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Threats and Aggression Directed at Soccer Referees: An Empirical Phenomenological Psychological Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

Aggression, Threats, EPP-method, Referees and Soccer

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Threats and Aggression Directed at Soccer Referees: An Empirical Phenomenological Psychological Study

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A descriptive qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews involving seven provincial Soccer Association referees was carried out in order to find out how referees experience threats and aggression directed to soccer referees. The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological method (EPP-method) was used. The analysis resulted in thirty categories which were summarized in six themes. The main themes described the perceived causes of threat, reactions to threat, how the referees manage stressful situations, and their motives to referee. Key Words: Aggression, Threats, EPP-method, Referees and Soccer

Introduction

Sporting performances are associated with a number of different dimensions including suffering, hysteria, excitement, drama, traditional ideals, cheating, and aggression (Messner, 1992; Stråhlman, 1997). It has been suggested that sports provide an opportunity for the expression of feelings and emotions (i.e., aggression) (Coakley, 1994), which on the one hand may lead to improved mastering of stressful and emotionally charged situations while on the other hand may lead to violent and aggressive behavior.

The concept of sport aggression is multifaceted (Lindroth, 1986). For instance, it is important to distinguish between physical and verbal aggression. Physical aggression occurs for example when a soccer player intentionally seeks to hurt or injure someone else (i.e., a deliberately injurious act). Another form of aggression occurs when athletes/sportsmen apply verbal methods (e.g., “threats and swearing” in soccer or “sledging” in cricket) in attempts to disturb each other and thereby gain some advantage. The physical act of trying to disturb/damage another person’s integrity through application of physical force has been termed aggression by Gill (1979). According to Gill, confrontational tackling of a player in opposition (as in for example, soccer) on the field is an aggressive action, but striking the same person on the chin with a clenched fist constitutes a vindictive act of aggression. Furthermore, Gill implies that an act may be considered vindictive when a satisfactory apology is missing or when the act is performed with deliberation. According to Isberg (1986) it is acts of aggression that are included in the conceptualizations that pertain to aggression in sports and around which difficulties arise in drawing the borderline between what constitutes an aggressive action and an act of aggression. Isberg implies further that the word, aggression, incorporates a dimension of values that may be interpreted in several ways. A legitimate tackle for ball possession in soccer may be construed as aggressive but not necessarily aggression for

which the additional requirement of an illegitimate physical act must be fulfilled; this distinction may facilitate the underlying implications of “aggressive” and “aggression.”

Investigations of spectator acts of aggression and observations of fans demonstrate a relationship between fan-aggression and the activities of the players on the field. Berkowitz (1972) and Smith (1983) suggest that when the players’ performance on the field/ice rink is experienced as violent, the sports audience and supporters tend to act violently both during and after the match.

There are a multitude of investigations dealing with sports fans’ aggression and aggression in general, in sports, but there is a lack of studies focusing on the situation of sports judges/referees/umpires exposed to aggression. In one study the attitudes of referees, coaches/trainers, senior, and junior players as well as boys’ team players towards aggression in ice hockey were examined (Isberg, 1981). Here, the investigation consisted of 148 participants. Subjects were asked to watch a video that contained film sequences from the Ice Hockey World Championships of 1981. The participants were instructed to estimate the aggression of the incidents that occurred during each sequence on a five-graded scale. The results indicated that referees, seniors, and junior players tolerated higher degrees of violence in the game situation than coaches/trainers and boys’ team players did. There was a tendency shown that the older persons tolerated higher levels of aggression.

Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, and Norlander (2002) examined the circumstances pertaining to threats and aggression during soccer games as experienced by 107 provincial Soccer Association referees. Three sources of aggression were identified as emanating from: (1) soccer players, (2) coaches/trainers, and (3) spectators, and the main questions included threats of physical and verbal aggression. Incidence of threats and aggression had an effect on concentration, performance, and motivation including pre-match worries. Furthermore, the results were found to be affected by age, degree of experience, and life orientation of the referees. Younger referees were shown to be most subjected to threats and aggression. Referees with a generally pessimistic orientation experienced less motivation, worse performance, and greater problems coping with aggressive behaviour from the sports audience compared with referees with a generally optimistic orientation.

Anshel and Weinberg (1999) examined approach and avoidance coping styles of 137 skilled basketball referees from the United States and Australia. Using a self-report survey, the referees were asked to indicate their use of coping techniques in response to several stressors (e.g., making a mistake in mechanics, being in the wrong location, coach abuse, verbal spectator abuse). Approach coping (e.g., calling/warning a technical foul, criticizing the coach, verbally expressing anger) as well as avoidance styles (e.g., ignoring/discounting the coach, quickly continuing play, ignoring the player) were identified. Furthermore, the results indicated differences between coping styles as a function of the type of stressor. There were also differences between North American and Australian referees. The results suggested a need for continued examination of coping styles among sports officials. Rainey (1994, 1995) examined sources of stress among 782 certified baseball and softball referees. Four correlated factors were revealed: fear of failure, fear of physical harm, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict. The study suggested that those factors may be common sources of stress among sports officials and that there is a need for investigating sources of stress in officials of other sports.

