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Group Dynamics and Managing Interactions

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Abstract

This chapter discusses officiating processes from a group perspective. Specifically, the group dynamics and group processes of sport officiating teams are further explored. The chapter begins with a review of current and relevant sport officiating literature about the influence of the group environment on sport officials. A practical case study example is presented examining the interaction and communication of on-field officials and off-field video assistant referees in the English Premier League. Implications of positive and negative group dynamics are discussed concerning sport officials' wellbeing, cohesion, satisfaction, performance, and retention. Finally, practical applications and recommendations for sport officiating organizations are advanced.

1. Introduction and Review of Literature

The study of group dynamics and the social environment in sport has traditionally focused on sport teams (see Eys et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2014 for reviews) and less so on sport officials. However, research has begun to raise the importance of understanding the sport officials' group environment (Hancock et al., 2021). When one thinks of sport officials, what often comes to mind is one person operating independently making decisions. However, numerous sports operate with officiating teams made up of three (e.g., basketball), or four (e.g., soccer, baseball, ice hockey) on-field officials. If you factor in off-field officials (e.g., video replay assistants and timekeepers), these groups grow even further still. The addition of modern technology such as headsets also means that these officiating groups are in constant communication with each other over the course of a competition. Considering all of the

above, it is somewhat surprising that researchers have only recently started to study the group dynamics of sport officials.

Group dynamics refers to “a field of inquiry, dedicated to advancing the knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions” (Cartwright & Zander, 1968, p. 7). Simply put, it is about understanding interactions, relationships, and processes that occur among a group of people. When discussing group dynamics, it is important to understand what a group is. Several definitions of groups have been advanced over the years, however there is a general agreement that a group is two or more individuals who are connected by and within task and or social relationships (e.g., Forsyth, 2019). Carron and Eys (2012) outline five main components that groups share: (a) common fate, (b) mutual benefit, (c) social structure, (d) quality interactions and interdependence, (e) mutually agreed self-categorization.

In the context of sport officials, group dynamics has not always been on the forefront of attention when aiming to understand the officiating experience, with most research in this domain focusing on decision making (e.g., Hancock & Ste Marie, 2013; MacMahon et al., 2007). However, group dynamics surely impacts sport officials’ ability to effectively carry out their roles and responsibilities as a sport official. Although the officiating makeup of different sports varies, in most sports, officials often work in teams of two to four, and their ability to work together effectively can greatly impact their officiating performance and the overall experience of athletes, coaches, and spectators of the sport.

Hancock et al. (2018) explored the perceptions of group processes in ice hockey officiating via a qualitative study. They interviewed 17 elite amateur ice-hockey officials who worked within teams of four people. Their findings demonstrated that officials experienced similar group processes as that of sport teams, which were represented in the five components

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of groups outlined by Carron and Eys (2012). Additionally, two more unique group processes pertaining to officials were identified: transience and intrateam competition.

Transience in sport officials' groups represents the ever-changing nature of the make-up of a competition day squad, and who they may get assigned to work with on any given occasion. That is, in many sports, it is rare for the same group of officials to work together for two competitions in a row. Thus, sport officials discussed the challenges of switching officiating partners from one assignment to the next. Sport officials felt this was something unique to the officiating context, and more likely was a detriment to their officiating performance. Challenges such as lack of familiarity, sparse communication, and differing officiating styles were the main challenges of integrating and gelling with a new officiating group each assignment. When compared to a sports team, who typically have similar line-ups from one competition to the next, one can see where this would pose challenges for sport officials to garner a similar sense of synergy with their colleagues.

Another unique group process that was identified was the process of intrateam competition that occurred within the officiating groups. Sport officials discussed that their performances were often rated by the officiating organization and had implications for future game allocations with higher ratings more likely leading towards more desirable game assignments such as playoffs and major cup finals. Garnering high-level experience in officiating these major events could also have implications for their advancement and progression in their careers to moving onto higher levels of competition. As such, intrateam competition in the workplace environment could become intense and cause negative emotions, conflict, stress, burnout, and poor well-being among sport officials (Carson et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 1990). Although sport teams also experience similar processes of positional competition (Harenberg et al., 2021), and intrateam conflict (Paradis et al., 2014),

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the officiating experience differs in the striving for more prestigious assignments that may or may not include those whom they have worked alongside before.

