

Smells like team spirit: Opening a paradoxical black box

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Abstract

Despite the common usage of the term, researchers and practitioners have not been able properly to explain what team spirit is and what benefits and drawbacks it might bring to teams. Several definitions have been proposed, but not in a consistent manner. Using a qualitative approach, we worked with one football team to shed light on how individuals experience and characterize team spirit. Our results suggest that team spirit

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is built around four paradoxes: these are a paradox of selfless egoism; a paradox of results; a paradox of conflict, and a paradox of relationships. Essentially, team spirit can be viewed as an inter-subjectively shared facility with which individual members of a team can balance opposing tensions in a consistent way, managing to maintain a healthy synthesis between individual and collective needs and expectations, preventing the team from dominating the individuals, as well as specific individuals from capturing the team.

Keywords

groups, paradoxes, sport teams, teams, team spirit

Introduction

Teams are considered to perform best when they deploy appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities (Stevens and Campion, 1994) in a context that fits the group's structure, environment and type of leadership. However, even when all these aspects are contingently matched there is something that makes some teams stand out and teamwork flow more naturally. Leavitt and Lipman-Blumer (1995: 110) describe a situation in which 'despite the intensity of the [group] experience, members usually find it impossible to specify exactly what made it so hot.' This impossible-to-qualify quality element is often called 'team spirit' (Foster, 1991; Heermann, 2003; Turel and Connelly, 2012), 'group spirit' (Hackman, 2012) or 'esprit de corps' (Pentland, 2012) that involves all team members, allowing success factors to inter-link smoothly and synergies to emerge (Lawford, 2003). The creation of invisible ingredients whose presence people feel, yet are often unable to define properly or formally acknowledge, recalls 18th century chemistry and its reliance on concepts of unseen movers such as *phlogiston*. The challenge is to make the notion of team spirit more material and less ideational. Thus, defining what team spirit is remains a challenge.

Two perspectives emerge from the literature, articulated through different constructs (see Table 1). The first evaluates individual feelings of fellowship within the team. Team spirit is herein defined as the extent to which *individuals* feel a sense of group togetherness (Jaworski and Kholi, 1993) and participate in the team dynamics. Under this perspective, the notion of team spirit is often used interchangeably with that of team identity, the part of one's self-concept deriving from membership to a social group (Shapiro et al., 2002).

The second perspective focuses on how groups build a collective ethos towards which the individual members show commitment. The ethos of collective unity has been explored via concepts such as team cohesion, defined as an individual's sense of belonging to a group and their sharing a commitment to achieve common goals (Bollen and Hoyle, 1990), as well as through the idea of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). In this perspective, the notion of team spirit overlaps somewhat with related notions such as group potency – the collective belief that the group can be effective – and group drive, defined as the motivation to achieve the group's goals (Stogdill, 1972; Werner and Lester, 2001). At base, such analysis characterizes team spirit in terms of a coherent totality sharing a common goal-oriented intentionality. Team spirit is viewed as a property expressed by the *team* itself, as a unit, as something that is immanent to the team, resulting from its dynamics and expressed in this overarching commitment.

Table 1. Team spirit and a sample of related concepts.

Concept (domain)	Definition	Where it may overlap with team spirit	Where it differs
Team identity (individual domain)	'The salience of one's self-definition as a . . . team member' (Shapiro et al., 2002: 457).	Team spirit involves an individual reflection about the team as a team and the individual's place in the team. It may co-evolve with reflection about team spirit.	Identity may not involve reflection about or tolerance of contradictions and paradoxes. It may actually consist in avoiding them for the sake of unity.
Psychological safety (group domain)	'Individuals' perceptions regarding the consequences of interpersonal risks in their work environment' (Edmondson, 2012: 146).	Team spirit seems to involve some psychological safety, namely to allow learning from defeat.	Psychological safety is mostly related to risk, namely interpersonal risk. Team spirit is broader and covers many different dimensions of group life.
Team cohesion (group domain)	An individual's sense of belonging to a group and sharing a commitment to achieve common goals (Bollen and Hoyle, 1990).	Team spirit may be expected to create some level of cohesion.	Cohesive groups may actually lose spirit. They may become oppressive and limit individual voice (e.g. groupthink) and the capability to live with (rather than to suppress) contradiction and paradox.
Team potency (group domain)	The collectively-shared belief of a group that it can be effective (Lester et al., 2002; Shea and Guzzo, 1987).	Potent groups may be hypothesized to have a team spirit. Spirit may be hypothesized to be a cause or a consequence of potency (more research needed).	Potency may result from individual talent and a history of success without much team spirit (e.g. teams of previous rivals).
Group mind (group domain)	Patterns of heedful interrelated actions attributed to a group (Weick and Roberts, 1993).	Team spirit may result in patterns of mindful actions performed by team members.	Group mind is often perceived by external observers. Team spirit is essentially perceived by team members.
Group drive (group domain)	The level of work group arousal toward organizational task-goal accomplishment (Stogdill, 1972; Werner and Lester, 2001); the group-level analogue of achievement motivation (Chen et al., 2004).	Team spirit may be a predictor of group drive, although several variables (e.g. team potency) may moderate the relationship. Werner and Lester (2001) consider the team spirit construct comprises both group potency and group drive.	While team spirit is a cognitive frame, group drive represents the intensity with which group members invest energy on behalf of the team.

The discrepancies between these two perspectives – and, consequently, their implications for how researchers operationalize team spirit – suggest that a more consistent examination of the meaning of team spirit is required for future research. We contribute to this discussion by considering that, while the two approaches seem contradictory, they can co-exist if we adopt a paradox lens. The notion of a ‘paradox lens’ (Luscher and Lewis, 2008) is a way of developing holistic, fluid, both/and approaches to organizational phenomena. The paradox lens allows one to see contradictions and tensions as two sides of the same reality rather than polarized opposites that cannot be reconciled. As an illustration, Luscher and Lewis (2008) discuss, among others, the individual expression *and* group formation paradox (see p. 231). Teams have to manage tensions between opposite dimensions permeating group life, namely those between the individual and the collective, and those related to competition and cooperation, trust and vigilance, harmony and conflict (De Rond, 2012). Teams are faced with paradoxical challenges (Smith and Berg, 1987) and, in this sense, contradictions may co-exist when a paradox lens is adopted. We thus approach our topic with a paradox lens that seeks to explain why it is not easy for teams to build and maintain team spirit.