Andersson (1983) examined soccer referees' motives for continuing to referee in soccer matches despite the seemingly thankless task. This study consisted of thirty-six soccer referees at Association level in the Göteborg region, Sweden, who were required to answer questions prepared in a questionnaire. The results indicated that two thirds of the referees intended to resign from their referee assignments. The most common reason for this was that refereeing occupied too much time and that they had tired of all the criticism that they had had to accept in the referee role. Commonly too, they experienced the demands placed on themselves as unreasonable. Twenty percent of the respondents (7 out of 36) had become so upset by criticism that they considered resigning. Several referees (about 30%) wanted players and coaches/trainers to be further educated in the rules and regulations of the game. The main reason that the referees continued to referee in spite of everything was their love for the game.

In one study examining the soccer referees' reasons and motives to act as a referee (Isberg, 1978), 80 district and association referees participated. The results showed that the most important reason for becoming a soccer referee was to maintain the contact with the sport after an active career as a soccer player. Strong interest for the game was also a critical factor. The ongoing desire to become a better referee was a motive for them to want to continue as soccer referees. Among their positive experiences were listed opportunities for human contacts and chances for improvement in the referee function. Among their negative experiences was listed the overpowering criticism raised by media and managers/coaches/trainers.

Previous research indicates that referees experience stress and fear of physical harm. Most of these studies are related to coping styles, motives, and reasons to become a soccer referee. However, previous research offers little insights in to the psychological experiences of threat and aggression directed at soccer referees. The aim of this study is to find out how the referees experience threat and aggression. Thus, the unique contribution of the present study is to catch the essential meaning structure and the constituents that could characterize the phenomenon "threats and aggression directed at soccer referees".

Verbal aggression is defined as all the verbal utterances that are expressed against the referee and which are experienced as unpleasant, (e.g., swearing and verbal abuse, and slander). Physical aggression is defined by those actions by which soccer players/coaches/spectators intentionally attack the referee physically (e.g., pushing/shoving, kicking, or punching). The concept of threat pertains to verbal threat of impending physical aggression. In the present study, it was necessary to include both physical and verbal aggression as the dividing line between the two concepts is not a clear cut. A holistic approach is essential since different threshold may cause the referees to perceive physical and verbal aggression differently.

A primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the threats and aggression directed at soccer referees. A second purpose was to examine the reasons why people choose to continue as soccer referees. The theoretical framework for this project is phenomenology, which attempts to examine the psychological experience, in order to describe the essence, structure, and character (Karlsson, 1993). The phenomenological interview emphasizes individual experiences of a particular phenomenon (Bengtsson, 1998). Accordingly, this method was chosen in order to reach a deeper understanding of

threats and aggressions directed at soccer referees based on recollections of their specific experiences.

The Self of the Researchers

Three researchers conducted this study. The research group consisted of an associate professor in psychology (Norlander), a senior lecturer in psychology (Friman), and a student in psychology (Nyberg). Norlander is trained in an experimental paradigm but has begun to conduct phenomenological studies within his area of interest (Norlander, Blom, & Archer, 2002; Norlander, Gård, Lindholm, & Archer, 2003; Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, 2001; Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, 2003). He has noted the value of broad approaches with different methods. He has also understood that there are areas where qualitative methods are necessary. Friman, who is a college lecturer, has also combined qualitative and quantitative methods in previous research (cf. Friman, Edvardsson, & Gärling, 1998; Friman, Gärling, Millett, Mattsson, & Johnston, 2002). In addition to the aim of this study, it is our hope that we further develop our qualitative skills for future studies.

Method

Participants

A sample of seven soccer referees was interviewed. They consisted of three women and four men, aged 18 to 53 ($M = 34.3$ years, $SD = 5.9$) from the Province of Värmland in western Sweden (population approximately 270 000). Of the seven referees who participated, a majority have refereed at both a district and football association level. They had on the average been active as soccer referees longer than three years ($M = 15.4$ years, $SD = 3.9$). Male 1 has experiences from the district level (chief referee). At the time of this study he referred at the youth level. Male 2 was an assistant at the football association level and chief referee at the district level. Male 3 was a chief referee at the district level. Male 4 had experiences from the football association level. At the time of this study, he refereed at the district level. Female 1, 2, and 3 were all assistants at the football association level and chief referees at the district level.

The participants to be interviewed were selected from a phone list handled by the Värmland Soccer Association. The list contained all soccer referees belonging to the association, in total 146 licensed referees. As a start, ten referees were randomly selected from the list. However, the researchers stopped conducting interviews when it was apparent that saturation had been reached (i.e., when the next interview just confirmed what has already been said), which resulted in seven participants. Thus, the three remaining referees were never contacted. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Värmland Soccer Association. In an introductory part, the participants were contacted by phone and introduced to the aim of the study. All the contacted participants agreed to take part in the study.

