Ice Hockey Officiating Retention: A Qualitative Understanding of Junior Ice Hockey Officials’ Motivations

Brian Fowler, University of Northern Colorado
Jimmy Smith, Gonzaga University
Kyle Brannigan, University of Northern Colorado
Heidi Nordstrom, Gonzaga University
Alan Morse (Advisor), University of Northern Colorado

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Ice hockey is deeply embedded in the culture of Canada, with participation rates increasing 20% over the last 10 years (Hockey Canada, 2017). The increasing rate of young athletes playing ice hockey results in an increase in demand for more ice hockey officials. Officiating can be challenging, and previous scholars have primarily focused on reasons why officials leave the vocation. Reoccurring themes from studies explaining why the officials quit include lack of opportunities for advancement, stressfulness of the officiating occupation, and abuse and criticism from other stakeholders associated with the sporting events (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Pappas, 2016). While the majority of previous scholars have focused on why officials resign from the profession, very little research has explored the motivations of the officials who continue their officiating careers each season. To fill this gap, the current research study employed Ryan and Deci’s (2000) model of self-determination theory (SDT) to understand what motivational factors affected Ontario Hockey Association (OHA) ice hockey officials to continue in the officiating profession from season to season. Through a somewhat novel approach, the current research study contributed to the body of research concerning sport official retention.

A qualitative, explanatory case study approach using semi-structured interviews was implemented to understand the motivations of these OHA ice hockey officials through the lens of SDT. SDT employs innate needs (i.e., competence, relatedness, autonomy) and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to explain the reasons behind the choices people make (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Analysis from these semi-structured interviews uncovered several themes related to SDT including (1) family, (2) new perspective, (3) comradery, (4) opportunities for advancement, and (5) commitment and dedication as primary reasons for individuals staying motivated to continue officiating. The findings of the current study contrast classic extrinsic motivational factors such as power, income, and prestige, which demonstrated the merit of viewing the issue of officiating retention through those officials who continue in the profession season after season. These findings may be helpful to sport organizations in regard to retaining officials in the future, as elements of the identified themes can be cultivated to create an environment that encourages officials to stay in the profession.