To further this aim, our article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature and explore the core perspectives on team spirit highlighted above: what exactly does team spirit mean? Where can we find it? How can we maintain it? Second, we discuss how team members define and explore what team spirit is, where it comes from, and what its main implications are for team functioning. Empirically, our research is based on interviews with the players, coaches and directors of a non-professional football team. Considering the intangibility of our phenomenon of interest, we opted to ground the discussion around *one* team. Using this qualitative data, we explore the meaning of team spirit within this particular unit. Samples of one, in this case, one team, have limitations, but they also offer opportunities in terms of the in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of interest (Buchanan, 1999; Tsoukas, 2009), including the interpretation of members belonging to the same team, sharing the same experiences and, as a team, interpreting the meaning of team spirit. The data resulting from the interviews were analyzed using semi-otic clustering (Feldman, 1995). Our findings showed that even though people discussed team spirit in layperson’s terms, they were clearly able to define it, had their own views about where it resided within the team, and were aware of its implications for team functioning. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the literature. Our study highlights the complexity and the paradoxical nature of team spirit and sheds light on why team spirit is so difficult to build and, particularly, to sustain.

Team spirit: Two views

Despite the conceptual inconsistencies, some researchers have examined the potential of team spirit for team functioning. For instance, in a study with 143 firms in the USA, Harris et al. (2006) found team spirit to be positively associated with functional intra-departmental conflict and negatively associated with dysfunctional intra-departmental conflict. Koonmee et al. (2010) found a positive link between implicit forms of ethics institutionalization and team spirit in a study with 164 firms in Thailand. In contrast, Smith et al. (2009) reported that team spirit was not significantly associated with

misreported behaviors of status information among 228 project managers drawn from various ongoing information systems projects.

Several authors have referred to the concept of team spirit as an important issue for group functioning. However, team spirit is a concept that is normally assumed rather than problematized and explored as a research topic per se (Abell, 1996; Cabañes and Calvó-Armengol, 2007), namely in terms of the way it unfolds as a team process (as Jaworski and Kholi, [1993], and Werner and Lester [2001] did). Considering the organizational literature on teams, two views predominate: one that associates team spirit with the team itself, while the other interprets it from an individual perspective. Next we explore these two streams. As previously considered, the first takes team spirit as immanent to the team, while the second views it as the result of individual contributions to the team.

Team spirit as team process

Some accounts represent team spirit as something located not within the individual psyche, but as something that is located in the collective entity of the team. From this perspective, some team processes transcend their individual members (Gersick, 1989), belonging to a different level of analysis. Heermann (2003), for instance, proposed six interconnected stages that high-performing teams experience to reach a proper team spirit. In the *initiating* phase, team members develop a sense of belonging. The following three stages – *visioning*, *claiming* and *celebrating* – are characterized by expectancy, common purpose and feelings of wonder. Finally, in the *letting go* and the *service* phases, team members experience emotions such as relief, honesty, sharing and accomplishment. Teams having a ‘spirit’ may look similar regardless of the characteristics of their members. Paraphrasing Tolstoy, every team with a spirit may look similar in the same way that teams without it may have very different lives (see Pentland [2012] for an empirical note on the topic).

The team-based view of team spirit is echoed in notions such as those of team potency (Guzzo et al., 1993), group identity (Kramer and Brewer, 1984), group mind (Waytz and Young, 2012; Weick and Roberts, 1993) and the stress on the team level as the appropriate conceptual locus for exploring dynamics that are more than the sum of individual actions. Groupthink and group potency, for example, are seen largely as a result of group dynamics rather than something explicable (exclusively) from an individual perspective (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). For example, a group of highly self-confident individuals may be characterized by low group potency (i.e. a collection of self-confident members may consider that the group, as a group, is unable to reach group’s goals successfully; Rego et al., 2013). In this sense, to understand team spirit one needs to look at the team itself.

Team spirit as individual process

Other authors present team spirit as something that happens as a result of individual actions and contributions. Abell (1996) discussed team spirit in organizations as part of a theoretical model constructed on the basis of the ‘probability of someone helping’

others and the utility of the received 'awards' and the given 'effort' (p. 449). Therefore, while challenging each other for the top position in the group, the scale of rewards would influence a member's help offered to other members of the team (Abell, 1996).

In an individual-based perspective, star players need to help the team so that the team in turn helps them on their journey to stardom (Kets de Vries, 2012). Hence, team spirit requires some sacrifice if only because not all members can be stars either all the time or in synchrony. Nonetheless, team spirit has other relevant and more emotional characteristics, such as encouraging behavior that is oriented to helping and trusting others, sharing ideas and setting mutual group goals.

An individual-based view of team spirit is closely related to a set of topics deemed problematic, such as free riding (Kerr, 1983), social loafing (Karau and Williams, 1993; Latané et al., 1979), personal identity (Turner et al., 1987), fault lines (Thatcher and Patel, 2012) and expertise dissensus (Gardner and Kwan, 2012). All these problematic issues arise from an analytical stress on the importance of individual interpretations of, and contributions to, group processes. Teams are seen to be vulnerable to individual actions and even small changes in group composition may disrupt existing dynamics (de Rond, 2012; Mueller, 2012), a finding that supports the importance of the individual level of analysis in group research: hence, the group is viewed here as an aggregate of individuals.

With the previous questions in mind, we approached one team in its natural environment in order to learn more about the experience of team spirit. Is it a property of teams? Does it depend on individual contributions?