Procedure

A qualitative research design consisting of in-depth interviews has been adopted in the present study. All participants were asked two questions: (1) Tell me how you experience the referee situation and (2). What feelings and thoughts do you experience when judging? Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. One interview took place at the university and the others took place at the referees' homes. Through the application of in-depth interviews in the form of a dialog, it was possible to obtain a close insight of the subject's perspective. Dialogue is a form of interactive study where it is possible to correct misunderstandings, maintain new and unexpected information as well as ensure that no gaps in information occur (Lindström, 1974). In this open dialogue, subject's answers are followed up by corollary questions in a flexible and easy manner but are strictly focused upon what is relevant to the investigation. One must maintain sight upon leading the dialogue forward in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the subjects' perspective (Hellström & Carlsson, 1996).

After stating the aim of the study, confidential handling of the transcriptions was guaranteed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed directly after each interview into a verbatim text that served as the data for the analysis. Experiences from previous interviews were sometimes used in subsequent interviews. For instance, if special issues were brought up (e.g., uncomfortable feelings when walking into the arena) it was raised as a question in following interviews with the aim to examine if this was perceived by more than one referee. The interviews were undertaken by the second author who had good knowledge in qualitative research. To ensure that the terminology and the probing procedures were appropriate to this population, the interviews were pilot tested with two referees from the Värmland Soccer Association, who were not involved in the main study. The pilot process did not result in major changes in the key question or the probing procedures. Due to ethical considerations, all participants were guaranteed anonymity.

Analytical procedures

Giorgi (1997) has formulated a phenomenological method within psychology that consists of three parts: (a) *reduction* (i.e., to overlook theoretical and other knowledge about how the phenomenon originates but through concentration upon the material come-to-grips with that which is relevant; (b) *description* (i.e., to describe rather than interpret the material); and (c) *seeking the essence* (that through very concentrated descriptions to attain the essential structures). Data analysis, in the present study, was based on "the empirical phenomenological psychological method" (EPP) developed by Gunnar Karlsson (1993), based on Giorgi's work. Karlsson's method for phenomenological studies aims at describing the structure of meaning of phenomenon. This method was chosen in preference to other phenomenological methods since it is developed specially for research into psychological phenomenology.

The method contains hermeneutic elements for both text material and experimenter/interviewer. At analysis (as during the whole period of examination), the over-riding ambition was to maintain as open and unbiased an opinion as possible, in

order to obtain a unity with the material under study, “to be one with the material”. The data analysis is performed in five steps, described below. The five steps ought not to be conceived as strict rules to be followed; rather it should be adapted according to the phenomenon under study and the condition of the material (Norlander et al., 2002; Norlander et al., 2003; Pramling et al., 2001; Pramling et al., 2003). In the data analysis all five steps were undertaken by two of the researchers and later reviewed by a third researcher. The data analytic method used in the present study provides us with the ability to increase our understanding of the problem, that is, the understanding of what kind of threats and aggressions are perceived by referees and how they experience it. By means of the EPP-method it is possible to examine referees’ descriptions of their “lived experiences” (Karlsson, 1993), the characteristics and essence of the phenomenon could thus be described and better understood.

Step 1

In the first step of the analysis the second and third authors read the transcriptions of each participant, until a good overview, understanding, and “feeling” for the material was achieved. In this study, the researchers read the transcriptions three times and in no particular order. The focus of this reading is to single out relevant psychological phenomena but without the purpose of testing the validity of any particular hypothesis.

Step 2

In the second step of the analysis, the second author distinguished “small units”, called meaning units (MU). This did not follow rules of grammar but as the text altered, meaning breaks were made, independent of grammar. Example:

1/”--I have a purpose with my training, I keep fit off season 2/and it’s pleasurable to meet different people...”

Step 3

During the third step, the researchers transformed each MU from language of the participant to the language of the researcher. The language of the participant is reformulated to a language that is relevant to the research question (i.e., to the researchers’ own words). There were no rules regulating the researchers’ language; however everyday usage was preferred to one “psychologically-conditioned”. Example:

- 1/The subject believes that judging is a way to keep up his personal training.
- 2/The subject experiences that he can make many new acquaintances.

Step 4

In the fourth step, the researchers synthesized the transformed MUs into a “situated structure” (summary formats). These categories may look quite different depending on the phenomenon that is being referred to. One seeks to describe “how” (*noesis*) the phenomenon expresses itself and “what” (*noema*) the phenomenon is. The categories were developed under processing wherein repeated consultations of the raw

data continued in a hermeneutic manner. The above-mentioned quote exemplifies the categories encompassing “training” (1) and “meet people” (2).

Step 5

In the fifth step, the researchers moved from the situated structure to a more general theme or structure. The level of abstraction for presentation of the results was decided upon, according to the principle that clarity should be attained without excessive detail. The purpose is to reflect at a more abstract level. The themes, for example, perceived sources of threats, psychological and physical violence and reactions to threat, mental, and physical violence is unfolded in the discussion section.

