Leading Soccer Referees: Elite Match Officials and the Influence of Culture Across Transnational Boundaries

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The organization and leadership of referees in soccer is multifaceted and differs from country to country and from confederation to confederation (Webb, 2017), although the literature related to these aspects is sparse. Therefore, this explorative study considered the cross-cultural comparisons of the elite soccer referee environment in France and Portugal, through the examination of the participants’ experiences in these environments, in order to examine the cultural differences, leadership structures and organizational frameworks which exist in the globalized and highly commodified world of professional soccer.

As referees progress through their domestic system they officiate higher profile matches, culminating with international responsibilities under the jurisdiction of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in Europe and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) for pan-world competitions (Webb, Wagstaff, Rayner & Thelwell, 2016), with adaptations in playing styles observed at European and international tournaments (Giullianotti, 1999). Different styles of play between countries can manifest as a result of each nation having their own shared knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and interactions with others, or cultural differences that can be identified within soccer (Hofstede, 1980; Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). Moreover, it is possible to group countries together based upon their cultural dimensions, shared similarities and inherent differences, as well as their geographical location, with countries including France and Portugal classified as “Latin European” due, in part, to their aversion to authority figures and greater emotional responses in some situations (Ronen & Shenkar, 1985).

Research to date has explored soccer more widely, such as the globalization of the sport, the increased television and sponsorship income and the players that operate within the game (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009). Academic research has predominantly concentrated on the players, their physiological capabilities and the psychological gains that can be made by managers, coaches and clubs in order to maximise the players at their disposal. Historically the referees within soccer have been neglected, both in terms of their personal development and training (Webb, 2014) and also academically, as recent research demonstrates, through an integrative review (Pina, in press). Referee research in soccer has tended to focus predominantly on aspects such as technical performance and referee bias, as well as physiological studies. Therefore, given the goal of uniformity in decision making and organizational structure in refereeing from bodies such as UEFA and FIFA, there is significant scope in the literature to address concepts related to the leadership and organization of referees and the notion of culture within soccer (FIFA, 2014; UEFA, 2012; Webb, 2017).

The present study included a purposive sample of eleven elite referees from France and Portugal, and participants were identified and contacted via e-mail or in-person to inform them about the nature of the study and to invite them to participate in the semi-structured interview process. Interviews were conducted by telephone because of the participants’ diverse geographic locations (see, Holt, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes in duration following a set of pre-planned questions, allowing participants to express their opinions and experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interviews transcripts were subsequently analyzed inductively using thematic analysis generating codes to label key features and clustering the codes into central organizing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Thematic analysis was employed and four general dimensions were inductively identified, namely cultural diversity, governance, support and organizational structure, training and development and responsibility and preparation.

This study is the first to compare cross-cultural elite referee responses related to their culture, performance and
leadership, and the results suggest that ultimate standardisation of refereeing is implausible, if not impossible. The findings identified variations in player behaviour and referee performances due to cultural diversity and this suggests that the concept of standardization in elite refereeing should be reimagined in order to apply more realistically to the modern, globalized game in which referees operate. Moreover, the results also identified factors that hindered aspirations of consistency or uniformity, such as a lack of organization, instruction and leadership in some situations. Consequently, there are a number of pertinent recommendations emanating from this research which can be utilized by elite referee leaders in order to understand further the challenges faced in the organization of elite sports people and assist in the construction of appropriate strategies toward a more standardized approach to leadership within refereeing, soccer and professional sport more widely.