A subculture of mental toughness in an Australian Football League club

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Abstract

Objective: The current study aimed to provide a subcultural analysis of mental toughness in a high-performance context in sport.

Design: Using Schein’s (1990) framework of organisational culture, an exploratory qualitative analysis, employing focus group and individual interviews, was used to investigate mental toughness in an Australian Football League club.

Method: Nine senior coaches and players participated in focus group and individual interviews. Photo elicitation was used as a method to capture mental toughness through the identification of prominent club artefacts. Participants were considered to have significant subcultural knowledge of their football club and were willing to describe personal experiences and perceptions of mental toughness through this cultural lens. Deductive and inductive analyses were conducted to capture the core themes of mental toughness across the disparate levels of Schein’s organisational framework.

Results: Mental toughness was found to be a socially derived term marked by unrelenting standards and sacrificial displays. These acts were underpinned by subcultural values emphasising a desire for constant improvement, a team first ethos, relentless effort, and the maintenance of an infallible image. At its core, mental toughness was assumed to be an internal concept, epitomised an idealised form of masculinity, elitist values, and was rhetorically depicted through metaphors of war.

Conclusions: It may be difficult to understand mental toughness without giving attention to the contextual norms related to the term. Appreciating how people promote, instil, and internalise prized ideals coveted as mental toughness could be intriguing for future research in sport psychology.

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For the past 15 years, scholars have been interested in better understanding the concept of mental toughness in sport. During this time, rigorous efforts have been made to advance what people mean by the term and to identify key attributes founding it. For many academics and sport practitioners, mental toughness expresses peoples’ abilities to cope with adversity and perform well under stress (e.g., Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett, & Temby, 2015; Hardy, Bell, & Beattie, 2014). Inherent to this description is the assumption that mental toughness is something that people either have or can possess; in other words, it is a concept treated as something decidedly psychological, where toughness (or lack thereof) reflects a measure of a performer’s character or personality. However, with growing interest in the field of cultural sport psychology (e.g., Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & McGannon, 2015), some scholars have recently suggested that mental toughness might not be what the majority of people think it is. These scholars have argued that mental toughness can be better appreciated as a social product, reflecting certain norms and ideals prized in sporting subcultures (Andersen, 2011; Tibbert & Andersen, 2015). Considering social perspectives of mental toughness takes a different approach to studying the term. For example, socially inclined scholars are less likely to concern themselves with knowing the psychological qualities comprising the mentally tough performer (e.g., see Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007) or how existing personality theories can help to explain mental toughness (e.g., see Hardy et al., 2014; Harmison, 2011). Instead, these individuals might be more intrigued by the origins and nuanced meanings attached to mental toughness; the various identities and behaviours promoting the term in particular contexts; or why, in the first place, mental toughness has become such a prevalent and loaded expression in contemporary sporting discourse.
Since the early 2000s, scholars have been aware of the important role context plays in understanding mental toughness. The issues of sport-general and sport-specific research on the topic have been well documented (see Crust, 2008; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). The publication of certain mental toughness measures also reflects the gratitude some scholars have shown for contextual nuance (e.g., Cricket Mental Toughness Inventory, Australian Football Mental Toughness Inventory; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009b). However, while subcultural reports are evident in mental toughness literature (e.g., Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005; Coulter, Mallett, & Gucciardi, 2010; Sheard, 2013), overall, their mention has been fleeting or has lacked deeper scrutiny. For example, in their analysis of mental toughness in cricket, Bull et al. (2005) stated that they selected a participant cohort based on culturally held knowledge of what mental toughness signified in the English game, but without elaborating on what this cultural emphasis actually meant. Coulter et al. (2010) later made the same claim in their efforts to capture mental toughness in Australian soccer. Similarly, these authors offered no evidence or further insights regarding their cultural assertions.

However, notable exceptions to this tenet are the views of Andersen (2011) and Caddick and Ryall (2012), and recently, Tibbert, Andersen, and Morris (2015). These authors have provided useful insights into socio-cultural perspectives of mental toughness; in particular, they have critically challenged the idea that an underlying construct (comprising a set of psychological attributes) actually exists, instead proposing that mental toughness is a term used to promote certain subcultural ideals in elite sport. Andersen (2011) queried what people mean when they talk about toughness or being tough. He said that such language resonates with much of what is questionable in sport, suggesting that constructs like mental toughness “reek” of macho pathogenic cultures expressive of patriarchal hierarchies and intolerances for weakness. Caddick and Ryall (2012) called mental toughness “a pseudoscientific rhetorical construction, characterised by romantic notions of sporting idealism, elitist values, and metaphorical images of triumph and victory” (p. 2). They argued that despite its merits, mental toughness too often reflects a “fascistoid” ideology, inferring that athletes who fail to adopt elitist ideals of toughness end up being treated as less valuable and dispensable by sport society. Tibbert et al. (2015) led the first and (so far) only empirical study examining subcultural ideals linked to mental toughness. These authors tracked the experiences of a rookie Australian footballer over a yearlong period to gain insights of his acculturation into the norms and imperatives prized by his Australian Football League (AFL) club. Their findings showed that mental toughness meant conforming to certain standards indicative of hypermasculine cultures (e.g., ignoring injury, denying vulnerability, sacrificing individuality) – ideals that had to be met to gain acceptance and approval from the club’s player and coaching hierarchy.

These reports by Andersen (2011), Caddick and Ryall (2012), and Tibbert et al. (2015) promote mental toughness as a measure of peoples’ willingness to quietly endure the physical and emotional hardships associated with elite sport – where the strong (conformists) survive and the weak (non-conformists) get discarded. Andersen and Tibbert et al. reported that elite sporting subcultures often use mental toughness in such a way that demands athletes to learn and accept dominant masculine ideals and is a pretense to justifiably push (and abuse) people harder and for longer in the pursuit of success, despite the risks to personal health and well-being (e.g., injury, overtraining syndromes, distress, loss of identity) (also see Richardson, Andersen, & Morris, 2008; Young & White, 2000).

However, it is presumptuous to assume that all high performance contexts ratify mental toughness in the same way without prior knowledge of the ideals and expectations held in specific subcultures. For example, peoples’ perceptions of mental toughness may differ considerably when operating in a climate of threat and intimidation versus one emphasising more compassionate and caring conditions (Tibbert et al., 2015). One might also expect different versions of mental toughness in contexts where people’s development (not performance) is the priority, and where competition is less of a focus (see Gould, Griffes, & Carson, 2011). Traditionally, mental toughness has been studied through a psychological lens whereby interpretive (e.g., personal construct; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009a) and theoretical (e.g., hardiness theory; Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002) frameworks have been used to promote an internal, attribute-driven conceptualisation. Examining mental toughness from a social perspective might add conceptual breadth to this conventional approach. However, socio-cultural research is currently limited to the views of a single case study (see Tibbert et al., 2015) and broad critiques of the mental toughness literature (see Andersen, 2011; Caddick & Ryall, 2012). To progress research from this outlook, mental toughness could be examined within the confines of the unique cultures and climates of different sporting environments. This step might help to reveal the social forces at work in defining mental toughness, shaped, for instance, by the underlying assumptions and values that bind a sporting cohort together (i.e., organisational culture) and the recurring patterns of behaviour and attitudes that characterise “how things are done” in a particular performance climate (cf. Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009).