The result of the analysis is presented in the form of qualitatively different categories, which will be explained and exemplified with reference to citations derived from the empirical material.

Results

The current study sought to give insight into the psychological experiences of threat and aggression directed to soccer referees. In total, the analysis produced 187 MUs with relevance to purpose and research question. These were converted (step 4) into 30 categories. The 30 higher order data categories are presented in a randomized order and not after importance or any other strategy. A shortened description of the categories is rendered, which is followed by a few citations associated with each category. The citations are randomly gathered from the pool of MUs since the primary interest is threats and violence directed to soccer referees at an abstract rather than an individual level (Karlsson, 1993).

1. Interest (5 MU)

This category refers to the commitment to the game. Interest is clearly an important factor and a main reason to continue refereeing.

Example: --“...I guess it’s the interest for the game since I am engaged in sports ... I played some myself when I worked at LKAB (a company that prospect, mine and process mineral resources) and I thought the referees in the Swedish athletic alliance [Korpen] were terrible. That’s how it went.”/
 --“ Yes, it’s my interest”.../--“...it’s an interest./ --“ Taken together, I think soccer is very enjoying. I have been living with soccer for a long time. I have been training and judging and got so used to it that it’s difficult to quit doing it”./--“ ...if you want to be a good referee I think you must have an interest in soccer ...”

2. Judging (4 MU)

The second category describes the feelings when judging in front of the watching spectators.

Example: --“...when I go to a game its party.”/ --“Of course, I have a good experience, especially now since my team plays on the national arena with a great sports audience. I have to pinch my arm many times.”/ --“...it’s an experience to be in the premier division of the Swedish soccer league. To be at Söderstadion in Stockholm is something special, just to experience the atmosphere. It’s cool and an enormous feeling.”/ --“The sports audience laughs and the commentator seems to have fun, everybody enjoys the game. I guess that’s what keeps us going.”

3. Lack of Knowledge (3 MU)

The lack of knowledge among soccer players, coaches, and spectators about the rules is a source of many conflicts.

Example: --“...and much depends on a lack of knowledge about the rules among players and the crowd.”/ --“I guess it mainly depends on a lack of knowledge.”/ --“It’s rare that the rule book changes, but the interpretation of it changes from time to time. ...it’s hard for the players and the crowd to catch up with all these new interpretations.”/ --“...many do not know the rules”.

4. Accusations (2 MU)

This category describes how a loss can result in accusations directed to the referees. The accusations are often about whether or not they have been judging according to the rules.

Example: --“ It’s common for us to hear that we caused the loss. Frequently we are accused to be bad referees.”/ --“A loss due to the referee occurs daily.”

5. Respect (1MU)

This category concerns the respect one may gain as a referee. A younger participant stated that experiences and age affect degree of respect from the players.

Example: --“I think it’s much about age. It’s the respect when it comes to age. It’s much easier to say, “I think you were wrong” to someone who is 13 rather than 45.”/

6. Travel (3 MU)

Older participants pointed to their opportunity to travel and experience new things.

Example: --“...I joined X for a couple of seasons, and have visited many sport fields.”/--“...it’s a challenge to travel, it’s fun. I have seen almost every game in Värmand.”/ --“Sometimes we make longer trips. It’s nice to get away.”

7. Training (7 MU)

Older participants pointed out that judging is a way to keep up their personal training.

Example: --“ I have a purpose with my training, I keep fit off season.”/ --“We have done this training for at least ten years now. We meet at Skutberget every Tuesday to run, swim, and have coffee.”/ --“ ...the game is fun when I get real sweaty...”/ --“We practice together as a group and participate in the Sylvester race. I have been running that race the past seven years; it takes place on New Year’s Eve.”/ --“I have been training for many years now. If I quit it would not be the same.”

8. Parents (4 MU)

Some parents push their kids more than others. The heavy commitment by some parents combined with their lack of knowledge about the rules is a source of conflicts.

Example: --“It’s the soccer for younger that troubles me most. The parents are the trouble makers, a source of unrest.”/ --“Some of them have never had any athletic experiences until their son or daughter starts to play soccer. Their pushing may be both good and bad.”/ --“Two teams were playing when the ball rolled straight to a father who was standing there leaning against the railing. The ball bounced at his feet and the father took the ball and kicked it away from the field. Yes, he said, it’s two more minutes to go and we are winning by 0-1.”/ --“...of course it has to do with their upbringing.”/ --“...parents to twelve year old boys, then it starts to get important, “my boy is going to be a great star and the referee is ruining my son’s future prospects...”/ --“You can talk to the players, tell them to calm down and explain what happened. But you can’t do much about a parent who is standing close the field shouting, “it was wrong.”/

9. Mentality (3 MU)

The value of success (i.e., winning) is very important in small places. A loss elicits strong emotional responses.

