Decision-making in football officiating: An interview study with top-level referees

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Introduction:

Officials take a vital role in almost every competition-oriented game sport. For this reason, an interesting area of research has emerged over recent years with respect to sport officiating (MacMahon et al., 2014). However, the majority of the football-related studies can be characterised as pursuing a "from-theory-to-practice" strategy. Hence, the identification of potential problems is rooted in scientific theories in the first instance before it is empirically checked whether these problems can be proven relevance also under the applied conditions of the practical situation. Therefore, the present project aimed on the reconstruction of subjective theories of elite football referees and on the identification of problems in the practice of top-level football officiating.

Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from 23 European elite referees, either from UEFA's elite group (19) or first group (4). Thus, the interviewees can be considered to represent the best referees in Europe. With the average length of 19.4 min (SD = 5.4 min, range: 10.5 min-39.2 min), all interviews were transcribed verbatim, analysed independently by two coders and further processed on the basis of inductive content analysis (Mayring, 2008).

Results:

From the entire interview material, the data analysis resulted in 91 raw-data themes that were grouped into 22 lower-order themes and further structured into 7 higher-order themes, namely: *(1) descriptive* (reason to become a referee), *(2) characteristics of a good elite referee* (educability, game management qualities, mental attributes, fitness, personal characteristics, football intelligence, and experience), *(3) difficulties* (human limitations, development of football, pressure, amateur status, cheating of players, and personal state of mind), *(4) pre-match preparation* (understanding the teams, and referees' team), *(5) communication through headset* (importance, way of communication, and training), *(6) decision-making* (teamwork, gaze behaviour, the relative location of the referee, experience, and reactions of players), and *(7) decision-making training* (training within game set-ups, video-based training, desirable tools, mental practice, and visual training).

Discussion:

The comparison of the subjective relevant issues with the findings revealed by scientific research on football officiating shows that the vast researched area of visual capabilities and perception enhancement is also recognised by the interviewees as highly relevant. In contrast, a number of scientific publications can be found on effects of potential biases on decision-making whereas biases were not mentioned by the referees as an important issue affecting their decision-making. A clear need for further research, however, could be revealed for those topics which, according to the statements of the interviewees, are on the one hand highly relevant from a practical perspective but for which, on the other hand, only a small amount or even no scientific investigations can be found so far. These topics refer to the optimisation of the pre-match preparation, the evaluation of supporting technical devices, the development of innovative training tools for improving decision-making quality, the optimisation of the communication within the referee team, particularly through the headset, and the evaluation of supporting training methods like mental practice. Hence, for sport scientists with a special interest in applied work, these topics can be recommended for conducting further research.

References:

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