A subculture of mental toughness: an organisational perspective

Cultural perspectives of mental toughness might be examined at various levels of foci – from macro to micro systems of society. One possibility is to view mental toughness through the concept of organisational culture. Organisational culture refers to the unique social and psychological environment of an organisation (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). It can be defined as a collection of basic values and attitudes common to a social group that sets the standards expected of its members (i.e., how each should think, feel, and behave; Smith & Shilbury, 2004). The impact of organisational culture in high performance sport has recently received increasing levels of attention in sport psychology research. For example, various scholars have set about examining the key role organisational contexts play in preparing athletes for Olympic and world competition (cf. Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009); the critical factors underpinning the functioning of elite sporting organisations (e.g., Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012); the leadership and practices required to create and regulate high performing cultures (e.g., Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014; Fletcher & Arnold, 2011); and the application of relevant theories to deliver sport organisational change (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). Broadly speaking, this emerging body of literature asserts that climatic and cultural factors are associated with the optimal development of athletes, and elite performers’ psychological states and processes (e.g., their motivations, emotions, and beliefs) cannot solely account for the onset and maintenance of peak performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). To date, scholars have largely overlooked the role of social and organisational factors for understanding and defining mental toughness, preferring instead to treat the term as an internal construct. While social factors are often reported as key mechanisms contributing to mental toughness development (e.g., see Bell, Hardy, & Beattie, 2013; Bull et al., 2005; Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Crust & Clough, 2011), the norms and imperatives influencing how people construe mental toughness in particular sporting contexts is rarely explored. This cultural
oversight represents a gap in current mental toughness research and presents an opportunity to augment the developing literature regarding organisational psychology in sport.

There are many different models and theories available for assessing organisational culture. For example, Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified four generic types of culture: the tough-guy macho culture; the work-hard, play-hard culture; the bet-your company culture; and the process culture. Hofstede (1991), instead, highlighted that cultures differ based on four dimensions that he labelled individualism, masculinity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. An alternative to these and other existing models is Schein’s (1990) structural framework of organisational culture. Schein’s framework is an important contribution to organisational epistemology, and has been widely cited in organisational literature (Dauber, Fink, & Yolles, 2012), including sport (see Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015). A structural approach for defining organisational culture is particularly relevant to the current study because it helps to identify clear entry points for analysing mental toughness across different cultural domains. Schein (1990) said “culture is what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems in internal integration” (p. 111). He specified that to analyse group culture it is important to distinguish through essential levels at which culture manifests itself. The first level consists of observable artefacts, which make up all phenomena that one might see, hear, and feel when entering an organisation (e.g., the physical environment, recognition of attainments and visible traditions, statement of philosophy). The second level, espoused values, which are less immediately visible, are acquired norms that find expression in the way organisational members describe the culture to others (i.e., preferences and ideals of what ought to happen). The third level is the basic underlying assumptions, which reflect the core of what culture really is. Underlying assumptions are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that determine more visible cultural manifestations (e.g., social practices, symbolic artefacts); they act as the basis upon which group norms (standards and values) are formed and guide members’ perceptions and actions so that when a problem in a culture is solved repeatedly in the same way the solution becomes gradually accepted and stored as an evident truth by those members.

Studying mental toughness at an organisational level is appropriate given the perceived importance mental toughness holds for organisational success (Strycharczyk & Elvin, 2014), including for those organisations in sport (e.g., the England and Wales Cricket Board; see Bell et al., 2013; Hardy et al., 2014). Examining mental toughness across different levels of sporting subculture (e.g., inter-group, intra-group, or individual levels; cf. Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) may give a deeper contextual understanding of the term that contributes to new perspectives in this area reflecting the growing trend of subcultural research in sport psychology literature (see Schinke & McGannon, 2015). In this study, the main focus was to examine mental toughness in an elite sporting context through the lens of Schein’s (1990) organisational framework. Specifically, we wanted to explore the connotations inherent to mental toughness in a particular sporting subculture and to assess what the term subsequently meant to people embedded in this setting. To achieve this goal, we sought to combine perspectives of mental toughness from different actors (senior players and coaches) located in the performance context of a club in the AFL, and to examine subcultural norms founding mental toughness expressed as behaviours, artefacts, values, and assumptions. We purposely chose an elite level focus to compare our findings with reports by Andersen (2011), Caddick and Ryall (2012), and Tibbert et al. (2015), who likened mental toughness with certain hyper-masculine and elitist ideals. We selected an Australian football context to compare our findings with Tibbert et al.’s recent case study research, in doing so, bearing in mind that while organisational cultures in AFL are likely to hold similarities, their mental toughness subcultures might differ considerably. Furthermore, mental toughness is also a common term used in this particular sporting code.

Methodology

Philosophical and methodological orientation

Given that the focus of this study was to gain a contextual understanding of mental toughness in a unique sporting context, a case study design (Thomas, 2011), grounded in a post-positivist paradigm (Campbell, 1999), was selected to examine the research questions, gather data from multiple sources, and direct the data analysis (content analysis). In this respect, we operated under the assumption that we could identify and characterize a phenomenon defined as mental toughness within a particular context, but observing this reified entity (e.g., via interpretations of certain behavioural displays) is fallible and prone to error, such that the “truth” of what mental toughness is for one person or group may not be the “truth” for another (cf. O’Leary, 2004). Post-positivists reject the idea that any individual can see the world perfectly as it really is; instead, objectivity is theory-laden (i.e., biased) and inherently a social phenomenon shaped by cultural experiences and worldviews. While objectivity can never be perfectly achieved, post-positivists believe it can be approached by triangulating multiple (fallible) perspectives in the hope of gaining a better grasp of what reality is or might be in time. Hence, the goal of this research study was to consider mental toughness from this imperfect stance, and attempt to bring together some consensus (despite incongruences in opinion) regarding what the term means in this specific environment.

The current project follows an interpretational procedure for studying mental toughness that draws primarily on the inductive techniques proposed by Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993). This approach is suitable since a detailed description of subcultural norms associated with mental toughness has yet to be systematically examined. Similarly, for methodological convergence, this approach is consistent with our post-positivist beliefs and aligns our research questions, philosophical orientations, and theoretical perspectives that derive from grounded theory. It differs from Côté et al. (1993) in that we have used the organizational structure of Schein (1990) as a preliminary way to define and guide categorization of the data. However, while this provided a deductive structural framework, the thematic dimensions of mental toughness were retrieved inductively, according to the Côté et al. (1993) procedures that reflect the comparative principles of data organization underlying grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The novelty of this procedure is that it uses an established organizational framework as a means for producing an interpretive and contextualized perception of mental toughness in a unique sporting subculture.

Participants

Consistent with qualitative methodologies (Patton, 2002), one AFL club was purposely selected because of its heritage and reputation. It is one of the oldest sporting clubs in the AFL and is branded with its working class background and doggedness to survive as a football club, despite many challenges over its 100-plus year history (e.g., financial problems, low membership, risk of disbandment). The club has won multiple Premierships as a member of the Victoria Football Association, Victoria Football
League, and AFL. Within this context, the club’s Player Development Manager (PDM) was asked to identify senior players and coaches considered to have a long association with the club and be highly aware of its performance culture and history. In line with Schein’s (1990) definition of culture, cultural knowledge referred to the “content of culture” relevant to understandings of external adaptation (e.g., club identity and core mission) and internal integration (e.g., group and interpersonal dimensions). Historical knowledge meant familiarity with the club’s traditions and achievements (origins, eras, rivalries, reputation). Four male coaches (age range = 31–44 years) and five players (age range = 24–26 years) were subsequently recruited. Coaching roles represented were assistant coach (n = 2), recruitment/induction coach (n = 1), and development coach (n = 1), all of whom held full-time roles. Three coaches were past AFL players (range = 10–13 years), with two having played for the participating club (10 and 13 years) winning individual and club honours in the process (e.g., Premierships, Best and Fairest awards, International Rules reps). Together, these individuals had over twenty years coaching experience in the AFL (Range = 2–12), including 14 years with the involved club. Players had played AFL football for a combined 35 years (Range = 6–10 years), all for the participating club. Three players were members of the club’s leadership group—a status given to those persons trusted with asserting club standards and norms, training, and performance. All players had either won or been nominated for club and/or international honours (e.g., Best and Fairest, International Rules, team selection). All participants were recognised as having considerable subcultural knowledge of the football club, and were willing to describe in depth their personal experiences and perceptions of mental toughness through this cultural lens.

