Where Does a Sport Official Belong? Navigating the Social Identities of Sport Officials

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This study aims to expand our understanding of the social identification of sport officials (i.e., referees). Specifically, the Sport Employee Identification (SEI) framework (Oja, Gordon, & Bass, 2015, 2018) will be utilized as a conceptual framework for analyzing in-depth, in-person, semi-structured interviews with high school officials. The SEI framework enables for the use of a sport-specific theory in the officiating setting. Examining officials through the lens of SEI has practical implications due to the significant number of officials working across a multitude of sports and the challenges associated with retaining officials. Furst (1991) found that officials initially began officiating because of “challenge, fitness, competence, commitment to sport, and the relationships developed as an official” (Furst, 1991, p. 93). Several scholars have examined why officials decided to leave the profession. Prevailing reasons for departure include a lack of mentoring (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014), a shortage of clear measurements for advancement opportunities (Forbes & Livingston, 2013), and general absence of appreciation for their efforts (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Tingle et al., 2014).

One’s social identity is seen as a way for individuals to gain meaning through their group memberships (Tajfel, 1978). Specific to the sport industry, the concept of SEI, which is based on social identity theory, has recently been theorized (Oja et al., 2015) and empirically tested (Oja et al., 2018). Initially, the construct was thought of as a conglomeration of both organizational and team identification. However, after empirical examinations, it was revealed that team identification (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was not a significant factor of sport employees’ identification with their sport organization. Instead, two new dimensions were discovered: collective enhancement, which is similar to organizational identification, and the construct known as sport affinity, which more accurately describes the unique identification processes of sport employees (Oja et al., 2018). This dimension represents the shared similarity, in this case sport, between the individual (i.e., official) and the group (i.e., officials’ association). By associating with those who share valued themes or concepts (e.g., sport), identification is facilitated (Pratt, 1998).

In-depth, in-person interviews were conducted with 30 high school varsity basketball officials. Data was collected in two states at officiating clinics sanctioned by the respective state’s high school athletics governing body. Coding was used to confirm/deny a priori themes (based on the SEI model) and to discover possible emergent themes (Gibbs, 2009; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Preliminary results indicated three primary themes: (1) high levels of identification as an official despite the fact that officiating was an avocation and not a full-time job for all interviewees, (2) affinity for continued involvement in the sport, and (3) collective enhancement with others in the officiating community, which is particularly important considering sport officials are inherently unaffiliated with one sport team or athletics department. By understanding the mechanisms by which sport officials identify with their associations, opportunities are created to enhance their performance and well-being. Moreover, sport officials who identify with their associations are more likely to continue as an official. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.