Method

To learn about team spirit in context, we conducted qualitative research, with information gathered 'in vivo' (Van Maanen, 1979: 520). Recognizing that we were dealing with concepts of team spirit that seemed to be 'essentially contested' (Gallie, 1956) in terms of an analytically normative focus on either the individual or group, we make sense of the meaning of team spirit in terms of categories in use by the members of a naturally occurring team. We appreciate that members' categories are not decisive, since the social world is characterized by the coexistence of multiple interpretations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Feldman et al., 2004) and other explanations for the data we collected may also be plausible. Interpretive research traditions search for plausibility rather than assuming that there is a single objective truth. By grounding our accounts in those of the team members, working from their categorical worldviews, by collecting data on the perspectives of team members in their work environment (Glaser and Strauss, 1965), considering the participants' point of view (Fossey et al., 2002; Gephart, 2004; Van Maanen, 1979), we embed analysis in members' sensemaking (Schutz 1967), but we do not restrict ourselves to it. Instead, grounding our analysis in members' categories, we move through analysis to successive stages of meaning, from the mundane to the abstract.

People's feelings and perceptions are notoriously difficult to access other than through self-reported information (Kim et al., 2012). Using self-report data, semiotic clustering analysis allowed us to gain access to implicit and rich deep understandings underlying the stories people tell (Feldman, 1995; Feldman et al., 2004). Semiotic clustering explores

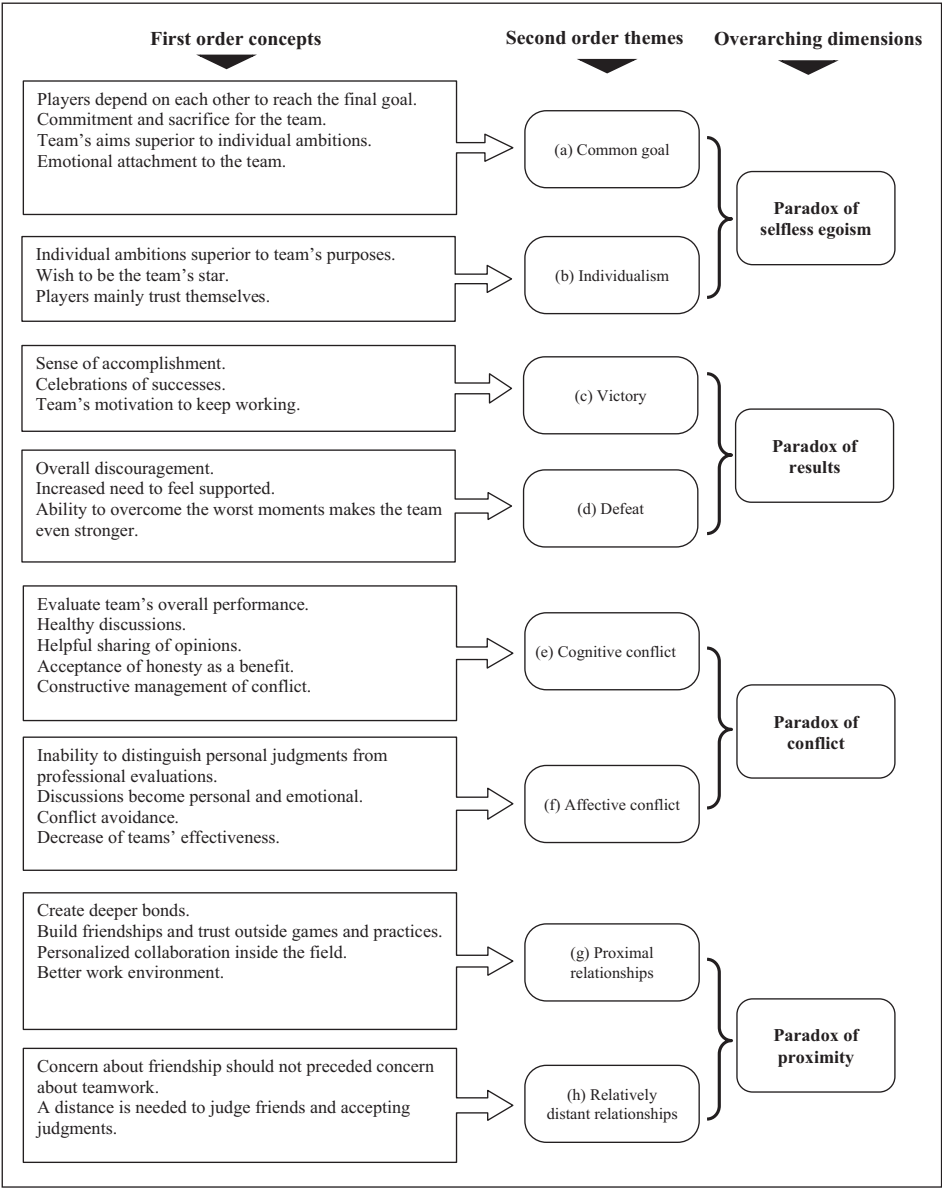


Figure 1. Data structure.

successively deeper layers of meaning, represented systematically in a three-column table. The first order concepts, located in the first column (see Figure 1), are the ones that emerge directly from the data, in this case mainly from the interviews. Such evidence was based purely on the ‘informants’ own language’ (Clark et al., 2010: 407): what they said and understood regarding team spirit. As more semi-structured interviews were

conducted, we sought out evidence of emergent patterns present in the interviewees' perceptions of team spirit. The transformation of unrefined expressions and opinions into more thematic categories was conducted in the second order column, via thematic association, which allowed us to capture deeper meanings not evident in the first order concepts (Clark et al., 2010). These second order themes relied upon interpretation of the data collected, as well as from interrogation of existing theory. The third order concepts express a higher level of abstraction still, moving from data themes to conceptual abstraction, representing an interpretive effort to lift data to a higher level (Suddaby, 2006), drawing categories that capture the meanings that form a deep structure beneath the surface of discourse.