Procedure

A university human ethics committee granted approval for the study prior to data collection. To examine subcultural perceptions of mental toughness across the three levels of Schein’s cultural framework, we used two ethnographic methods for data collection: photo elicitation (of artefacts) and qualitative interviews (focus group and individual).

Photo elicitation of artefacts

One day was spent collecting artefacts illustrating the cultural “surface level” of the club. The first and second authors had access to all club facilities under supervision from the PDM. Of interest were areas that players commonly occupied (e.g., dressing room, gym, training oval). Using Schein’s (2010) definition of artefacts (the visible elements of an organisation on public display: for example, a vision or mission statement, organisational slogan, statues, facilities, and physical layout), and under the PDM’s guidance, the authors used photographic equipment to record prominent (e.g., hall of fame images) and unassuming (e.g., rest areas) artefacts in the club, totalling one hundred photographs. The aim was to gather artefacts to be used as part of participant interviews; specifically, we wanted participants to reflect on how certain artefacts stimulated meaning (if any) relevant to what was implicit about mental toughness at the club. One of the flaws of studying organisational artefacts is that researchers can make improper inferences from them because they do not know how each artefact connects to underlying assumptions inherent to the organisation of interest (Schein, 2010). Our first aim was to gather artefacts that could later be used for this reflection purpose. In preparation for the interview phase, all duplicate images (i.e., different perspectives of the same artefact) were discarded from the original one hundred photographs. In consultation with the PDM, the remaining images were then filtered to ensure that (1) all major/common areas of player access in the club’s facility were included, and (2) prominent artefacts within these areas (e.g., quotes, portraits, plaques, and emblems) were adequately represented. Following this initial “cleaning” phase, thirty-four photographs remained and were subsequently prepared for the participant interviews.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted to elicit “rich” insight into the participants’ perspectives of mental toughness that considered more than the what (i.e., descriptions of mental toughness behaviours); that is, we wanted to know how and why particular mental toughness behaviours were valued in this context, and the underlying assumptions associated with the term, from the participants’ thoughts, feelings, emotions, and meaning making (Patton, 2002). Two interview techniques were used: focus group and one-to-one interviews.

A focus group was initially used to stimulate culture-mental toughness debate amongst players and coaches that spanned role and authority, and to elicit broad perceptions of mental toughness in the studied context. A benefit of focus groups is the interactions between participants that might trigger new ideas enabling the group to become more than “a sum of its parts” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 19). The focus group consisted of six participants (2 players, 4 coaches) and was carried out in a private meeting room in the club’s training facility. The selected players were in the club’s leadership group, increasing the prospect these individuals would feel at ease sharing personal opinions about club culture in the company of senior coaches. Of the coach participants, two were former club players. This was considered useful to clarify ideals of toughness valued by the existing football cohort, relative to previous eras.

Individual interviews were then held with three senior players to examine unique attitudes, opinions, and beliefs connected with mental toughness at the club. Individual interviews allow flexibility to probe participants’ responses to elicit clarification and deeper insights (Patton, 2002), in this case, ensuring rich and uninhibited accounts of mental toughness were gathered, free from any unintended power relationships. Only players who had experienced A1 football for the studied club were recruited. This decision was made to best capture perceptions of mental toughness from persons who had developed (and been acculturated) as professionals in this single sport setting. Prior to meeting, all players were asked to specify where they might feel comfortable conducting their interviews, and to suggest an appropriate location to ensure each could freely express and share their views.

Interview guide. For both interview formats (focus group and individual), a semi-structured interview guide was created to explore participants’ perceptions of mental toughness in the studied context, and to develop a deeper understanding of subcultural factors shaping what the term meant. The first and second authors initially created a list of potential interview questions that sought to explore a subcultural examination of mental toughness across the three levels of Schein’s organisational framework. After several meetings between these authors, an interview draft was formed and subsequently critiqued by an external, third party specialist in mental toughness research (see acknowledgements). Following this review, discussions were then held to consider the final interview guide until consensus was reached. Initial questions were aimed at eliciting a broad overview of the club subculture. Here, matters of external adaptation (e.g., “What is the core mission...
of the football club?”; “What is the club’s perceived identity in the AFL?” and internal integration (e.g., “What standards are most important to the team”; “What type of footballer is highly respected and recognised at the club?”) were discussed (Schein, 2010). These opening exchanges helped set the tone and focus of what was to follow in the interview; for example, the participants were able to reflect upon and debate subcultural norms deemed important to the club and the current playing cohort. Following this, questions were focused on gaining an understanding of the general behaviours associated with mental toughness at the club (e.g., “What behaviours at this club demonstrate that a footballer is mentally tough?”). Subsequent questions provoked insights of subcultural values linked to and reinforcing these behaviours (e.g., “What important club values underpin [mentally tough behaviour X]?”). Considering these behaviours and values, participants were then asked to identify any club artefacts signifying mental toughness from the collection of thirty-four photographs, which were presented on a display monitor (“Which artefacts, if any, invoke a sense of mental toughness at the club?”). Finally, participants were asked to reflect on what they take-for-granted about mental toughness; for example, participants were asked to consider the assumptions they have about the term (e.g., “What do you assume to be true about mental toughness in the context of this particular club? For example, how important is mental toughness to the club and its players?”). Clarification and elaboration prompts were used when necessary. Overall, participants were encouraged to describe their experiences of mental toughness and to consider this when thinking about how the term connects with the performance context of the club. While some structure was inherent to the interview guide, an open, interactional approach was used to encourage conversation (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) and build rapport, and to treat participants as co-researchers and experts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). At the end of the interviews, all participants were asked to complete a sentence stem detailing their basic views of mental toughness at the club (“For a professional footballer at [AFL football club], being mentally tough is [ ... ]”). The purpose, in this regard, was to give participants the opportunity to summarise their thoughts about mental toughness considering preceding subcultural discussions. All interviews were approximately two hours in length and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, totalling over 120 pages of single-lined text.

**Data analysis**

To enhance data familiarity and immersion, transcripts were repeatedly listened to and read several times by two members of the research team. Following procedures by Miles and Huberman (1994), deductive analysis was initially employed to capture mental toughness across Schein’s (1990) cultural framework. This process involved the first two authors independently analysing and sorting raw data responses into four broad categories: mental toughness behaviours and Schein’s three levels of organisational culture (artefacts, values, and assumptions). Through extensive discussion between the first and second authors, raw data responses were consensually labelled. Data housed in each category was then analysed through a process of inductive content analysis to generate themes. Following guidelines by Côté et al. (1993), the first and second author independently tagged and coded words and phrases relating to perceptions of mental toughness to generate categories. For example, where an excerpt from the data about mental toughness behaviours indicated that a player was mentally tough because he had played through injury, that section was provisionally highlighted and tagged; similar excerpts (i.e., marking units) linking mental toughness with continuing to play while injured where then combined and labelled as “playing injured”. It was agreed that these codes should have validity (accurately reflect what is being researched), be mutually exclusive (distinct with no overlap) and exhaustive (all relevant data should fit into a code). Comparisons were then made between these independent analyses as authors discussed and then agreed on a number of lower and higher-order themes. For example, “playing injured” was grouped with other sub-categories emphasizing the apparent association mental toughness had with certain physical endeavours and sacrifices while playing competitive football (e.g., commitment and bravery in contests, willingness to get/play hurt). Together, these sub-categories were labelled as “Body on the line” — a common phrase often heard in many of the conducted interviews and reflective of our attempts to incorporate (as much as possible) contextual discourse into the data analysis. This process was aided by the involvement of a third-party researcher, well-acquainted in qualitative analysis, who acted as a critical friend (Creswell, 1998). These categories necessarily remained flexible as they were derived from data analysis and needed adjustment as the inductive process continued. While there was generally a high level of agreement across the research team regarding the general dimensions, any discrepancies involved a separate re-examination of the transcripts, and the coding decisions made in this regard, until such differences were settled (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010). Toward the latter stages of analysis, individual transcripts were analysed to ensure appropriate placement of raw data into higher order themes (Podlog & Eklund, 2007). While this inductive process necessarily relied on the analysts’ subjective decision-making processes, it was enhanced through the use of decision-making heuristic developed by Côté and Salmela (1994). The identified themes and sub-themes were also re-considered in relation to Schein’s organizational framework. This final step permitted a refined evaluation and interpretation of mental toughness that captured the term as one with deep social connections and connotations.