In a follow up quantitative study, Hancock et al. (2022) assessed the relationship between cohesion, satisfaction, and performance in sport officiating groups. They surveyed 228 sport officials across nine sports. Sport officials were asked to rate their perceptions of cohesion, satisfaction, and performance with their most recent officiating teams. A modified version of the Group Environment Questionnaire (Carron et al., 1985) was utilized which was adapted and validated within the study to the context of sport officials. Results indicated that although sport officials experienced varying degrees of task cohesion (perceptions of group involvement and togetherness around team goals) and social cohesion (perceptions of group involvement and togetherness around feelings towards and interactions with teammates), on average, task cohesion was significantly stronger than social cohesion. Additionally, task cohesion shared moderate ($< .50$) positive correlations with performance and satisfaction, and social cohesion shared small ($> .20$) positive correlations with performance and satisfaction (Hancock et al., 2022).

Taken together, findings from Hancock et al.'s (2018) qualitative study and Hancock et al.'s (2022) quantitative study suggest that there could be room for improvement around building a social bond between sport officials. The transient nature of officiating groups and the intrateam competition experienced in vying for desirable officiating assignments, likely explains the increased perceptions of task cohesion over social cohesion in the quantitative findings. Nevertheless, social cohesion along with task cohesion explained variance in satisfaction and performance of sport officials. This finding carries over from the established cohesion-performance relationship in sport teams (Carron et al., 2002).

Given the heightened scrutiny and abuse match officials face (e.g., Dawson et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2020), recruitment and retention (e.g., Downward et al., 2023) and

wellbeing (e.g., Webb et al., 2021), the welfare of match officials has never been more prominent. Improving the group experience of sport officials could help address ongoing challenges with referee dropout (Hancock et al., 2015). Thus, refereeing organizations should explore team building endeavors (Paradis & Martin, 2012) to further improve teamwork (McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014) and the social environment of the sport officiating landscape.

The transient nature of officials is also apparent in sports where geographical dispersion and cultural integration are part and parcel of the work environment. Webb et al. (2016) assessed the leadership of FIFA and UEFA association football referees by interviewing 42 participants from England, Italy, and Spain, discussing the geographical and cross-cultural challenges that exist when talented individual referees come together to work in refereeing teams in pan-European or International competitions. Inspirational leadership was identified as an important factor to building interpersonal and working relationships. This includes having a clear set of values and refereeing philosophy. Further, sport officials must be able to take charge of a game and make quick and accurate decisions interpreting the principles and laws of the game. This includes the ability to remain calm under pressure and the ability to inspire confidence in their fellow referees to make difficult decisions. Sport officials must also be able to delegate responsibilities effectively, ensuring that each member of the team knows their role and is contributing to the overall flow of the game. It was also believed that referees needed to adopt and operate under the same philosophy to see success. Research supports this notion in the form of shared mental models, as developing a shared knowledge through cooperative learning in the task environment leads to improved performance (van den Bossche et al., 2011).

Sport officials' group interactions to develop a shared officiating philosophy can also be impacted by individual personalities and biases that influence communication. Avugos et al. (2021) conducted a review looking at individual differences in refereeing and the impact

of communication styles, types of interactions, and game management of officiating performance. They note that there has been very little research on referee communication and interaction (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2014). Sport officials must communicate effectively with each other to ensure that they are making consistent calls and are on the same page. This can be especially challenging in high-pressure situations as performance demands can impact on the decision-making process (Mascarenhas et al., 2008; Cunningham et al., 2012). Effective communication requires not only a mutual understanding, but also an appreciation of each other's roles and responsibilities (Eys et al., 2005). Referees must be aware of their own biases and work to overcome them to ensure that they are making fair and unbiased decisions. They must also be able to work effectively with individuals who may have different personalities or communication styles, adjusting their own behavior to ensure that they are effectively communicating with and supporting their fellow referees. Social support of fellow officials is important not only for fostering a sense of group environment and developing a sense of collective, authentic shared officiating experiences, but also for retention and wellbeing of officials (Kim et al., 2022).

In sum, group dynamics has an important role for performance, satisfaction, retention, and wellbeing of sport officials, which is now being acknowledged by officiating organizations across different sports (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013). Further, group processes such as effective communication, leadership, teamwork, and an awareness of individual differences are all important components of group dynamics in officiating which the following case study further explores.