As we became more involved with data collection and analysis it became increasingly evident that our informants struggled with team tensions. These tensions informed the interpretations presented in the final step, where constructs that were not immediately visible in primary data became implicit when searching for common themes, which were produced when we drew on broader and more abstract social theory. Therefore, and in line with Clark et al. (2010), it was possible to move from first and second order connections to more abstract, simplified and complementary clusters. As a result, the eight themes in the second column were gathered into the structure of the four deep dimensions that were ultimately seen to characterize the data reporting the empirical situation. These dimensions represented deep paradoxes: the paradox of selfless egoism, the paradox of results, the paradox of conflict and the paradox of proximity.

Sampling process

The sample for this study comprised 25 team members of one non-professional football (soccer) team from the Portuguese football association. We thus refer to European-style football ('soccer' to our North American readers), 'a sport played between two teams of eleven players who each compete to maneuver the ball into the opposition's goal without using their arms or hands' (Elberse and Dye, 2012: 25). Within the team there is a marked division of labor between attackers ('strikers'), defenders ('defense') and the goalkeeper, the person whose skill is the focal point of the game's most intense moments when teams strive to score by landing the ball inside the goal posts. Football, 'the most popular sport in the world' and also a 'big business' (Elberse and Dye, 2012: 2), is a collective game that critically depends on collaboration among players. All our informants were Portuguese and included players, coaches and directors, all male, with an average age of 27, ranging from 20 to 40. Although they all played football, each had a different day job as their professional activity. Some members were students while others worked as bank clerks, insurance agents and business owners, among others.

Football was selected for several reasons. First, players are required to work together in a highly interdependent mode if they are to score and win (Hackman and Allmendinger, 1995). Second, as any cursory analysis of the media will show, team spirit is massively valued and required in sports, including football. Third, sports provide a rich context in which to explore phenomena of general organizational interest (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; De Rond, 2012; Dirks, 2000; Katz, 2001; Wolfe et al., 2005).

Data collection

We gathered our data over a six-month period. After getting approval from the teams' directors and coaches, we collected data from the team, mainly but not exclusively using semi-structured interviews to do so (Fossey et al., 2002). We used an interview protocol with 10 questions concerning four dimensions (see Appendix). Overall, the topics framing discussion included the nature of team spirit, team dynamics, team rituals and team performance management, which were deployed in order to address our own topic directly and indirectly via team processes. One of the authors acted as the field researcher conducting a total of 33 formal interviews, with some members being interviewed more than once. Interviews, in general, lasted about half an hour. We stopped data collection when a stable interpretation was reached and we found that subsequent conversations with informants did not challenge the sense we were making. Sensemaking stability suggested that we had attained that threshold described in the literature as one of 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To prevent data contamination, each interview was conducted in an office physically separate from the other interviewees to minimize interaction and data sharing among members. During this period and subsequent to reliability checks, the field researcher maintained informal episodic contact as an opportunity to verify and enrich the analysis. Data collection took place before team practice sessions in order to meet participants in the same geographic area and within the proper team context, allowing us to contact our informants in their natural sports environment, providing an informal and relaxed quality to the interviews.

In addition to interviews, field notes were taken during the weekly games, to examine team interactions and to inform further data collection conversations. Finally, the themes and ideas that arose during this research were informally discussed with some of the team members in order to compare our interpretive results with the participants' own views (Fossey et al., 2002). In combination, these procedures (semi-structured interviews, field notes, observation and discussion of our interpretations with the participants) indicate triangulation (Fossey et al., 2002).

Findings

Eight themes resulted from the initial treatment of semi-structured interviews. The process leading to theme identification definition was not straightforward (Clark et al., 2010). As we coded our data, we moved back and forth between different data to build theory while consulting theory to ground our coding conceptually (Weston et al., 2000). As we gained familiarity with the data, the overarching idea of tensions and paradoxes captured the deep structure of the team members' conversations with us, leading, analytically, to literature on paradoxes of organizations (e.g. Clegg et al., 2002; Lewis, 2000) and more specifically that literature stressing the paradoxes of group life (e.g. Murnighan and Conlon, 1991; Smith and Berg, 1987).

Figure 1 represents the three interpretive orders resulting from the analytical strategy. Additionally, Table 2 gives representative illustrations of interview data from which second order themes emerged. In the text, we include brief illustrations only: the table offers more comprehensive first-order evidence. We identified four classes of paradoxes:

Table 2. Representative supporting data for each 2nd order theme.

2nd order themes	Representative 1st order evidence
(a) Common goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'All of us like to play, but we have to understand the coach's choices the best way possible because we all have the same objective.' • 'I think it is important to remember it takes everyone to pull in the same direction.' • 'Being me or another player scoring, the enjoyment will be the same, since it is equally good for the team.' • 'We are not professionals, we are not here for the money and we all know each other, so we must all care about what is the best for the whole team.' • 'First of all, winning is our objective, which is why we work so hard during the week and in the games.'
(b) Individualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • '... there are situations in which some players fail to show team spirit because they were not chosen to play or did not feel happy to begin losing the game and start to complain ...' • 'Of course there are proud players who occasionally exaggerate in individual moves to show themselves a little more still, sometimes the ones who exaggerate in individualism are doing it to try their luck to score, and if they actually achieve it, it will be not only for them, but for the whole team as well.' • 'When I belong to a team, I like to think I am the best one, but I also want to believe that the other goalkeeper who is in the bench has the same vision and believes he is the best one as well, so we can be really committed to the team's objective.' • 'The most common example is when someone is better placed to score but the player who has the ball decides not to pass and tries the goal himself.'
(c) Victory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'It is a time where our short-term objective has been reached so that moment has to be enjoyed.' • 'Scoring is the main purpose of football and if we stopped celebrating every time we scored it would stop motivating us.' • '... the fact that we won on September 25th should have united us even more as a team so that we could have played better on the following Sunday ...' • 'Usually these games feature an extra motivation.' • 'Since we were always winning the matches, everything else was easier to accomplish: union, friendship, better work, greater joy ...' • 'The more we celebrate, the closer we are to the objective set.'
(d) Defeat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Being relegated to the last division was a really bad feeling because it was the work of a whole season which was lost.' • 'If we are losing ... this is a moment where we should get more united and join forces even if it is so hard to do it.' • '... a loss can contribute positively to the extent that we know we have to work harder and appeal more to each other, so defeat does not happen again.' • 'In those times when things go really bad, we are lacking a bit of help.' • 'And if winning is good for team spirit, losing is even better because if we do not get more united, committed and understanding as a team when we lose, it will be much harder to succeed.' • 'When we are losing we get really demotivated and we cannot turn the result in our favor. And that absence of psychological strength affects us badly.' • 'During that season, seeing our bad results and predicting a drop was really demotivating for all of us.'
(e) Cognitive conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Occasionally players argue about team's performance when things did not go well[. Even so, these are not personal discussions.' • 'Sometimes we discuss when we do not play as well as we should.' • 'When I fail there is a certain reprehension from other players, but in a constructive manner so next time I can do better.'