**Trustworthiness and validity**

While various criteria exist for evaluating qualitative research (e.g., Sparks & Smith, 2009; Weed, 2009), Tracy (2010) principles of best practice were used to judge the study’s merit. These principles state that “high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigour, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence.” (p. 839). The focus on a subcultural (rather than a customary, “taken-for-granted”) psychological perspective of mental toughness positions the study as a worthy topic and significant contribution to the literature in this area of sport psychology. The research design and reporting style invites readers to step into the context under study, wherein vivid and engaging visual (e.g., photographic) and narrative aids (e.g., using direct quotations) promote a sense of resonance. Credibility and rigour were addressed by interviewing knowledgeable participants embedded in the participating club giving greater depth and richness to the raw data that subsequently guided the generation of results. Aligned with a critical realist philosophy (see Maxwell, 2012) to examining mental toughness in the studied context, and cognizant of recent debates regarding reliability and validity in qualitative research (e.g., Sparks & Smith, 2009), we highlighted the importance of these processes in our data analysis. In this regard, credibility was positioned from a parallel perspective (see Sparks & Smith, 2014) and facilitated by two main methods — member reflections and peer triangulation. Each participant received a transcript of his recorded interview for verification, and later a written copy of the research team's initial analyses and interpretations, which were individually discussed (via telephone or face-to-face) with the first author. The goal of sharing the study
findings with each participant was to help the research team gauge the extent to which the initial interpretations were comprehensible and meaningful, and to give opportunities for participant clarity and elaboration (rather than check for some immeasurable accuracy that “we got it right”). Peer validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) was gained through collaboration with the co-authors (and critical friend) to establish interpretive coherence. The triangulation of data sources, incorporating multiple researcher viewpoints, helped encourage consistent (re)interpretations of the data giving a greater sense of trustworthiness and credibility to the findings (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2014; Tracy, 2010).

To mark the study with transparency, it is important to acknowledge each researcher as a reflexive instrument whose biography, biases, and goals influences every aspect of the study. The biographies of the first and second authors were especially relevant and, consequently, need to be situated in relation to the project. Specifically, the first author (interviewer) was a practicing sport psychologist who had several years experience of working in high performance sport (predominantly in cricket), and was research active in the area of mental toughness in sport, including studies of mental toughness behaviours were ultimately founded by values that speak of a player’s commitment to ongoing improvement, that establish him as a trusted individual in this unique high performance environment. At the level least observable to the outsider — underlying assumptions — it was found that mental toughness essentially reflects an idealized form of masculinity and is saturated with connotations associated with such themes as conditional regard and winning.

In the following section, we discuss the results from our qualitative analysis, integrating representative quotes from the interviews throughout to complement these findings, the majority of which can be found in Tables 1–3.2 We begin by providing insights regarding the perceived identity of the AFL Club. The purpose of this

Fig. 1. A socio-cultural perspective of mental toughness in an AFL Club through the lens of Schein’s framework of organisational culture.

1 A will to survive (Figure 2)
2 Win-at-all-costs (Figure 3)
3 EVERYTHING FOR [CLUB] (Figure 4)
4 UNCOMPROMISING (Figure 5)
5 Is someone doing it harder than me? (Figure 6)
6 Body On The Line / Team First (Figure 7)

Visible, but often not decipherable

Invisible, taken for granted, preconscious

Results

To explore a socio-cultural view of mental toughness, we analysed what this term might mean for certain players and coaches in an AFL club using Schein’s (1990) organisational framework. Fig. 1 represents an overview of the main study findings and illustrates the tangible and less tangible themes associated with mental toughness in this particular sporting context. Starting at the top of Fig. 1, the results showed that mental toughness was linked with certain sacrificial and unrelenting behaviours. To the outsider, these behaviours are largely indecipherable; however, in a subculture and context connecting these behaviours with being mentally tough, they bear important meaning and value. Such behaviours were reinforced and conveyed through certain visible artefacts (see Figs. 2–7), which are discussed in detail below. Together, these artefacts and behaviours represent the “surface level” for understanding mental toughness at the studied club. Nonetheless, exploring the values and underlying assumptions linked to the term garner a deeper comprehension and subcultural connection. Importantly, these values and assumptions give insights into why these more observable (surface level) phenomena “happen” in the way that they do (Schein, 1990). The results suggested that mental toughness behaviours were ultimately founded by values that speak of a player’s commitment to ongoing improvement, uncompromising efforts, infallibility, and a team first approach, which establishes him as a trusted individual in this unique high performance environment.

2 Selected quotes used in the results section and corresponding tables are linked to the participants reporting them. Following each quote is an anonymous abbreviation identifying each relevant individual; for example, C1 indicates a quote reported by a particular coach, and P2 a quote by a different coach. Player quotes are represented as follows, P1, P2, and so on. All numbers relative to each participant remain consistent throughout the paper.
step was to establish a basic subcultural foundation to appreciate mental toughness in this setting. We then report the findings outlined in Fig. 1: The general behaviours indicating mental toughness and the subcultural artefacts, values, and assumptions linked with the term. We conclude by offering a general discussion, including the mention of study limitations and suggestions for future research.

Club identity

To broadly capture the identity of the studied club, a common narrative ran through all interviews. The club was perceived as one that has been disadvantaged over the years in comparison to its rivals—be that in financial, membership, or resource terms. A club with “blue-collar roots” said one coach (C2), “which has had to fight tooth and nail to survive in this League.” This blue-collar reference speaks of a club that takes pride in its working class background and surroundings—one revering work requiring resilience, physical strength, and endurance without complaint. Others labelled the club as traditionally “deprived behind the scenes” (C4); “downtrodden … that has always struggled for recognition” (P3).

As a result, all participants indicated that this perceived identity has created and demanded a “hard working, hard-edged” culture (C2), infused with values emphasising the need to gain status through achievement, self-reliance, strength, and dominance. The club’s teams, over the years, were reported as epitomising a “hard and edged” metaphor (C3); “hard-nosed, hard-nosed” used another, “who work really hard for each other” (C4). Players were often described as club custodians, whose association went well beyond the role of playing football. In particular, the club has a unique connection with its local community, which has been formally acknowledged as a key stakeholder responsible for its (financial) survival. All interviewees reported the importance of the community in representing the club, and playing for its (working class) support base. Overall, there was no doubt that being tough meant something important and carried social worth. “We don’t have too many show ponies here,” emphasised one coach (C2), setting the (masculine) tone of what was to come when discussing mental toughness in this context. From this broad overview, we present mental toughness as perceived by participants embedded in this unique performance setting. We report general behaviours linked to mental toughness, followed by an examination of the term across Schein’s (1990) three-level cultural framework.

Mental toughness behaviours

Behaviours thought to reflect mental toughness in the football context of the club are reported in Table 1. Following a thorough review of the transcripts, seven lower-order themes emerged and were combined into two higher-order themes. The higher-order themes that emerged were self-sacrifice (i.e., prioritising football, withholding emotions/personal issues, putting body on the line) and unrelenting standards (i.e., fittest player, obsessive trainer, unwavering effort to compete, task perfectionist).