Example: --“There is a special mentality in small regions. ‘Degerfors’ who is in the premier division of the Swedish soccer league is supposed to win. It doesn’t matter whether they kick the legs of the opposing team as long as they win. That kind of mentality is prevalent in many small places in

Värmland.”/ --“ ...a loss for the home team may result in some serious discussions.”/ --“ Many regard the game as the event of the week. Thus, it’s important that they win.”/

10. Managing Threats (5MU)

This category refers to actions participants have taken when exposed to threats. Managing threats includes formulating a report to the soccer association and/or to the police.

Example: --“You write a report to the Swedish soccer association.”/--“You call home and tell them not to answer any phone calls, as it can be a threatening supporter.”/--“I contacted the committee in the Värmlands soccer association. I saw the threat coming from a drunken person as a harmless incident but my family worried and wanted me to take further actions. The association encouraged me to file a report to the police. I filed the report and sent it to the association it concerned.”/--“Eight years ago I got a murder threat from someone in a soccer team. Since then I haven’t judged that team.”/--“I kept on judging and tried to forget the whole thing. It’s just to carry on. Life has to go on.”/

11. Meet People (4 MU)

This category refers to the opportunities a referee has to make many new acquaintances.

Example: --“... I have been judging for many years now. I have had so much fun and met so many people, many with whom I still meet from time to time.”/ --“ ...to be a referee has given me a lot as a human, partly due to the opportunity to travel and make new acquaintances.”/ --“It’s pleasurable to meet different people ...”/ --“You get to know many people when you are a referee. Friends of mine ask: ‘How do you know him?’ I answer: ‘He is a referee’. You also get to know many soccer players. A lot of them start to recognize you: ‘You have judged us’ ”.

12. Fun (7 MU)

Some participants indicated the importance of having fun. It was clearly stated that it is fun to be a soccer referee. The analysis revealed that the referees valued these situations which also seemed to be an important reason to continue to referee.

Example: --“...it’s fun...”/ --“ Nice atmosphere and fun ...that’s what keeps me going.”/ --“It’s very special to judge younger players. Once a boy came to me and asked: ‘May I have a red card?’ I told him that this meant that he couldn’t play this game and the next. He answered: ‘Okay can I have a yellow card then?’ Kids can be really nice and that’s what’s most pleasant. One can advance faster in higher divisions, but it’s more entertaining to judge kids since you see how much fun they have.”/ --“Hm,

I don't think I will concentrate on the career only but I will also judge games were its still fun to play. As a reminder of why you go out on the field in the first place."/

13. Acting Out Feelings (5 MU)

The older participants stated that many people attend the games with the only for the purpose of acting out their feelings and it is easy to direct these feelings at the referee.

Example: --“ There are people who attend the game with the only purpose of acting out their feelings. It's fun to attack the referee for his looks or behavior.”/ --“ It's always fun when a referee trips and falls The authority figure falls and then they laugh... I think it's important not to use too much violence but try to be a friend.”/ --“In general, the attitude has gotten tougher the past few years.”/

14. Physical Training (1 MU)

An older participant noted that when players have not been trained enough, they will grumble more and the game will more frequently be called off.

Example: --“ obviously they were not trained enough. ... When they are whiny and they think it's troublesome they kick on everything they shouldn't kick on ...”/

15. Handling Stressful Situations (12MU)

The participants acknowledged the importance of staying calm. Explaining decisions were naturally noted as an important act in stressful situations.

Example:--“Go to the coaches and talk to them, We can't do this, all of us got to help each other.” In nine out of ten cases it gets better then. They understand that all of us are responsible for the difficulties.”/--“You then take a couple of days off.”/--“Try to be as calm as possible and let them know it's you who decide.”/--“ It's no good trying. It's better to send them out at once.”/--“It's a good thing to tell them that you can't see everything on the field when you are alone.”/--“The coach may be standing on the side just shouting. Then I tell them that we could talk about it later.”/--“I used to say: 'It's not that easy' when explaining the situation to the players. Then they say: 'We know'. They do understand since they see the situation from the same perspective as I do.”/--“Try to forget the game afterwards. If I have to make a report, I usually wait a day or two in order to think the situation through.”/--“ ... try to go on.”/--“Seek counselling and talk about the situation.”/

16. Decision Making (6 MU)

Many participants witnessed how they felt when they made decisions. Some of them thought it was an opportunity to show their skills and that they could manage the situation.

Example: --“If you know that you are right then you are proud of yourself.”/ --“It’s satisfying to get on the field together with 22 players and make all the decisions...However, I am not sure whether to call it a satisfaction or not. Still, it’s in your mind that you will decide the game.”/ --“You want to make a great performance, that’s really what it’s all about.”/ --“I went there and made the right decisions. I did not interfere and I called the game off before it became too rough. I made all the right decisions, I did well today. That’s a very nice feeling.”

17. Setbacks (10 MU)

Setbacks or failures among the players are expressed differently. However, it is common for the players to direct dissatisfaction towards the referee.