2. Practical applications – Case study

The following case is based on common refereeing incidents that have occurred from the English Premier League (EPL).

A. Background and Context.

The EPL is one of the most popular soccer leagues in the world, known for its high level of competition with fast, physical, and intense matches. Traditionally, refereeing groups in soccer include a main match official (i.e., head referee), two lines officials (i.e., assistant referees), and a fourth official. The introduction of the video assistant referee (VAR) since the 2019/2020 season has added an additional element of interaction from off the field of play. All these officiating roles are important in the refereeing of matches. However, their ability to work together effectively can be challenging due to the high stakes and pressure of the game, particularly when decisions go to the VAR. This case study examines the group dynamics of these sport officials in common VAR situations.

B. Presenting issue(s)

During an EPL match, there can be a lot of confusion and disagreement among the match officials regarding the interpretation of the rules. Common reviews around decisions are for offside, penalty kicks, red cards, and handballs. As with the rules, all goals are reviewed by the VAR in which they can determine down to the millimeter if a player was onside and if the goal should stand. However, often there are also other incidents that may take place off the ball leading up to the goal and a debate around how far back in time can you determine an incident to have an impact on the outcome of a goal. This might be a foul, or a handball, or if a player in an offside position was influencing the play. The on-field referee, the lines officials, and the VAR may all have different interpretations. If the VAR believes there was a clear and obvious error with the on-field call, they suggest that the on-field match official goes over to the monitor to have another look to review the play and consider if they want to overturn the initial decision. Most often, when the VAR intervenes, the call is overturned. The following statistics from the 2022-2023 Premier League season are indicative of the

significant influence of VAR and the impact these decisions can have on the outcome of matches. Out of 120 decisions for review, 116 were over-turned on suggestion of the VAR and only four were rejected (meaning the original on the field decision stood). That means 96.7% of decisions that the VAR suggested for review were overturned, with only 3.3% of original decisions standing. Fifty-five reviews led to disallowed goals, 26 reviews led to penalty kicks being awarded, 12 reviews led to penalty kicks being overturned, 35 reviews led to goals being ruled out for offside, while 14 reviews led to goals being awarded for incorrect offside decisions on the field. Eight goals were ruled out for handball, 10 goals were ruled out for a foul, six red cards were issued, and three red cards were overturned. In practical terms, these calls led to the difference of a range of +/- 6 points (equivalent of two wins or two losses) for teams in the league table standings. Interpretation and application of the laws of the game and fairness have never been more under scrutiny (Zglinski, 2022).

In May 2023, Howard Webb who was an EPL referee from 2003-2014 as well as a FIFA international referee from 2005-2014 and current Chief Refereeing Officer for Professional Game Matches Officials Limited went on Sky Sports' Monday Night Football Program in the UK to show the behind-the-scenes teamwork, communication, and interdependence that takes place between the on-field officials and the VAR in the decision-making process. VAR has been a controversial addition to the officiating of association football, with many divided on its inclusion in officiating. With the aim of being more transparent around this decision-making process, officiating associations are beginning to pull the curtain back to allow a glimpse of this officiating process unfolding. Sky Sports pundit Gary Neville, who is a retired professional footballer, reacted to this process and said, "What struck me was

the professionalism, integrity, and communication, and you would never question the integrity of the officials after seeing this...fans need to see **this**".

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C. *The intervention/work conducted.*

Several potential interventions can be applied to work towards getting referees on the same page. One intervention is that of video analysis training (e.g., Schweiser et al., 2011). This training can take many forms. For the purposes of a team of referees working in a group, the officials would sit and watch a series of plays on screen and adjudicate each play independently about what decision they would make. The group would then later come together to compare their results to see the level of congruency in their decisions and discuss any discrepancies they may have had. This can offer an opportunity for referees to gain insight into their colleagues' thought processes to improve decision making and build shared mental models (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993). This represents a team learning environment through co-construction in the development of such shared mental models (Van den Bossche et al., 2011). This in turn has also shown to influence group processes, and improve group performance (Mathieu et al., 2000).

Likewise, leadership skills are another important aspect, and perhaps often overlooked. Parallels can be drawn between the head match official, and that of a team captain. Research suggests the positive influence that peer leaders can have on the cohesion, satisfaction, and retention of a group (e.g., Paradis & Loughhead, 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that those same group variables of cohesion and satisfaction would predict performance and retention in referees (Hancock et al., 2022). Therefore, the leadership of a referee group is important to get right. Leadership development programs among sport officials is another intervention for officiating organizations to consider.