In this context, the theme of self-sacrifice stressed that to be considered mentally tough players needed to excessively focus on meeting the needs of others (e.g., coaches, the team), often at the expense of their own gratification. For instance, mentally tough players show their total commitment to football by disregarding other areas of their lives (e.g., relational) and development (e.g., fulfilling educational goals); they are expected to “park” their difficulties and take criticism without complaining; or be willing to get hurt and play hurt for the good of the team. Those individuals who strive to meet very high standards, and who push the limits of their physical capacity, also typify mental toughness in this performance context. Under the theme of unrelenting standards, the mentally tough footballer often claims the label as the fittest and most dedicated player in the squad; for instance, someone unlikely to physically break down, who recovers fastest if injured, or performs best in demanding fitness tests; he completes many extra and unscheduled training sessions; he is a task perfectionist ensuring all his training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order theme</th>
<th>Lower-order categories (frequency cited)</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Representative quote(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>Prioritise football (8)</td>
<td>Investing significant time in football-related activities</td>
<td>We’re encouraged to do all this personal development stuff on the side, but we know it’s all about football. You’re expected to sacrifice your life for it, otherwise, when you don’t play well, you’ll be told you’re getting distracted and not being dedicated enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withholding emotions/problems (9)</td>
<td>Suppressing and controlling emotions</td>
<td>I tend to keep my problems to myself. That’s what the coaches want to see in players—those who can deal with all the crap you have to go through at this level, and not whine about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body on the line (9)</td>
<td>Willingness to get/play hurt</td>
<td>Playing through injury if the team needs you to; Putting your head over the ball, when it’s your turn to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fittest player (7)</td>
<td>Outperforms others in fitness tests</td>
<td>I make sure I do well in those [fitness] tests. If you’re topping those, it tells the coaches and other players that you’re pretty tough and can handle that pain barrier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obsessive trainer (9)</td>
<td>Staunch commitment to physical training (e.g., trains on days off, never misses training)</td>
<td>You’ve got to be obsessive about training. There’s no compromise there. All the guys are at it. Extra skills and gym sessions, it’s just the norm around here—a sign of your commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolute effort to gain/maintain possession of the football (8)</td>
<td>Scores high on 1%ers (e.g., smothering, spoils, chasers, working the mark).</td>
<td>If you constantly chase and harass the opposition to gain possession of the footy, then you’ll always get that pat on the back coming off, no matter the result. It tells that you’ve not given up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task perfectionist (8)</td>
<td>Meticulous preparation</td>
<td>Mental toughness is about completing each week to a level where you have upheld all instructions, taken no shortcuts, and getting everything done correctly in your preparation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and preparations are completed; and on the field, be a player known as someone who “keeps running, keeps taking hits, and keeps going” (C2) sometimes to the point of exhaustion.

Visible artefacts

To explore mental toughness at the first level of Schein’s (1990) cultural framework, participants were asked to consider certain characteristics associated with the term. From an original collection of thirty-four images, numerous artefacts were mentioned. However, all participants agreed on six in particular.³ Fig. 2 illustrates a portrait of a former player and so-called “club legend” (P2). This artefact was situated in the corridor of the coaching staff offices (to which players have regular access) and is the largest sized portrait of any individual at the club. All participants described the image as a competitive contest and perceived it as reflecting mental toughness in several ways; for example, signifying a “relentless will to never giving in” (P1); “total effort” (C2); “dominance” (P4); and “strength” (P5). One coach described it as:

Just breaking through the tackle leaving blokes in their wake. A will to survive … Like the mental toughness of being able to play with injuries and when things aren’t going your way to be able to find a way to keep going, keep fighting. (C3).

Fig. 3 shows an image of a different player (another club icon) located prominently in the players’ treatment room. This artefact evoked similar meanings to Fig. 2 regarding mental toughness; specifically, it was thought to underline the physical sacrifices required to win and a visible sign that being exhausted translates to a perception of team commitment and 100% effort, which was valued in this context. The quote below, by one player in the focus group, captures this general feeling:

That picture that we’ve got downstairs in [the treatment room] … To me it just says “win-at-all-costs.” Like when you’re back’s against the wall or when you’re absolutely fatigued or you’re absolutely knackered, you just find a way to win and you will yourself over the line. I think that is what that photo says to me. Exhausted! And you would need someone to pick you up off the ground to finish and reward that. (P1).

Figs. 4 and 5 symbolise artefacts that speak of two (of the three) core values endorsed by the club’s playing group. These artefacts were also situated on the wall of the players’ treatment room, both displayed in large capital letters and branding the club’s colours. Fig. 4 reads “EVERYTHING FOR [CLUB].” For the participants, this connected with mental toughness by stressing the importance of displaying duty and sacrifice for the shared benefit of the playing group. This could be marked by various means — for example, by “playing through injury if the team needs you to” (P2), “doing your role for the team despite form or personal issues” (C4), “being selfless” (C2), “demanding and driving the team ethos” (C1), or by “taking no [training] shortcuts” (C2). Not one action or set of behaviours epitomised what “EVERYTHING FOR

³ We note that all original artefact images/photographs were presented to study participants in colour and with no alterations. Subsequent modifications to the images illustrated in Figs. 2–7, for the purpose of this manuscript, have been made to protect (as much as possible) the identity of any individual represented in those images, and also the identity of the participating AFL club. The participating club has given formal permission to the lead author to use the modified images for publication purposes. The club also agrees that these images have been adapted to an extent so as to protect its anonymity, in addition to that of its staff and patrons. Copyright permission for portraits and photographs included in any artefact image was also obtained.

[CLUB]” meant; rather, it reflected a general statement of intent to be expressed and obeyed. Certainly, a mentally tough player, in this context, was perceived to be someone who lives this value; he is someone who undeniably “gives everything” for the team. Another coach highlighted this point regarding mental toughness and Fig. 4:

[Mental toughness is] not what the club can do for you. It is what you can do for the club. So it’s more that spirit of doing whatever you can to help out the club in any way, rather than thinking about yourself individually. (C2).

Equally, for a player to be mentally tough at this AFL club, the artefact “UNCOMPROMISING” (Fig. 5) emphasised a continual effort to compete as a core value respected in the playing group and, in many ways, epitomised high performance, especially regarding a player’s commitment to the 1%ers (i.e., defensive actions that apply pressure on the opposition making turnovers more likely). It was described as reflecting an ability to repeatedly “stick to the task” (P5) and be “relentless” (P4) in a player’s application to gain possession of the football during games, as described by one coach: “Regardless of form, injury, or score, it’s about continuing to be relentless, physically giving yourself up, total effort, harassing and pressing up on your opponent.” (C2).

On the walls of the players’ treatment and dressing room area were 4–5 separately located placards. Each placard had a different stated question to the same sentence stem [AN ELITE ATHLETE WOULD ASK …]. These questions encouraged the reader to think about certain areas of his training, attitude, and performance, such as his commitment or mental preparation (see Figs. 3 and 5, respectively). However, all participants declared one placard, Fig. 6, as pertinent to mental toughness at the club, this being “AN ELITE
ATHLETE WOULD ASK: IS SOMEONE DOING IT BETTER THAN ME?"

One player reported:

I am always comparing myself to what the other guys are doing. What are their stats and test scores? How is so-and-so going compared with me, and who is grabbing the attention? It’s a competitive environment—a bit dog-eat-dog underneath the camaraderie. But it’s something we all accept. Something the staff and senior guys use to motivate us to continually better ourselves. (P3).

Reinforcing this statement, one of the coaches suggested that this question was indicative of mental toughness because “the mentally tough player would always be concerned with improving year-on-year or making sure he doesn’t allow himself to be left behind others in the playing group.” (C3).

