Referee Attrition: An Exploration of Former Referees’ Experiences

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An individual’s commitment to an occupation includes investments in training, the development of a network of contacts, experience and knowledge developed over time, and career and social identity. Leaving an occupation represents relinquishing all of these investments, as well as potentially, sustaining a loss of income. It is rare to gain insight from individuals who choose to leave occupations due to the logistical difficulties of collecting data from those who have already left. Instead, much of the literature that explores occupational commitment and job satisfaction (or lack thereof) is drawn from those currently employed (e.g., Harris, Wheeler & Kaemar, 2009; Jones & McIntosh, 2010; Nyberg, 2010). As a result, most information that explores decisions about leaving an occupation are drawn from self-report measures about current employees’ intentions to leave rather than actual behaviour and reasons for leaving. This raises issues for validity and reliability of such measures (see Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

In the sport setting, there is a growing body of knowledge that explores issues of occupational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover in coaching (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Dixon, 2002; Dixon & Warner, 2010). Further, there is also a growing body of knowledge that explores these issues for specifically females in sport coaching and administrative roles (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2003; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Again, this research also has been based on intentions to leave the roles rather than to understand occupational turnover from the perspective of those that have left. Globally there is a shortage of referees in many sports (Kendall et al., 2009). The mere survival of sports is dependent upon strategies to successfully recruit and retain individuals to the occupation of refereeing. Therefore, it seems paramount for sport managers to understand the experiences of referees, especially those who have dropped out. In studies of umpires who have continued in the role, researchers have found that off-field experiences are important for continued involvement in the occupation. For example, Kellett and Shilbury (2007) found that the social worlds referees develop is paramount to their retention and can overcome on-field experiences of abuse. Kellett and Warner (2010) found that a sense of community among referees is important to their continued involvement. Other studies have explored referee turnover and intentions to leave based on on-court experiences (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995; Taylor et al., 1990). A common theme from this research literature is that on-court experiences that result in stress and abuse are the basis of self-reported intentions to leave the occupation. While this research provides a starting point for understanding the officiating experience, there is an immediate need to more clearly understand the reasons why referees are not retained and choose to discontinue officiating. Rather than assessing the intentions of current officials, the purpose of this research is to understand the perspective of referees that have already left since they can likely offer the most pertinent information on why officials leave and how they could have been retained.

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study examined the experience of sixteen former basketball referees. Participants were identified via snowball sampling, and then semi-structured interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview guide based on the previous literature (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Rainey, 1995) was used to help ensure consistency among the interviews. With the aid of Nvivo 7, three researchers independently reviewed the data. The researchers then discussed the codes that were generated until agreement was met on the major themes (Neumann, 2000).

The results indicate all referees had an interest in the sport, and viewed refereeing as their opportunity to be “part of the game”. Further, many noted that they could supplement their income by engaging in refereeing. These elements were important for their initial entry into refereeing, and all referees reported that at times they enjoyed the experience. Consistent with previous literature, referees in this study reported receiving abuse as part of their game-day interactions with players, coaches, and fans. Referees in this study reported that they were not trained for the interactions and other managerial requirements such as managing fans and personalities associated with game-day. Rather, their training was focused on gaining knowledge of rules as well as the mechanics and execution of rule enforcement. While referees understood these activities as central to their role, learning about the interpersonal, social, and communication skills needed to effectively manage game-day situations (such as interactions with coaches and players) as part of rule enforcement was not part of their training—which rendered the experience of refereeing stressful for many. Although lack of training is this area negatively impacted their experiences, interestingly, it was the off-court experiences that ultimately had the most impact on basketball referees’ decision to leave the occupation. Referees reported a felt lack of understanding and consideration from administrators. Administrator decision-making processes were also perceived by referees to be a barrier to their advancement. Decisions regarding referee assignments were reported in many instances to be based on favoritism, politics, and familiarity rather than on merit. The problem of career advancement was exacerbated when referees relocated or moved to a new state. Referees understood that as an “unknown” in a new network of referees (albeit in the same sport), their career advancement would depend on developing new social networks rather than based...
on their skill and experience as a referee. The prospect of starting over for many referees was too unappealing, so many chose to leave the occupation.

From the results of this study, it is clear that refereeing is a difficult undertaking where the on-court and game-day experience can be negative. However, from the perspective of former referees in this study it is the negative experiences due to off-court managerial issues that are more likely to cause a referee to leave the occupation. Kellett and Warner (2010) suggested a sense of community among referees (an off-court experience) is important for their retention. This study has extended that research by clearly indicating that organizational structures and managerial actions that hinder the development of community among referees is a main contributor to referee turnover. Undoubtedly, there is a lack of scholarly understanding of referee management, as well as an understanding of the practical implementation of referee management. This study of former referees is another step towards understanding how sport manager can better implement policies, procedures, and structures that positively impact the off-court experiences in an effort to retain more officials.