

Why Blow the Whistle? Exploring the Psychological Connection of Sports Officials

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**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

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The recent NFL referee lockout illuminated the importance of having competent sports officials. Referees are a vital component of almost all organized sport competitions; however, sport administrators are facing a growing concern as the number of qualified and committed sports officials continues to decline (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). The shortage of officials is not limited to a few sports or certain regions; it is a global phenomenon that affects many sports from the grassroots level to high caliber competition (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2004; Read, 2000; Thornley, 2010; Topp, 2001; Yoon, 2006). A shortage of referees can lead to a number of issues that can negatively impact sport administrators, athletes, coaches, and fans.

The current literature on sports officials has focused primarily on stress, burnout, and coping responses (Goldsmith & Williams, 1992; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Rainey, 1995, 1999; Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Taylor & Daniel, 1987, Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990, Wolfson & Neave, 2007). Overall, the findings from these studies suggest that the effects of stress are mild and most officials are able to employ effective coping strategies. To date, research on reasons for initial attraction and continued involvement and commitment to refereeing is scant. Successful recruitment and retention of referees requires an understanding of both motives and constraints associated with officiating involvement. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of both contributing and constraining factors that impact one's psychological connection to the activity of sports officiating.

Funk and James' (2001, 2006) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The PCM is based on the notion that both individual and social situational factors work together in the development of allegiance or loyalty to a sport object or activity (Funk & James, 2006). The PCM conceptualizes a four stage progression towards greater psychological connection with an activity. The four stages move in a hierarchical fashion from awareness to attraction to attachment, and ultimately, to allegiance (Funk & James, 2001). The PCM has been applied to spectator sports (Funk & James, 2006) and to physically active leisure participants (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2011; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2009), but has not been tested with sports officials.

Semistructured in-depth interviews are being used to collect data from a purposive sample of several individuals at each stage of the PCM. The interviews are being digitally recorded and conducted with the aid of an interview guide (Patton, 2002). Questions were developed from the literature on leisure involvement (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997; Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000) and leisure constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). Pseudonyms are being used to conceal the identity of participants. Several methods are being employed to achieve a greater sense of trustworthiness. Participants are sent a copy of the transcript and given the opportunity to review their comments and clarify statements to ensure they are portrayed accurately (Neuman, 2000). Following the member checks, two researchers will independently review the transcripts and use open-coding to locate themes and assign initial codes. The codes (generated from theory and initial open-coding) will then be entered into NVivo software for further analysis.

Themes that emerge will be compared to the study's PCM framework. This study will attempt to identify salient factors that promote advancement through the stages of the PCM as well as obstacles that prevent progression from one stage to the next. A better understanding of reasons related to initial awareness of officiating opportunities up through allegiance or sustained commitment to being a sports official may assist sport administrators with the recruitment and retention of referees. Results will be presented and practical implications discussed.