Lastly, Fig. 7 is an image of a large sign located in the players’ conditioning gym. It promotes the values of “Courage” and “Care” and how these might be represented. Similar to previous artefacts already mentioned, mental toughness was described as being particularly associated with putting one’s “Body on the line” and by taking a “Team First Approach.” The text in Fig. 7 reinforces several previous identified themes, especially the notion that physical sacrifice and being portrayed as “selfless” (i.e., putting the team ahead of self first) underpin the term.

Values

To understand why certain behaviours (e.g., training obsessively, taking criticism; Table 1) and artefacts (e.g., reinforcing themes of physical exhaustion, playing injured) might be linked to mental toughness at the club, it is necessary to shift the focus to Schein’s (1990) second level of cultural analysis—espoused values—which are reported in Table 2. Here we were interested in exploring the main principles or ideals the term projects for members of the team. In this regard, one higher-order theme, namely trust, emerged prominently from the content analysis. Being trusted holds cultural significance in the performance context of the studied club. It suggests that a player can be counted on to display the values and behaviours respected in this setting. Mental toughness seems to be a term used as one way to confirm or communicate this trust. It is also a way of marking a player as valuable to the group—a theme captured by one player during his interview:

Fig. 3. Photograph of an image of a former player on the wall of the player’s treatment room. The image portrays a reportedly exhausted player being physically supported and regarded for his efforts. For those interviewed, it suggested a total commitment in the pursuit to win, evidenced by visible fatigue, and reinforced with text below the image saying, ‘AN ELITE ATHLETE WOULD ASK: HAVE I DONE EVERYTHING?’ Photograph taken by lead author.

Fig. 4. Photograph of a sign denoting a principle value in the club’s playing group. Located on the wall of the player’s treatment room, the image depicts the importance of duty and sacrifice in this context, especially for the greater good of the playing group/team. Photograph taken by lead author.
If someone calls a player mentally tough, here, that means you’re trusted. You’re somebody respected by the playing group for doing all the things we’ve been talking about e.g. giving everything, sacrificing yourself, doing your role for the team. It says we trust you and you’re a key member of this team. (P2).

Specifically, the trusted/mentally tough player is respected because he is perceived as someone who conforms primarily to four (lower-order) values. These emphasise (a) improvement — a player who shows regular improvements in his game and fitness, or at least invests considerable effort pursuing this goal; (b) uncompromising — a player who has a “never-say-die” attitude indicating he is somebody who keeps at the task and persists despite the odds, and endorses a rigid belief that hard work and sacrifice brings success; (c) infallibility — a player that exudes an image of control where he is seemingly able to tolerate or manage challenges (e.g., poor form, personal difficulties), setbacks (e.g., injuries) and distractions (positive, negative) that do not detract from his focus or ability to perform well for the team; and (d) Team First — a selfless player who is focussed on how he might contribute fully to the team — despite the potential cost of his own wants or physical condition. Together, these ideals underline what makes a player tough in this context. Hence, calling a player mentally tough not only validates that he is trusted, but that he also conforms to the above prized ideals (see Table 2), expressed through his behaviour (see Table 1).

Assumptions

To gain insight into the complex social “truths” implicit to mental toughness in this context, it was deemed necessary to explore the underlying assumptions that inform the term’s
First, mental toughness was viewed as something internal to the individual. This assumption determined how mental toughness was broadly understood and discussed; specifically, mental toughness is something psychological that people have or possess, or perhaps something that may be developed in them. Second, mental toughness was assumed to be essential for team success (i.e., winning) and, fundamentally, the long-term survival of the club in the AFL. This assumption seemed to permit the endorsement of behaviours that emphasised “never give in” and “win-at-all-cost” idioms (e.g., playing hurt, obsessive training, total commitment of a player’s life to football). Third, from an individual perspective, mental toughness carried significant social value for team members; for instance, mentally tough footballers command status and are treated as icons to be copied in approach and attitude. In this regard, being labelled mentally tough identifies a player who sacrifices his life and body to live out a certain sport ethic promoting uncompromising and continual improvement, a team first mentality, and the aura of invulnerability. A player conforming to this ethic earns respect, approval, and rewards (e.g., selection, recognition), reinforcing the cultural pressure to strive for mental toughness. Fourth, mental toughness in the studied club equated with elitist attitudes, such as those emphasising strength and a survival of the fittest. Players reported as being unable to “stand up” to the mentally tough ideals were described as expendable and would eventually “delist themselves” (C3). For example, a player unable to meet the commitments of the fittest player, or who treats injury with due caution, was not someone considered mentally tough. Finally, connecting the assumptions that mental toughness is linked with success/winning, iconic status, and strength, it became clear the term represented a script for promoting stereotypical masculine behaviours. It was taken-for-granted that displaying behaviours and values associated with mental toughness are what make a player a “real man” at the club—an archetypal image (see Fig. 2) of a strong male athlete who is competitive, forceful, and competent in manner, and who can dominate others on the football field. Hence, mental toughness was grounded by connotations representing an idealized form of masculinity and masculine behaviour that reflected a desirable and respected identity at the club. Complementing this masculine persona, mental toughness was also termed using various analogies of war and front line metaphors to describe sport experiences. Terms such as “contest” (C1) “battle” (C2) “killing off” (C3) “Spartan” (C3) “duty” (C4) “discipline” (P4), and other variants, were often mentioned during the interviews. This military parallel reinforced a view of the mentally tough footballer as a (male) soldier and ruthless competitor who fights for the club: one willing to “put their foot to the throat of the opposition and start squeezing,” as one coach put it (C4).

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore subcultural perceptions of mental toughness through the levels of Schein’s (1990) organisational framework, and to consider how selected players and coaches embedded in an elite sporting context in the AFL

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**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-order theme</th>
<th>Lower-order categories (frequency cited)</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Representative quote(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Improvement (8)</td>
<td>Regular (e.g., seasonal) improvements in fitness test scores</td>
<td>They [coaching staff] want to see that you are improving and are totally committed – be it recovering from injury, improving fitness scores, or performance stats. Showing them a commitment to getting better is what they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular (e.g., seasonal) improvements in performance statistics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in attitude (e.g., towards training commitments)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Uncompromising (9)</td>
<td>Remains task/goal focused</td>
<td>Going through long rehab periods was bloody hard, and I was struggling sometimes and felt pretty down. I considered giving up, at one point, after things just weren’t getting better. But, in the end, I didn’t. I kept going, and got back to playing. I think it’s the sort of story people like around here. You know, stick to your guns, never give up, and all that “comeback” stuff. Giving off an image that you’re a guy who can stomach the difficult times and show you’re not affected by such things is admired; Not letting standards drop when things are not going your way, like form, injuries, or personal issues. Doing everything for the team even if you have to sacrifice your own game; Putting the team first, yourself second.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent high effort levels</td>
<td>Consistent high performance levels</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infallible (9)</td>
<td>Portraying an invulnerable image</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reliable (in performance/attitude)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team First (9)</td>
<td>Prioritises group needs/goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values cohesion/togetherness</td>
<td>Attributes personal achievements to the team</td>
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understood the term. The results showed that mental toughness was defined by certain behaviours emphasising themes of unremitting standards and sacrificial exploits. These behaviours were built on, and conveyed through, particular values and artefacts equating mental toughness with a commitment to ongoing improvement, uncompromising efforts, infallibility, and selflessness. Labelling a player as mentally tough branded him with social status at the studied club, a mark of his identity as someone trusted to conform to ideals linked with the term. Mental toughness was underlined by various assumptions. In particular, participants assumed that mental toughness related to peoples' psychology, certain personal and team benefits (e.g., conditional regard, winning), and one's superiority over others. At its core, mental toughness represented an idealised form of masculinity, one admired and promoted by those interviewed.