D. Outcome analysis.

Sport officiating organizations have begun to take notice of the importance of group dynamics among their sport officiating units (Hancock et al., 2018). As a result, significant investment is being made by officiating governing bodies to improve the overall officiating experience and safeguard officials' wellbeing (Mellick, 2020). One way to improve the officiating experience is to improve group processes, social connections, and peer support, especially for those who may feel like they have minimal support (Tingle et al., 2021). This is also important for organizations like the EPL that now have several female officials within their officiating ranks who may feel like outsiders having to navigate the male sporting context (Forbes et al., 2015). Thus, working towards developing collective cognitive process and shared mental models among sport officiating teams, can be one way to improve group processes and performance (Filho, 2019). Further, evaluation of such interventions and policies are important through quantitative feedback via surveying of officials (e.g., assessing, cohesion, satisfaction, leadership behaviors) over multiple time points, as well as qualitative feedback and frequent check-ins through focus groups and/or interviews.

E. Case study reflections.

The case study highlights the importance of effective group dynamics in soccer officiating. The officials must be able to communicate effectively (Cunningham, et al., 2014) with each other and with players, demonstrate strong leadership skills (Webb et al., 2016), collaborate effectively (Giel & Bruer, 2020), and be aware of their own biases in decision making (Helsen et al., 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that the present case represents a very small percentage of high-level sport officials (i.e., those with access to video assisted review) from one sport. However, the case is an exemplar that holds true in any

competitions where officials must communicate, interact, and depend on each other.

That is, no matter the officiating level and technology available, the steps for developing cohesive decision making are salient to officials across other sports and competitive levels as well.

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3. Summary and Conclusions

Effective communication is a central tenant of group processes and interactions, and thus no different for a group of sport officials working a match together. Organizations might apply these principles in several ways. With the heightened scrutiny and pressure that comes with being a referee in having to make split second decisions, it is important to remember that referees are human and will not always get it right. The introduction of VAR has been brought in to try to aide referees in decision making and alleviate some of the pressure; however, sometimes even technology can malfunction. No one system is infallible. Referee abuse is prominent in sport (see Mojtahedi et al., 2022 for a review) and is not acceptable and never the answer. However, when mistakes do happen, in the context of the group, it might actually be important to apologize to fellow officials and acknowledge mistakes, as opposed to doubling down. The transient nature of sport officials and the intrateam competition experienced (Hancock et al., 2018), may make some officials hesitant to admit mistakes. However, encouraging officials to be accountable and apologizing for mistakes, can actually lead to more favorable views and be seen as transformational leaders (Tucker et al., 2006). This can also improve psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) among officials.

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In terms of collaboration, previous research has suggested that referees value positive social interactions with fellow officials (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007), which in turns leads to more positive officiating experiences and greater retention (Livingston & Forbes, 2016). As such, fostering collaboration and teamwork is essential and should be encouraged by officiating organizations, not only to improve performance, but also for a better officiating

experience and ultimately better retention. In this situation, the officials' need to have a sense of collective cognitions of the interpretation of the laws of the game. However, it is important to note that effective group dynamics require ongoing effort and practice, and officials and officiating organizations must be committed to not only improving officiating skills but also improving teamwork among officials.

4. Key Messages

Five key takeaways can be gleaned from this chapter about referee group dynamics.

- 1) Officiating units are interdependent teams and experience group processes similar to that of a sport team or work team. Officials demonstrate the components of being a group along with two unique components of officiating groups in transience and intra-team competition. As such, these group relationships need to be fostered for satisfaction, performance, and retention.
- 2) Officiating groups should aim to develop collective cognitions and shared mental models through spending time together and engaging in pre- and post-competition discussion and debriefs to be on the same page for interpretation and application of the laws of the game going forward.
- 3) Officiating groups should engage in team building activities to build group bonds, trust, and positive social interactions to improve the overall refereeing experience, and retention rates.
- 4) Officiating groups need to promote healthy positional competition which can build cohesion and have a culture of accountability through owning mistakes without fear of punishment to build psychological safety.
- 5) Officiating organizations need to safeguard officials' wellbeing. One way to enhance wellbeing is through peer social support. Developing referee relationships and trust can further enhance the referee experience, and referee wellbeing.

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