Table 2. (Continued)

2nd order themes	Representative 1st order evidence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Seeing what was wrong and what went well and tackling this problem together is also part of the team spirit, it is good to analyze what is going on, still it should also be done when you win and not just when you lose.' • 'Giving a critique is not to justify defeat.' • 'Yes, typically in the first practice of the week our coach analyzes the pros and cons of the game.'
(f) Affective conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Two years ago we had two players on the team who outside the field did not even greet each other; they only had a professional relationship.' • 'There are discussions that can be taken to the changing rooms, but this is in the case of more serious debates, which need to be solved to have a better environment in the team; which is not always possible.' • 'Well, in my opinion, team spirit is missing when we have discussions which are related to the game, but that sometimes get bigger and personal.' • 'I specifically recall a big disagreement between two colleagues, but after a serious conversation everything was alright.' • 'I think that in this game we were lacking team spirit because there were some bad discussions about players' performances.' • 'Some conflicts may be constructive, others may not.' • '... seeing those personal discussions outside the field is not a good sign.' • '... some do not have the capability of detaching performance judgment from personality evaluations.'
(g) Proximate relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Dinners serve mainly for the group's union. It is what gives more effect to team spirit; not only for having fun together on those evenings, but also to create trust and friendship to collaborate better on the field.' • 'If we create a closer relationship, it will be easier for us to help each other inside the field to achieve our common goal.' • 'When I fail to score, the other players become upset because I lost an opportunity, but they also support me because they know failing is normal. Even first league players fail.' • 'Many things are said that ultimately facilitate the creation of another link between players which would not be so easily achieved on the field.' • 'The better we know each other, the better we accept criticism, which may not happen when we are criticized by someone with whom we do not have a closer relationship.' • 'We always run close to that player to congratulate him and show the team's joy because, regardless of who scores a goal, it is for the team and not just for that player.' • 'In my opinion what is built on the outside is much more important, so then you can take it inside the field.' • 'You know, this ends up being a family.'
(h) Relatively distant relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'But when it happens and players realize the true reason for skipping, they say some jokes and play with the situation, always with a relaxed posture.' • 'However, nowadays dinners do not contribute for building team spirit because players see these gatherings as entertainment and fun only.' • 'Then, outside the four lines, certain players try to criticize and evaluate others and some may not accept it in the most correct manner, so that is a thing we have to work on.' • 'Regarding the new coach, I've known him for several years and we are really friends, but if he does not select me for the games I can perfectly distinguish our relation of coach and player from the one we have outside the team context.' • '... the new one has been here for some weeks so I cannot judge right away, even because I am his friend.' • 'On the other hand, others become really grumpy when they are not selected and in fact disconnect from the field action ...'

considering individual needs and caring about the team (paradox of selfless egoism), learning from both victory and defeat (paradox of results), engaging in conflict without being captured by it (paradox of conflict), and learning from the constructive and destructive sides of close relationships (paradox of proximity).

Paradox of selfless egoism

Two first order categories emerging from the data referred to a tension between common goals and an individual's desire to shine.

Second order theme (a): Common goal. Before working to reach the group's targets, a common goal is essential: a compelling direction that motivates and boosts collective effort (Hackman, 2002). Team members, linked by the desire of belonging to the team and being together with their colleagues, desire achieving the team's goal of winning the game. In our sample, this orientation was strongly evident. Members' emotional commitment to the team was compensated only by symbolic rewards. Besides enjoying football, they felt engaged with their team's spirit, realizing that it was important that all participants respected the ultimate goal and needed each other to achieve it. As one of our informants described it, 'we are all on the field for the same reason and only together we can manage to win.'

Second order theme (b): Individualism. In parallel with the team mindset, there is inevitably an individualistic sense of trying to be the best possible player, the one who scores the most, or even the one chosen to play more often. Individualism refers to the tendency of individuals to look primarily after their own interests (Hofstede, 1984) and is usually viewed as the opposite of what teams should represent. However, it can actually empower team spirit: '[S]ometimes the ones who exaggerate in individualism are doing it to try their luck to score, and if they actually achieve it, it will not be only for them, but for the whole team as well.' To a certain extent, when some of the team members act in an individualistic manner, they enhance drive, motivation and confidence, and help the team to achieve its immediate objectives (Schmidt et al., 2012). Thus, individualistic actions in the right moments and in the appropriate amount may, in fact, work as team builders. As De Rond (2012: 54) argued, 'a healthy level of internal competition can help get the best out of high performers' and thus foster collective performance.