Many behaviours and values described in this study are similar to attributes reported in previous mental toughness research. For example, scholars have defined mental toughness in terms of overcoming, or being unaffected by, adversity (e.g., Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008; Jones et al., 2007); playing hurt (e.g., Coulter et al., 2010; Gucciardi et al., 2008); task persistence and focus (e.g., Crust, Swann, Allen-Collinson, Brecon, & Weinberg, 2014; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002); meticulous preparation (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2008); personal and physical sacrifices (e.g., Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti, & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Gucciardi et al., 2008); showing commitment (Clough et al., 2002; Crust et al., 2014); fitness (e.g., Weinberg & Butt, 2011); emotional control (e.g., Coulter et al., 2010; Gucciardi et al., 2008); and achievement (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2002). Some differences with existing literature were also noted. For instance, mental toughness was linked with unsel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Truth/Assumption</th>
<th>Description (frequency cited)</th>
<th>Representative quote(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental toughness benefits the Club</td>
<td>Mental toughness increases prospects of team success (le., wins) and, consequently, survival in the AFL (9)</td>
<td>Toughness is what we want, and toughness is what we need to compete in this league.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental toughness benefits the player</td>
<td>A player conforming to mental toughness ideals profits from conditional regard giving him respect, acceptance, and social value (8)</td>
<td>If every single player from this day on prepared to play AFL footy like [mentally tough player] does, we’d be an unstoppable football team. He’s an example to all our players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental toughness is internal</td>
<td>Mental toughness is internal and liable to the individual (8)</td>
<td>Mental toughness is something inside a person. It is something internal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral elitism</td>
<td>Footballers unable to adopt mental toughness ideals are considered morally inferior and disposable versus those able to withstand and conform to these demands (9)</td>
<td>We’ll put players through tough situations repeatedly and see who stands up. Those who get dropped will drop themselves; There are always players able to stand up to the hard demands placed on them. The mentally weaker ones eventually drop off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity and war</td>
<td>Mental toughness is captured through stereotypical masculine norms and analogies of war (9)</td>
<td>Strong … Dominant … Self-reliant … Competitive … Courageous … Tough; Duty … Discipline … Honour … Soldier.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with prominent subcultural values (e.g., infallible, uncompromising, selflessness) gives greater awareness of the contextual ideals founding the term. This behaviour-value connection gets reinforced at the club through certain visual (e.g., artefacts) and verbal cues (e.g., coach encouragement), often under the name mental toughness. Discovering that playing hurt is a mark of a “real man” in this setting also adds a level of complexity. Essentially, one learns that, at this club, being called mentally tough ratifies a player's manhood as a courageous and selfless competitor.

With scholars becoming increasingly interested in what mentally tough athletes do (e.g., Diment, 2014; Gucciardi et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2014), the term naturally becomes influenced by social interpretation. Examining mental toughness across the different levels of Schein’s (1990) organisational framework helps to discover and embrace the diversity and meanings associated with being tough in this unique setting. A primary theme identified from the current study was the connection mental toughness had with hegemonic masculine ideals. This result aligns with research by Tibbert et al. (2015), who explored the mental toughness experiences of a single athlete in the same sport (AFL). In both cases, mental toughness was represented through hypermasculine ideals, characterised by acts such as suppressing emotions/hiding pain, playing injured, making sacrifices, being competitive, and pushing physical limits. Exhibiting these behaviours on a regular basis also gave players’ status and recognition, meaning they were both accepted and approved of in their respective subcultures (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) for conforming to these masculine scripts.

Dominant masculine attributes, such as hardness, stoicism, and loyalty, are generally associated with high profile contact sports (Messner & Sabo, 1994), such as Australian football. Through these attributes, athletes (and the watching public) learn “lessons” about how to respond to setbacks, how to express themselves physically, how to impose themselves forcefully, how to mask pain and how to follow team rules (Hickey, 2008). At its roots, mental toughness signified an accepted term in the club for inciting athletes to live up to exaggerated (white, Westernised) male norms, where being strong, competent, in control, competitive, assertive, rational and instrumental form an identity that is admired and gets rewarded (cf. Grindstaff & West, 2011).

Crust (2008) questioned whether mental toughness is about conforming to the imposed norms of a culture or actually standing up against that culture where necessary. In his critique of the mental toughness literature, he asked whether mental toughness was about training through injuries, playing when in pain and risking long-term damage, or about making the difficult decision to stop competing, seeking medical advice, and returning to action as soon as possible. Tibbert and Andersen (2015) reported that mental toughness is inevitably about what particular subcultures say it is.
This suggests that both of Crust’s sentiments can hold true depending on what behaviours are valued in a given context. In this AFL club, mental toughness meant a player stopping at nothing to achieve his goals, who puts the team first ahead of his own needs, suppresses his problems and exudes an air of invincibility, and demonstrates an unrelenting will to improve. From this perspective, mental toughness echoes what Hughes and Coakley (1991) referred to several years ago as the sport ethic or what Douglas and Carless (2006), more recently, called the performance narrative inherent to many high performance sport cultures. Both notions represent the core norms and storylines used by some athletes and sporting cultures to assess identity and group membership, where performance outcomes, staunch commitment, physical and emotional sacrifices are the accepted and necessary values en route to success. In this study, players internalising the values associated with mental toughness were held in high regard compared to those so-called “weaker” players who might evade or make a stand against these principles. For Caddick and Ryall (2012), depicting mental toughness in this way creates a moral problem because it suggests that those failing to conform to the “win-at-all-costs” or “give everything” attitudes of elite sport get treated as inferior and less worthy of respect. It also indicates that those equally talented and dedicated athletes preferring to live their sport experience through the lenses of personal values (e.g., discovery, relational; see Douglas & Carless, 2006) will likely be excluded from or denied ever being considered mentally tough. The potential impact of this may result in some players questioning the raison d’être in such contexts, perhaps decreasing their motivation, commitment, and performance. Regardless, in the climate and subculture examined in this study, there was a perceived reality that being mentally tough meant conforming to certain ideals under an assumption that doing so would bring the club success. In the end, mental toughness was about (the pursuit of) performance achievement—a required outcome that verified the mentally tough footballer.

In a different setting, with altogether different principles, conforming to the toughness values reported here might be considered a loss of judgment or individual autonomy. For some scholars (e.g., Andersen, 2011; Crust, 2008; Gucciardi & Mallett, 2010; Richardson et al., 2008), interpreting mental toughness through such values as unrelenting standards, infallibility, and the like, creates a fantastical ideal that is intolerable and possibly harmful for the majority of athletes (e.g., greater susceptibility to overtraining syndromes, development of obsessive-compulsive personality disorders). To understand why mental toughness aligns with the macho, sacrificial ideals reported here, it is worth considering Australian football’s broader historical connection to the military, in addition to the current club’s own unique history as an organisation reputed for its survival in the game.

Caddick and Ryall (2012) reported that mental toughness is often rhetorically and idealistically constructed by metaphors of war. The findings in this study concur with this account, where “being tough” reflected a military discourse. Sport and war are deep-seated in Australia’s national identity, with Australian football lending itself to warlike comparisons. For example, the game’s origins date back to the 1860s and military involvement was an important feature in its emergence (Blair, 1996). Like other sporting codes shaped by the impact of two World Wars, Australian football’s history is established by a powerful ideology of Christian manliness promoting notions of imperial duty (to team, not self), loyalty, courage, teamwork, and the enhancement of moral character through physical endeavour (Blair, 1996). With this backdrop, it is no surprise that connotations of toughness reflected the values and behaviours reported here, which tie closely with the sentiments and sacrifices associated with battle, struggle, and war.