Example: --“The guy who called was in the team who lost on a goal difference. I knew it was a complicated situation since the team claimed a free kick for touching the ball. From where I was standing, I had to approve the goal and they lost the league.”/ --“...during half time they suddenly left the field and went home. The situation was terrible.”/ --“...when they are down and don’t play according to their leaders instructions it’s common for them to take it out on the referee.”/ --“... sometimes the crowd is aggressive. If the crowd supports a team that doesn’t perform satisfactorily they can take it out on the referee.”/ --“When a good team meets a worse team that eventually wins the game the players in the good team can be quite annoyed.”/ --“I think it’s those who are dissatisfied with their own team who blame mistakes on referees rather than on themselves.”/

18. Obtaining Advantages (8MU)

Younger participants stated that players and coaches try to gain advantages, especially with new referees. Both players and coaches clearly want to test if the rules can be stretched.

Example: --“Many seem to think that they can influence us.”/ --“Mainly it’s because we have just passed our examination. The first year was worst, ‘Hm maybe she doesn’t know the rules, let’s try...’ ”/ --“Many leaders seem to think it is okay to fool younger referees.”/ --“I know a leader who once said: ‘If there is a new referee on the field, I test him since I may gain something from it.’ ”/ --“...perhaps they think it’s much easier to influence younger than experienced persons and therefore they

try.”/ –“Of course, if you see a new face you’ve got to try to put him to the test.”/

19. Offside Situations (1 MU)

One younger participant considered offside as a source of many major discussions.

Example: –“The rules for offside situations change often. This causes major discussions.”/

20. Managing Mental Stress (17MU)

Several strategies on how to handle mental stress were listed by the participants. Others do not care at all. The analysis reveals the importance of staying cool and not to take things personal.

Example:--“I have a capability for keeping it out.”/-- “You get motivated when you now that you are right”/-- “The older you get the more mature and stronger. You have more experience. Life experiences are important.”/--“...sometimes you have to admit to players and coaches that you have made a mistake.”/--“Never mind the sports audience...They have paid for the shouting.”/--“You can’t listen to everything.”/--“The best thing to do is to ignore the player... to nonchalantly turn around. Then he will give up.”/-- “We have the cards if we want to resort to something. Change to red if they don’t quit.”/-- “Talk to the players and tell them you are wrong. That usually takes care of it.”/ –“The most important thing is to learn that it is directed to you as a referee not as a person. If you start to take it personally then you will not last long as a referee.”/

21. Reactions to Mental Stress (18MU)

Several participants described their reaction to mental stress as a loss of concentration, performance, and motivation.

Example:--“...your concentration gets divided. You get insecure. Is it me or is it the team that’s wrong?”/--“Performance gets worse... It can be chaos when judging too much during a week, the fourth or fifth game. I’m tiered and add to it myself.”/--“The motivation is very low.”/ --“It’s damned, the performance gets down. You can’t deny it.”/--“You try to say to yourself: ‘damn it’s only five minutes left.’ You have to pep yourself: ‘You can make it’. But still ... the motivation is lacking...”/--“You get used to it after sometime, you don’t care that much.”/--“You have to keep up your good spirit, it’s not much to care about.”/--“I was prepared to quit after every game during the first two years.”/--“When I get home I’m furious... you have to be used to it and try not to care. If you are angry when you get home, you should take it out on something and then it will

be forgotten.”/--“Then I swore that I wouldn’t get back on the field again. The next day I was judging division five. It’s no use hesitating ... otherwise you may never get back again.”/--“You get less concentrated.”/ --“ ...you get insecure.”/--“You do get effected and if you have no prior experience, it will nearly kill you. I was almost dead after a specific game, I was feeling sick.”/ --“...everything is at a low point, concentration, performance, and motivation. Even if you don’t get down totally you lose your concentration.”/

22. Attention (18 MU)

The importance of positive attention from the spectators and media was expressed by the participants. Respect expressed by the spectators and experienced referees is perceived by the participants in this study as a confirmation of their work.

Example: --“...there was a very good atmosphere on the field and they accepted me as a leader. At that time, it was common with a notice about the referee in the newspaper. Once the notice said: ‘Referee X in Karlstad best on field’. That press cut is safely kept in a drawer. It was a nice feeling.”/ --“The TV-team was there ...”/ --“...it was more than two hundred thousand people at the game, Bengt Bedrup was the commentator, it was fun.”/ --“The particular game with the TV-team in Deje, that was something special.”/ --“A female referee attracts extra attention since people don’t expect women to judge. Many think it’s positive that women judge at all.”/ --“... and the referee association thanked us, they gave us flowers and gift vouchers on the commencement day. It was highlighted in the news paper.”/ --“But it is also positive. Several came up to me and said: ‘Nice to see you. You were very good.’”/ --“Even if it was a difficult game someone always thanks you. The coaches always do it but also the parents say: ‘Well done.’ ”/

23. Contrary Decisions (12 MU)

Sometimes referees need to make decisions that stand in direct opposition to the opinions of the players, coaches, and the spectators. In these cases, referees may be accused of making incorrect decisions.