Overarching dimension of the paradox of selfless egoism. A first overarching dimension articulating the above categories can be described as the paradox of selfless egoism where team elements struggle for self-expression while simultaneously caring and feeling engaged with the team's aims (Lewis, 2000). A common goal shared by players highlights the values and intentions that connect all of them and drive the team to perform as one single unit. However, the conflicting element of individualism emphasizes a distinct social force where players dream of being the team's star. Life in sports teams seems, in this sense, to involve measures of both cooperation and competition (Katz, 2001), both being closely intertwined and fostering team performance since tensions are appropriately managed (De Rond, 2012).

Paradox of results

Victory and defeat were persistent themes for our informants. We thus categorized them as relevant interpretive dimensions.

Second order theme (c): Victory. As expected, victories are represented as central to feeding team spirit (Amabile and Kramer, 2011; Katz, 2001; Weick, 1984). When members achieve their objectives and take the time to celebrate, they get more committed. As one of the interviewees said: 'After winning a game, when entering inside the changing room, you feel a spirit of joy and a sense of duty. After all, that is the objective.' While singing, smiling, shouting, joking and congratulating each other, they experience this accomplishment with the prevailing feeling of 'that moment has to be enjoyed.' Therefore, victories energize. At the end, when the ultimate goal is reached, psychological energy increases. As one team member said:

... [the players] who remain from last year's team have in mind that last season they have spent a whole year fighting for a goal they have achieved. Now, based on that effort, those same players are even more committed to achieve this season's objective ...

Second order theme (d): Defeat. If winning supports commitment, it is defeat that constitutes the acid test of a group's team spirit. Losing, in this sense, can have a positive role. Many interviewees mentioned as a common theme that 'it is in times of loss that one can see true team spirit ... [because] ... criticizing when things go wrong will discourage even more, and team spirit is to respect and realize that we all lost.' When teams experience difficulties, their members feel more need for support, friendship and comprehension to face future obstacles. They need to perceive the team as a psychologically safe space (Edmondson, 1999). In the case of our team, members realized how important it was for them to know that they could count on each other in those moments and learn and grow from failure (Richardson and West, 2010). Teams learn more about themselves in their worst moments. A defeat leads to discouragement and sadness, but it is exactly these feelings that are essential for teams to learn how to build resilience and attachment and to prove the quality of their social capital.

Overarching dimension of the paradox of results. The paradox of results provides an overarching dimension combining these two categories in which the duality of victory and defeat bring important contributions to the team's environment. Victory contributes to team spirit due to the accomplishment of objectives and the concomitant experience of positive emotions. Defeat, despite carrying debilitating effects of disappointment and threats to self-efficacy, also makes the team members realize how interdependent they are and how supportive they should be to one another, making the team stronger and more cohesive. It provides unique opportunities for the development of a sense of psychological safety and stronger group cohesion. Future research may be conducted to test whether there is something about some victories (e.g. hard fought ones) or defeats (e.g. near misses) that lead to more demonstrable effects of this tension. In this sense, all

results might equally contribute to team spirit, but some results may be more equal than others.¹

Paradox of conflict

Informants referred to the dual role of conflicts, suggesting that conflict offers a relevant basis for understanding team spirit, as we elaborate next.

Second order theme (e): Cognitive conflict. At first, it may seem peculiar for team spirit to contain conflict as an integral element. Conflict, however, nurtures a positive team environment if handled appropriately. Teamwork involves people with different backgrounds, opinions and personalities, and teams must take advantage of such diversity. If teams use conflict to discuss points of view, performance issues, explanations for success and failure, producing 'competitive versions of the truth' (De Rond, 2012: 74) and divergent perspectives will improve team effectiveness (Amason et al., 1995). These are defined as cognitive conflicts. Discussing the overall condition of the team was part of the regular work done by team members. At the weekly practices or gatherings organized by the team, such as informal meals, members discussed among themselves and with the coach how to improve performance. Such discussions were seen as healthy, where they tried 'to correct each other, know what was wrong and what could be fixed,' without offending anyone personally. In short, if teams want to be truthful to each other, their members must accept honesty as a benefit achieved by criticizing, clarifying and exchanging constructive opinions (Amason et al., 1995).

Second order theme (f): Affective conflict. The problem with team conflict is its negative aspect. While discussing team issues, the inability to differentiate strategic perspectives from personal appraisals is common. Our sample offered vivid examples of this matter. First, discussions were visible 'in the pitch and about the game . . .' As a team sport, when mistakes occurred, players called for others to focus, something that could be resolved in the moment or that might escalate when 'wake up calls' were seen as personal attacks. While participants recognized the importance of the ability of knowing how and when to speak with each other, it was also evident that some players were not willing to accept criticism and avoided confrontation. Such conflicts have the potential to damage team spirit because they create a barrier to the benefits resulting from cognitive conflict. When there is no detachment between performance evaluation and personal criticism, members avoid sharing ideas and working in teams because they feel constantly judged (Amason et al., 1995). Therefore, while transparency, maturity and a willingness to receive honest feedback are necessary they should not be taken for granted.

Overarching dimension of the paradox of conflict. That people value group agreement to avoid conflicts and to maintain a good team climate, but are aware that benefits result from situations that may be unpleasant, is something expressed in the third dimension we uncovered: the paradox of conflict. Cognitive conflicts can be positive for the team, because they require some acceptance of criticism to understand what is right and what

needs to be improved (Amason et al., 1995). Conflict, therefore, is part of the development process, but it needs to be handled with care as affective conflict may emerge and jeopardize the potential benefits of cognitive conflict (De Rond, 2012).

The paradox of proximity

A final pair of themes referred to the proximity of relationships – proximity is both necessary and dangerous. Close relationships are necessary and dangerous, the tension that Kets de Vries (2011), via Schopenhauer, labeled as the ‘hedgehog dilemma’: in the cold of the winter, hedgehogs try to get close to each other to share their body heat; but if they get too close they hurt each other with their spines. Teams are relationship-intensive micro-ecologies and it is the nature of their inner relationships that defines their dynamics.