Themes of struggle and sacrifice are also prominent in the history and hallways of the studied club—one of the oldest organisations in the AFL. The club facilities are strewn with reminders of the connection it has with its local “blue collar” community and the critical role this connection has played in keeping the club in existence over its one hundred-plus year history. Despite major successes during this time (e.g., winning Premiership flags), and considering the modern era of Australian football, the participants’ still saw the club as largely one identified by its working class heritage and doggedness to survive as a sporting institution. As one coach (a former player whose father also played for the club) put it:

The club’s always found a way to exist and to keep going, and that’s how I’ve always seen the place. And that’s what it sort of means to me. And that’s how I’ve sort of… how I’ve tried to live my life through it. Like, no matter what happens, you’ll find a way. Just keep at it. Just keep going. You’ll exploit. You’ll finally exploit something somewhere. You’ll find a way to get there in the end. (C4).

For the participants in this study, an underdog mentality epitomised the club, wherein the playing group were unquestionably required to show their commitment through effort and sacrifice without complaint, and to display a team-first attitude.

In the pursuit of sporting excellence, adherence to idioms such as “giving everything for club” (akin: country; see Fig. 4) or “putting the body on the line” (see Fig. 7) may come with some unintended costs—what some have called the “dark side” of mental toughness (e.g., Andersen, 2011; Gucciardi & Mallett, 2010). This “dark side” emphasises the potentially damaging effects associated when athletes continually try to prove their mental toughness—something that may be particularly problematic when the term is construed in such a way that neglects athlete well-being and performance (e.g., by demanding that athletes continuously tolerate high levels of pain and stress, silence their vulnerabilities, and forgo alternative identities). Nevertheless, these battle scripts are entrenched in sport history and were exemplified here. They represent formidable narratives, condensed through terms like mental toughness, to motivate and evaluate performers’ commitments to team and their efforts toward achieving the common goal (i.e., victory, supremacy, and power over others).

From the results, it is also noteworthy that participants assumed mental toughness to be a psychological construct. Conceptualising mental toughness as a social idea challenges this perception. For Andersen (2011), mental toughness is not something that just occurs inside of people. Rather, he suggested that mental toughness exists within a socio-cultural context and is a product of a sporting culture, in this case, focused on winning and customs demanding self-sacrifice and 100% commitment to the club. The findings indicated that the studied context commands a strong influence over what players should want and prioritise in their lives (team first, constant quest to improve) or how they ought to cope (be infallible) and persevere (be uncompromising). With mental toughness representing these standards, arguably the term and its related attributes originate in a social setting and follow a culturally determined path. Given the wealth of literature and media discourse reinforcing mental toughness as a psychological construct, perhaps the participants in the current study overlooked the role culture and climate play in defining what mental toughness is or is not. As Tibbert et al. (2015) have recently indicated, mental toughness may indeed be something psychological, but perhaps only to the extent that it has been internalised, imposed, or indoctrinated from subcultural imperatives and ideals appreciated in high performance sport.

The current study has contributed to mental toughness literature in several key ways. First, our results tie in with Tibbert et al.’s
(2015) preliminary findings whereby we learned that mental toughness, in this AFL setting, associated with idealised masculine ideals. Second, we were able to explore a deeper contextual understanding of mental toughness in an elite sport environment using Schein’s (1990) organisational framework. This approach challenges the prevalent assumption that mental toughness is simply a psychologically founded and decontextualized construct. Third, the study’s focus facilitates the prospect of having new conversations about socio-cultural perspectives of mental toughness. For example, researchers might explore how mental toughness perceptions compare across different sporting organisations, subcultures, and performance climates. Similarly, important for continued growth within the cultural sport psychology movement is that mental toughness is considered a topic of interest in this area. For example, research outputs on mental toughness often stem from academic institutions in Western countries like Australia, the UK, and USA. This begs the question as to the cross-cultural nature of mental toughness as a universal concept or if it merely represents a Westernised (white, male, performance-based) cultural discourse and identity (cf. Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009).

Nevertheless, future research can progress this scholarly work by considering its limitations. Specifically, we acknowledge that the selected participants in this study may have presented a narrow perspective of mental toughness. For example, considering the participant profiles, it is possible these individuals portrayed mental toughness in such a way that merely reinforced the club ethos. By design, we tried to capture views of mental toughness from people who were considered to be highly knowledgeable of the club’s subculture (e.g., its goals, identity, group dynamics). However, different cohorts (e.g., rookies, transferred players, persons who had not bought into the dominant culture) may have offered alternative and equally useful perspectives, and we suggest researchers consider these options to ensure mental toughness does not just follow in line with standard club statements. It is also advised that conducting a thorough ethnography, using various techniques (cf. Krane & Baird, 2005; Waggstaff et al., 2012) across time (e.g., across a season) and groups (e.g., players, coaches, medical and science support staff, executive directors), would allow for a broader review of the performance subculture, and an enhanced account of how this subculture shaped different experiences and views of mental toughness. For example, the inclusion of sport science medical staff as participants might give greater insights of the culturally held mental toughness norms regarding overtraining and injury management. In addition, we recognise that elite male sport is one level, domain, and cohort by which to examine mental toughness, and the various values and assumptions connected with it. We propose that researchers explore sub-cultural perceptions outside the boundaries of elite sport (e.g., junior sport) and in different performance areas (e.g., exercise, education, performing arts). As a result, different versions of mental toughness may exist (Fawcett, 2011), connecting the term with the unique climate and conditions in which it is valued. Similarly, future research might explore the cultural views of mental toughness with female athletes. Given that we reported findings linking mental toughness with idealized forms of masculinity, examining the degree to which female athletes must also exhibit these masculine norms, to be considered mentally tough, may prove enlightening. Finally, adopting Schein’s framework for this study allowed us to explore mental toughness across three levels of cultural inquiry — visible artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Future research might consider mental toughness in greater detail by collecting multiple data sets at each particular level.

From an applied perspective, the focus and findings of this study reinforce the view that mental toughness can be thought of as a relative term (cf. Fawcett, 2011), where different (perhaps even contrasting) behaviours might equally characterise what people mean by mental toughness, depending on where their cultural emphases and assumptions lie. Suggesting that mental toughness has its roots in specific sport cultures also raises questions about the messages and images athletes internalise when they consider mental toughness. From a sport development standpoint, the role of competition, the need to produce winners, and the desire for athletes to meet rigid performance and disciplinary standards, is often a dominant feature and overarching theme of what “being tough” means in sport (e.g., see Bell et al., 2013). Should these ideals define what a good mental toughness story is and should be for every person participating and developing in sport? Practitioners might find themselves in a position to challenge this assumption depending on the context in which they work.

It may be difficult to understand mental toughness without giving attention to the contextual norms and ideals related to the term. This study proposes that scholars take interest in this social consideration, perhaps determining how mental toughness will be perceived and studied in the future. Mental toughness may be more than just a psychological feature of people to be captured and measured (Tibbert & Andersen, 2015). Appreciating how athletes, coaches, and others (e.g., parents, fans, the media) promote, instill, and internalise subcultural ideals, coveted as mental toughness, could be intriguing for sport research. Different versions of mental toughness may shape how athletes are primed or incited to think and behave, such as how they should conduct themselves under stress or respond emotionally to setbacks.

Conclusion

This study explored a contextualised version of mental toughness in the high performance setting of an AFL club. Using Schein’s (1990) framework of organisational culture, mental toughness was seen to be related to uncompromising and self-sacrificing displays underpinned and illustrated by values emphasising improvement, rigid effort, infallibility, and selflessness. At its core, mental toughness epitomised an idealised form of masculinity, reflected certain elitist values, and was assumed (perhaps prematurely) to be an internal concept. The results complemented the findings in a recent case study by Tibbert et al. (2015), Together, these works mark a shift in sport research towards understanding mental toughness as stemming from historical and socio-cultural contexts.

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