Navigating Dichotomies: Uncovering the Role of the Referee within the Olympic Sporting Structure

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Introduction
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to better understand the role of the referee within the Olympic sporting structure. In this study, role will be generally defined as the function assumed or part played by a person in a particular situation. To date, the extant literature has considered the role of the official within the context of a match (Berman, 2011; Raines, 1984), through the lens of attrition – including stress, burnout, and abuse (Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016; Schaeperkoetter, 2016; Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990); from a gendered perspective (Forbes, Edwards, & Fleming, 2016; Nordstrom, Warner, & Barnes, 2016; Tingle, Warner, & Satore-Baldwin, 2014); and through the analysis of decision making, bias, and supporting technologies (Gullien & Feltz, 2001; McMahon, Leson, Starkes & Weston, 2007). Nonetheless, the universal problem remains: sport organizations lack an adequate supply of qualified referees. As such, this study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature, considering the role of the referee within the larger sporting context.

Theoretical Framework
Role theory posits that there are numerous ways to define a role within various contexts (Biddle, 1986). Some have suggested that a role references a ‘social part’ and others examine roles as an outline for social conduct (Burt, 1982; Winship & Mandel, 1983; Zurcker, 1983). The common thread between all of the major role theories is that of expected behavior based on context or social identity (Biddle, 1986). As observed in many non-sporting domains, creating alignment between these two constructs often proves to be difficult. When misalignment occurs due to role ambiguity or role conflict, role strain can result (Eys, Carron, Bray, & Baeuchamp, 2003; Kouvelios, Theodorakis, & Gouliramaris, 2004; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Like much of the previous research on referees has indicated, stressors can increase the risk of referee burnout and ultimately attrition. Likewise, it has been shown that role ambiguity and role conflict also lead to decreased job satisfaction (Babin, 1996; Jackson & Schuller, 1985). As the role of the referee is analyzed within the sporting context, alignment, role ambiguity, and role conflict will be considered.

Methodology
A qualitative methodology utilizing semi-structured interviews was employed to deconstruct the human experience and to ascribe meaning to those experiences through a phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2009). To examine this phenomenon – understanding the role of the referee in the Olympic sporting context – 11 rugby referees who had been appointed to the Olympics were interviewed. Each interview ranged from 40-75 minutes and each participant was interviewed twice: three weeks prior to the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro and within one month after the closing ceremonies in order to confirm or invalidate expectations and perceptions. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results:
Mega events, like the Olympics, are considered to be the world’s premier sporting events. It is in these contexts that the expectations for adequate organizational structures and role development are at their peak. Despite this, the rugby referees seemed unable to find their niche in 2016. Using open coding and constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to examine the role of the referee in this sporting context four major dichotomies emerged: (1) The need for the referee to go unnoticed vs. media exposure; (2) the team vs. individualistic nature of officiating; (3) Being a judge vs. being an athlete, and; (4) Amateurism vs. professionalism. The two themes that appear most pertinent are the dichotomy between the referee’s attempt to remain unnoticed vs. media exposure and the team vs. individualistic nature of officiating.
We see the emergence of the first role conflict as the referees highlight their opinion of success, “You want the ref to go unnoticed,” says Z, “and if we go unnoticed then you’re playing your part.” While this sentiment may be true in certain instances, this referee and many others negated it as P expressed, “It’s quite nice for them to recognize that the officials are there… so it’s like the IOC had acknowledged us.” While the Olympic rugby referees felt that they should remain unnoticed within the scope of the game, they also acknowledged that coverage of the referees increases their feelings of worth within the larger context of the Olympics. Many went on to say that media coverage of the officials is extremely important to help grow officiating and to create recognition of referees as people and role models. Because recruitment and retention of referees is a pervasive problem amongst nearly all sporting entities, this dichotomy is an important one to address. How can we, as sport administrators, expect the referee to remain unnoticed, yet create enough awareness about the role to recruit future generations or officials?

The next role conflict materializes as the nature of officiating is considered. Is rugby refereeing a team endeavor or an individual one? Like players, referees strive to master their craft and in doing so, strive to retain the best appointments possible- competing with the referees around them. Despite this, C expressed, “You're only as good as your weakest link, so if I’m in the middle and I don’t get good support from the guys on the side, you’re never going to make it. So a lot of times I’m only as good as the guys on the side.” When considered from this perspective, it is clear that a referee cannot find success alone.

Discussion
When considered holistically, it appears that role ambiguity or role conflict exists at nearly every juncture for the referee; and it appears that this role ambiguity is reflective of the general referee experience in other sporting contexts. Clarifying expectations and further defining the role of the referee will help to eliminate role ambiguity and solidify alignment with the goals of sport organizations. From a practical standpoint this may lead to increased satisfaction and an influx in referee recruitment and retention as unnecessary role conflict and role ambiguity is eliminated.