Example: --“... it’s hard to accept that I don’t agree.”/ --“Often sometime during a game the crowd thinks that you should have signalled but you didn’t.”/ --“Yes, that’s always the case, it’s every thing from younger players to coaches that think you missed a free kick or that you are an idiot for dropping the game.”/ --“...if they don’t like the decision”/ --“I missed an obvious offside. However, I did not think I had done anything wrong but the coach did.”/ --“Probably they think that they could have done it better themselves”/ --“I didn’t pull out the flag and then he started to scream at me: ‘that’s offside’ I knew it wasn’t...”/

24. Mistakes (11 MU)

Some participants admitted that they sometimes made mistakes. A lack of attention caused by too many games during a week was given as a possible explanation for this.

Example: --“The main problem is that the decisions can differ very much from game to game, which understandably is difficult to accept.”/ --“Some referees are very strict whereas other are not. That makes it hard.”/ --“I general, we know if our performance wasn’t that good.”/ --“when you didn’t blow the whistle or when it was disputable or even proved on TV that we made a mistake.”/ --“If it starts to go wrong in a game then you are at fault for the rest of the game”/ --“The difference between players and a referee is that you can replace a player with another one but that’s not possible with referees. Everybody may have a bad day /--“...I don’t move around on the field as I should and therefore I might miss some situations. Off course they start whining. The players see that I am to far away when I make my decision and that I don’t keep up as I should do. They see it right away. This is common when you judge too much.”/ --“...if you judge four maybe five games in a short period of time, in the fifth game it can be tough to concentrate.”/ --“... of course, we are not perfect.”/

25. When Players are Drunk (1MU)

A younger participant noted that players talk badly about referees when they have had too much to drink.

Example: --“...they start to drink and talk shit about the referee who may be right in front of them”/

26. Reactions to Threat (2MU)

Older participants declared that they felt scared when they received threats. Example:--“If you are threatened often you should start thinking about what you are doing.”/--“...and that wasn’t fun. At that time, we rented an apartment upstairs. You could hear when people came in the entrance hall and went upstairs. That night, every noise made me jump.” /

27. Challenge (9 MU)

Some referees indicated the importance of challenges. It was stated that inconvenient decisions and trips are challenges.

Example: --“... it’s a challenge, especially when you have the opportunity to be in the top league. You met a lot of interesting people, the cream of players and league people. It’s nice to be at the top.”/ --“...as a referee you

like to advance, of course.”/ –“You prove to yourself that you can make inconvenient decisions, which you normally wouldn’t have to make. Then you make decision after decision during 90 minutes and it’s pleasant if you think that you do it right.”/ –“It’s pleasant to feel you did a great job.”/ --“I think it’s a challenge to travel ...”/

28. Jeering (3MU)

It was noted that the players jeer at the referee occasionally.

Example: –“A sense of victory makes it happen.”/ –“...if the players think you are whining then they will be annoyed.”/ –“I think it may happen when you are too caught up in the game...”/

29. Media (2 MU)

A few participants referred to the problem when games are followed by media. The media is sometimes brutally revealing whether a right or a wrong decision was made.

Example: –“It can be very unpleasant to think about the media since I am an assistant in the premier division of the Swedish soccer league. Every game is then followed by media.”/ –“... sometimes it is very unpleasant ... you have made a decision and then you see it on TV and realize...”/

30. Women as Referees (3MU)

Younger participants were concerned about women referees. Some people (both players and spectators) can’t accept women as referees.

Example: –“Their opinion is that it’s not a business for women. You could compare it to the view that women should not box or do martial art. Men can accept women players as long as they stick to their own. But if they start judging men it’s no longer in a womanly way.”/ –“There was a woman in the field. She was rather young and the team hadn’t seen her before. “Let’s try to challenge her”.”/ –“When I was judging Edsvalla-Torsby there were old men in the crowd ... They shouted: ‘do they have such bad referees that they must put an old hag on the field’. That was my first game and I remembered thinking to give it up.”/

Discussion

The results of the present study describe perceptions of threats and aggression experienced by the referees. Despite this, and somewhat surprising, many of them stated that it is fun to be a soccer referee. Questions are raised about depth psychological forces and clearly there is a need for more qualitative studies in this area.

The aim of this empirical phenomenological psychological study was to analyze perceptions of threats and aggression directed to soccer referees. A second purpose was

to examine reasons to continue as soccer referees. The soccer referees interviewed were asked to describe their subjective experiences. In the phenomenological analysis subjective meanings were transcended to allow description and interpretation of these experiences. By asking the participants to give concrete examples, we tried to deepen the understanding of the researched phenomenon and to ensure credibility.

The analysis resulted in thirty categories which provide a certain amount of information when described singly but can provide even more if they are related to each other in a general structure. Thus, the categories are brought together and summarized in four themes. The main themes are identified as: perceived sources of threats and aggression, reactions to threat, managing stressful situations, and motives to referee.