Second order theme (g): Proximate relationships. While team members interact with each other at work, closer relationships, friendships, may sometimes occur (Morrison and Nolan, 2007), and these create bonds between individuals. Mutual support and harmony may thus be seen as a positive and natural process. For our informants, social events such as weekly dinners and regular meetings were described as crucial ingredients creating more attachment to the team. The importance of extra-work gatherings, especially those around food and drinks (e.g. beer meets [Pentland, 2012] and meals in general [Cunha et al., 2008]) were also important for building the team. These rituals allowed team members to create trust, integrate new members, know each other more genuinely and ‘build up new friendships and strengthen the existing ones . . .’

As one informant said: ‘it is good to know each other because in that way we can have a better sense of the different personalities . . . and how to interact with others.’ Thus, deeper relationships of camaraderie and friendship improve cooperation and mutual support. However, personal relationships may be beneficial only up to a certain point.

Second order theme (h): Relatively distant relationships. Although deeper interpersonal relationships improve the environment of the team, they can also undermine team spirit. When team members have closer relationships, it may become increasingly difficult to avoid group-centrism (Kruglanski et al., 2006) and favouritism, to put team goals above friendship, and accept/provide professional appraisals from/to colleagues (Morrison and Nolan, 2007). Our informants did not always manage to escape this problem. It was evident that friendship also had the potential to undermine performance. For instance, while criticizing others, players ‘usually joke to avoid insulting . . .’ Additionally, while working with close friends, the probability of players not following all the rules is greater because the violation of rules may be received with some complacency. Therefore, the adoption of merit-based practices may be harder to implement in teams with a developed sense of interpersonal proximity (Morrison and Nolan, 2007). De Rond (2012: 47) argued that ‘harmony can hurt performance’ and that the most productive teams tend to be those with ‘a delicate balance between internal competition and harmony.’

Overarching dimension of the paradox of proximity. The final overarching dimension thus refers to the paradox of proximity. Even when interacting in a professional environment, positive, proximal relationships may foster team spirit because people get to know each other, knowing what to expect from one another (Hackman, 2002). This will happen with proximal relationships that unite the team and facilitate cooperation, but they may turn into an excess of proximity that may lead to self-indulgence, group-centrism and team ineffectiveness. Teams, therefore, may demand proximity but not an excess of it.

Reliability check

When invited to review our interpretations, a subgroup of three members, two players and a coach, agreed with the paradoxes we had identified although the concept of individualism initially raised some disagreement. First, informants expressed disagreement regarding individualism's presence in the team (a finding not totally surprising, considering what has been described as the in-group collectivistic nature of Portuguese culture by Hofstede [1984] and Jesuino [2002]). However, after we explained our interpretation, they admitted that individualism was actually present, with more visibility in the case of the strikers. Research with sports teams indicates that teams and coaches sometimes tolerate counterproductive behavior by star players because they are pivotal to the team's success (De Rond, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2012). Their individualism thus may not be viewed as such at first sight. Another important result from the crosscheck was when one of the coaches highlighted the importance of proximity. Agreeing with the importance of those close connections between team members, he avoided too much contact with the players out of the football context because he was aware of the destructive aspects that could result from close relationships. The reliability checks thus suggest that our interpretations can be considered plausible.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that team spirit is a paradoxical process, a finding that is in line with previous research on the paradoxical processes cutting across group life (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991; Smith and Berg, 1987). Paradoxes refer to contradictory yet interrelated elements that seem logical in isolation, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously (Lewis, 2000). These conflicting forces were visible in the answers provided by participants. Based on our findings, we define team spirit as a cognitive frame that team members share, which equips a team with the capacity to synthesize the contradictory social processes inherent to group life: individual and collective goals, winning and losing, constructive and destructive conflict, close but not too close relationships. Previous authors (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Smith and Tushman, 2005) defended the importance of shared cognitive frames; we extended this to the case of team spirit. We contribute to team research by studying the specificities of this notion of team spirit.

From the above, we can now derive three interpretations about the way team dynamics influence the process leading to team spirit. Some teams are able to achieve and maintain a healthy balance between the collective and individual components of team-working. These teams tackle their paradoxes as dualities (Farjoun, 2010) that need to be reconciled: the individual and the team coexist in a state of positive tension that takes the best of individual members and teams. According to our interpretation, this is what characterizes team spirit: the capacity to handle contradictory requirements as a permanent dialectic, without allowing one pole to dominate the other (Clegg et al., 2002). We suggest that when this paradoxical state is maintained, people perceive that the team is 'bigger' than the sum of individual contributions, and that it allows them to reach their individual goals.

In other cases, teams do not maintain this state of duality. Individuals come to dominate the team. When that happens, the team loses its potency as a collective because individual concerns can reduce care for the team as a whole, a tension familiar to most teams, including sports teams (Elberse and Dye, 2012; Schroth, 2011). When individual interests prevail over collective interests, the group fails to create a 'spirit.' A similar thing happens when the collective imposes itself: individual goals lose relevance and the team defines what the appropriate goals are for everybody. Processes such as groupthink illustrate the dysfunctions created by team dynamics that fail to appreciate the importance of attending to individual differences, intentions and agendas. Our results indicate that, interestingly, groups may be at their best when their members are able to push forward both their individual goals and those of the team. In this team, too much inclination to individual goals threatens a sense of shared identity; an excessive orientation to the collective may reduce vitality and the interest of their individual members. Team spirit characterizes the skill of keeping the team in the vital space between social forces that can neutralize each other but which, when articulated in a duality, enrich and empower one another.

The present research contributes to the understanding of why it is not easy for teams to build and maintain team spirit. Helping teams and their members to be able to deal with contradictions may facilitate the development of team spirit.

