Low Pay, Poor Play; What Motivates Referees of Adult Community Sport Leagues

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Referees are essential for the production of organized sport and delivery of a safe environment for participants (Kellet & Shilbury, 2007). Studies on referees have examined expertise development (Ollis, Machpherson, & Collins, 2006), decision making (Mallo, Frutos, Juarez, & Navarro, 2012), referee bias (Buraimo, Forrest, & Simmons, 2010), burnout, and retirement intentions (Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990). However, in the context of community-based adult recreational sport, the study of motivations and retention of referees has been largely neglected, with a few exceptions (Johansen, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine referees’ motivations for officiating in community leagues and how their motivations change over time.

People’s motives for refereeing are often intrinsic (Hancock, Dawson, & Auger, 2015) and include the love of the sport, service to the community, pleasure, leisure and personal growth (Auger et al., 2010; Fry & Sefton, 1982). However, these studies focused on professional or national level referees. In contrast, community level sport is different because remuneration for referees is meager or absent, and the quality of play mediocre. Adult community leagues even present a contrast to youth sport as the purpose of these leagues is not about development of athletes or the sport. It is therefore unknown in this context what motivates these referees or why they stay engaged. This study will utilize Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to uncover motives to referee at this level. SDT proposes that motivations can vary depending on the level of self-determination, known as the behavioral regulation continuum (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Referees might dedicate more effort and time if they have more self-determined motivations, and these motivations could change over time. Our research questions are therefore (a) What motivates people to referee in adult community leagues?, and (b) How do referees' motivations change over time?

Method

Twenty former and current referees of recreational team sports leagues in a mid-size Midwestern US city will be recruited. Data will be collected via personal interviews in Spring, 2018. A semi-structured interview guide will be developed using SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to identify referees’ motivations and how they may vary over time. The authors will use a priori, thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) followed by open coding (Cordin & Strauss, 2008) to independently code all transcripts. Intercoder reliability will be established through discussion to compare and refine codes and interpretations. To ensure trustworthiness member checks of transcripts and interpretations will be utilized (Creswell, 2012).

Expected Findings

We expect to find that referees’ initial motives are similar to previous research, but that as their participation continues their motives also change to focus more on community engagement and friendship development. These findings will be of importance for community sport managers as it may inform strategies to improve referee retention. This should lead to enhanced program delivery, which may contribute to participant retention and community development. This study will also advance theory on referee retention by focusing on an understudied context. This study will be completed before NASSM 2019.