Perceived sources of threats, psychological and physical violence

This theme refers to different sources that were perceived by participants as being threatening and aggressive [categories: 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, and 30]. The intent is to harm the referee either physically and/or psychologically. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Andersson, 1983; Folkesson et al., 2002), setbacks and decisions that are direct opposite to the opinions of players, coaches, and spectators (i.e., parents) are important sources of threat. For instance, in small communities the value of success is very important. Accordingly, a decision not in favor of the home team was related to strong emotional reactions (i.e., irritation and aggression) among the sports audience. A possible explanation for the threats and aggressions that the spectators directed at the referee may be a lack of knowledge about the rules of the game. For instance, several participants attested to the anger that players, coaches/trainers, and the watching crowd expressed in situations when they were not fully aware of the rules or of the latest interpretation of the rules.

Attention is an important aspect of the referee's behavior. When the referee doesn't run on the field as she/he is expected to, the players are obviously annoyed. If the referee frequently misses important situations, players will eventually lose trust in the referee and start to act aggressively and threateningly.

Another source of threat and aggression appeared to be due to the sex of the referee. One woman experienced verbal aggressions because many do not accept women as referees. Taken together, three sources of aggression were identified: players, coaches/trainers, and spectators as has been found in previous research (Folkesson et al. 2002). In the present study, the perceived sources of threats exclusively included verbal aggression. None of the participants expressed any physical aggression. The aggression from the crowd seemed mainly to be caused by a lack of knowledge about the rules of the game or by the referees' lack of attention.

Reactions to threat, mental, and physical violence

The second theme refers to the referees' reactions to threat and violence. Common reactions were loss of concentration, performance, and motivation [categories 21 and 26]. One possible explanation for this is a loss in self-confidence which has an effect on performance. Critical situations sometimes appeared to be due to a lack of knowledge among players and spectators. Still, the referee was blamed because he/she

was expected to be responsible for managing such situations. A feeling of insecurity, depression, and a desire to quit are examples of reactions to threat and violence.

However, there are referees who don't think they are affected by threats and violence. This result indicates that referees react differently in different situation. In addition, there was no clear support for previous findings that younger referees are more subjected to threats and aggression (Folkesson et al., 2002).

Managing stressful situations

The theme comprises strategies that were given by the referees to manage stressful situations [categories: 10, 15, and 20]. Some of the referees would not give the threats any attention. The analysis reveals the importance for the referees to stay cool and not to take the threats personal. Several participants expressed the importance of explaining decisions to the players and the coaching staff. A successful communication seems to lower aggressive behaviour among players and coaches. Furthermore, managing threats includes formulating reports to the soccer association and/or to the police.

Motives to referee

This final theme refers to the very nature of the reasons to referee [categories: 1, 2, 6, 7, 11, 12, and 16]. Reasons to continue to referee have been found to include a strong interest for the game and opportunities for human contacts (Andersson, 1983; Isberg, 1978). As the present result suggested, the opportunity to travel and meet people were high-ranking motives for becoming and continuing as referees. Furthermore, positive attention and respect seems to be important factors.

With its sample of seven referees, the study sheds light on and deepens our understanding of threats and aggressions directed at soccer referees. The goal of qualitative research is to describe and interpret individual experiences; the intention is not to suggest that these findings are to be taken as representational. In terms of the data collection plan, all data were collected on one occasion. Although participants were encouraged to consider sources of threats and aggression that they had experienced at different times of the year, it is possible that some referees were preoccupied with their most recent experiences. A goal for future research would therefore be to undertake a longitudinal qualitative study that captures the seasonal threats faced by the referees.

Overall, the findings from this study provide some important insights for the soccer association. For instance, more extensive training of players and coaches in game regulations would hopefully reduce negative experiences caused by threats and aggression. The results, furthermore, highlight the importance of spacing the matches. Too many games per week seem to affect the referees' attention. Although it may be difficult to introduce a mentor system, the present results highlight the referees' need of support.

In summary, the results of the present study correspond to previous research (Coakley, 1994; Folkesson et al. 2002; Gill, 1985; Smith, 1983) showing that threats and aggression is a problem among soccer referees. Not surprisingly, it was found that referees experienced verbal aggressions from players, coaches/trainers, and sports audience. Somewhat more surprising was that these aggressions stemmed from a lack of

knowledge regarding the rules among the audience and from referees' commitment to the game. Several reactions, including effects on concentration, performance, and motivation, were noted. Without doubt, it can be very frustrating and give a sense of unfair treatment when the sports audience are verbally expressing their anger. Strategies for managing these situations were to communicate to the parties concerned, not to take it personally but also to file complaints to appropriate authorities. Future research is needed to better clarify the relationship between referees' engagements for the game and the statements that they are not to take threats and aggressions personally. None of the referees in this study had experienced any physical aggressions.

A unique contribution of the present study is the use of a qualitative method to catch the essential meaning structure and the constituents that could characterize the phenomenon "threats and aggression directed at soccer referees". Hopefully, it is a first initiative of a series of studies using such methods. Perhaps it could stimulate other groups in sport psychology to use such methods.

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