As shown by the paradox of results, members need to discover that victories are the goal, but that defeat is critical to test the bonds within a team. Losing will teach team members how to provide support and friendship. Inconsistent results may be a challenge for the team, but it is very unlikely that most teams can avoid losing. As revealed by the paradox of conflict, individuals need to take advantage of conflicts. These are crucial for work improvement if focused on points of view and professional evaluations but potentially harmful when they damage the quality of interactions (Losada and Heaphy, 2004; Pentland, 2012). Finally, excessively close relationships provide emotional bonds between team members, intensifying motivation and mutual appreciation. The proximity of relationships, however, has a downside. They may connect but also complicate professional interactions by potentially reducing team potency and competence, when the personal and the professional interpenetrate (Morrison and Nolan, 2007; Morriss et al., 2011).

Limitations and boundary conditions

All research has limitations: to enumerate ours, first, even though sports are a relevant context in which to study organizing processes and sport is a big business (Day

et al., 2012; De Rond, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005), the fact that our study was conducted with a football team may make it difficult to extrapolate to other contexts, such as business. Sports teams have unique characteristics that may render generalization to other types of organizations difficult. In this sense, statistical generalization (from observation to population) is problematic but analytical generalization (from observation to theory) may not be a major issue (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010). Forms of group solidarity may differ substantially from the voluntary and amateur team we studied here, freely working collectively, to those work teams whose sense of unity is a mission provided by resisting management in a company. In addition, as one of our reviewers pointed out, 'what human beings consider to be things like "good" inter-subjective relations and "positive" group-solidarity are not made up from scratch every time a new team comes together for the first time but involve the interaction of a wide range of pre-existing social objects like culture, institutions.' Our project could not address the history and genealogy of the meaning of team spirit in this empirical context, but only enquire into its being rather than its becoming, a limitation that should be acknowledged and which offers an opportunity for further research.

The study's contribution may also be limited to the boundaries of small, collocated face-to-face groups. Our choice means that the study does not contribute a great deal about teaming processes (Edmondson, 2012) or what have been called 'new teams' that are potentially bigger, dispersed and electronically-mediated (Kim et al., 2012; Wageman et al., 2012). On top of this, our players were all volunteers, which adds another layer of difference to most organizations, especially firms. Sports teams tend to be homogeneous in their demographics, characterized by voluntary association and submitted to strong socialization processes that may not occur in other teams. The team were all men, all Portuguese and all of a similar age. As such, generalization of the findings should be made with caution. Many teams in organizations are not equivalent to the team we studied in the dimensions referred above. They are less homogeneous in terms of their demography, more diverse in terms of the motivations of their members and looser with regards to socialization practices. They have different teamwork experiences and histories and may have learned to tackle paradoxical requirements different from those we have unearthed here. For example, we approached this team with the assumption that team spirit would be something positive and cherished, but in other contexts, team spirit may be assumed as something 'against' and be more controversial from some stakeholder perspectives. Context matters: the same individuals may be aligned with several constituencies to create shared interpretations whereas at work they may be part of a team less benevolent for management. Ignoring the context, as to a great extent we did here, makes our work less relevant in social, historical and cultural terms. Related to this limitation is the fact that our study was carried out within a context attributed to be an in-group collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 1984; Jesuino, 2002), albeit a judgment that invokes a very abstracted level of analysis. Future studies may test if the themes and paradoxes identified here also emerge in other cultural contexts and within teams composed of individuals from diverse cultural contexts, a crucial issue in times of 'teaming' processes (Edmondson, 2012) involving individuals from different geographies and cultural ecologies.

Conclusion

Given theoretical and managerial focus on team spirit, we proposed to examine the meanings associated with it in the naturalistic context of a football team. The subtleties associated with team spirit were transformed into one comprehensive conceptualization combining four dimensions. Members have to accept some individualism and see it as a stimulus to reach a common goal, face losses as a necessary ingredient for winning, consent to performance confrontations in order that improvements occur and encourage proximity – but not in excess. Team spirit thus appears as a paradoxical and fragile state, a combination of attempts at syntheses that may be difficult to achieve and to prolong.

We approached a football team to develop plausible theorizing about team spirit based upon the interpretations of members. We cannot make substantiated claims about the relation between team spirit and team performance. That relation, although relevant, was out of the scope of this research. Previous research, however, indicates that the ability to embrace tensions has been claimed to enhance team performance and individual creativity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Smith and Tushman, 2005). We can thus hypothesize that this ability can provide an advantage to teams who developed a shared cognitive frame in comparison with those that do not, a possibility that presents itself as an interesting area for future research.

Our goal was to develop a grounded understanding of the meaning of team spirit. While our participants' responses grounded our theorizing that led us to the concept of paradoxes, one should bear in mind that this conceptualization still has space to evolve. As Murnighan and Conlon (1991: 184) stated: 'Living with, understanding, and absorbing group paradoxes . . . may be an essential element for group success.' Hence, it is critically important to grasp that team spirit refers not only to the individual and collective ability to align opposite, but also to manage complementary tensions (Lewis, 2000). One key question concerns the extent to which teams are prepared to manage paradoxes by tackling them productively, which does not necessarily entail 'resolving' them: this accomplishment seems necessary to make team spirit a possibility. Teams with a 'spirit' are those that are sufficiently socially sophisticated that they can hold opposite tensions as healthy elements in a duality, namely the wellbeing of individuals inside well-functioning collectives. While in successful football teams one may be able, literally, to 'smell' team spirit after the game, the organizational production of this spirit is a matter of productively and continuously handling paradoxes rather than a game of two halves.

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Appendix

Interview protocol

Team spirit

- (1) What is team spirit? Is it present in this team?
- (2) When is it apparent? How does it manifest?
- (3) When is it most relevant?

Team dynamics

- (1) How do you work, as a team, during games?
- (2) And in practice sessions?
- (3) Before and after the games?

Team rituals

- (1) Do you cultivate any rituals as a team?

Team performance management

- (1) How do you deal with victories?
- (2) And with defeats?
- (3) How does the team manage cases of underperformance?