
ARBITRATION IN SCHOOL SPORT CONTEXT: PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE REPORTED BY REFEREES**ARBITRAGEM NO CONTEXTO DO ESPORTE ESCOLAR: PERCEPÇÕES DE VIOLÊNCIA NARRADAS POR ÁRBITROS**

João Carlos Martins Bressan¹, Kleber Tuxen Carneiro², Viviane Teixeira Silveira¹, Dominique Stefany Gomes dos Santos¹ and Riller Silva Reverdito¹

¹Mato Grosso State University, Cáceres-MT, Brazil.

²Lavras Federal University, Lavras-MG, Brazil.

RESUMO

A gestão do ambiente de jogo coloca o/a árbitro/a em uma posição de destaque no esporte. Contudo, nesse contexto a arbitragem consiste em uma atividade exposta a situações de violência. Em competições em nível escolar, as pesquisas nesse campo ainda são incipientes. Assim, o objetivo do estudo foi reconhecer a violência percebida por árbitros/as no contexto dos jogos escolares da juventude. Lança mão de uma abordagem qualitativa de caráter exploratório, e foi realizado na fase estadual dos jogos em 2016 no estado de Mato Grosso. Participaram da pesquisa árbitros/as (n=19), das categorias a e b. Foram realizadas entrevistas, registradas em um gravador digital (sony® icd-px 312) e transcritas na íntegra. Enquanto procedimento analítico empregou-se a análise de conteúdo, usando o software nvivo®10. Com base nos resultados, observou-se que todos/as sofreram ou vivenciaram algum tipo de violência, bem como relativizam-na considerando o contexto investigado. Revelou-se também a fragilidade no sistema de controle dessas situações, atribuindo ao/a árbitro/a a exclusiva responsabilidade pela gestão do ambiente de competição. Em resposta a problemática, uma das possibilidades seria abordar o papel do/a árbitro/a como conteúdo do processo de formação de jovens no esporte, nesse sentido, deverão compreender que são corresponsáveis pela formação esportiva.

Palavras-chave: Árbitro/a. Violência. Esporte. Jovens. Pedagogia do Esporte.

ABSTRACT

The role of managing the game environment places the referee in a prominent position in sport. However, in the sport context, arbitration is highly exposed to violence. Referees occupy a prominent position in sport, having the responsibility to manage the game, and are therefore exposed to violence episodes. Research addressing violence in school competitions is still incipient; thus, the objective of this study was to identify the violence perceived by referees in youth school games. A qualitative exploratory study was performed in the state games held in 2016 in the state of Mato Grosso. The study surveyed 19 referees of categories a and b. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder (Sony® icd-px312) and the content was analyzed using software nvivo®10. The results revealed that all referees have witnessed or been victims of different types of violence, confirming the fragility of the violence control system, which attributes exclusively to the referee the responsibility to manage the competition environment. Addressing the referee's role as a content in the sport youth formation would largely contribute to the development of sport education.

Keywords: Referee. Violence. Sport. Youth. Sport Pedagogy

Introduction

Sport is one of the most important contemporary socio-cultural phenomena, reaching practically all dimensions of human activities if we consider its numerous scenarios, participants, purposes and meanings^{1,2}. In institutional sport practice, referees play a main role³, being responsible for managing the play/event environment. Their decisions and interventions affect the athletes, coaches, team directors and fans. In the face of new contemporary configurations, institutional sport practice is marked by heightened competition as a result of earnest involvement and determination to attain results⁴, and, consequently, by referees being exposed to different types of violence. This scenario does not differ contextually between professional and school sport events, and, intriguingly, the similarity is even greater, given that the violence control system at schools ends up being more fragile⁵.

Participation in sport competition is inherent to sport education^{2,6}. Young athletes are expected to be able to experience different levels of competition throughout their training process and to acknowledge that a sort of simulated combat takes place in sports⁴, the rules of which are previously defined and shared with the purpose of ensuring a congenial play environment. However, a referee's activity is rarely seen positively³ due to the stigma of dishonest behavior attributed to referees in the social representations of their role and whose actions and decisions may be biased by interests foreign to the game. Based on this axiom, referees' decisions are questionable in and out of the court/on and off the field, which results in a depreciation of refereeing as an occupation, voidance and depreciation of the referees' role as authoritative.

Internet and Television sport media use different audio and video resources simultaneously during games, such as video replay, which allows the analysis and assessment of the behavior of the refereeing team. Undoubtedly, this conclusion reveals its influence on the final game result, through refereeing analyses that expose referees to ignominious situations⁷. The use of technology as a basis for referees' decisions as a means of ensuring equity and reducing controversial situations is certainly advisable. However, it should reach other levels as well, as reported by Svantesson⁸, who proposed that the use of technology should revive the dignity of refereeing. These two aspects reinforce the social imaginary that a referee is someone who must not make a mistake, and, when they do, in addition to "incompetence", it implies moral/ethical compromise, since everyone expects decisions beyond question.

Empirical studies have given evidence that referees are submitted to different situations of abuse and violence from players, coaches and audiences^{3,5,7,9-12}, resulting in incalculable consequences to sport practice, either at organizational or representational or educational process levels. Ackery *et al.*⁹ studied violence towards hockey referees in the amateur sport context in Canada and reported a lack of discipline and compliance with rules and increased athlete aggression and injuries. Kellett and Shilbury³ mentioned difficulty in recruiting and ensuring the permanence of new teams of referees in various sports. Offences, threats, deliberate violent behavior^{5,11} are some of the behaviors that have been documented in association with social and psychological stress¹³ and mental exhaustion in referees¹⁴.

Despite an expressive increase in the number of studies on the different aspects of refereeing^{10,13}, those on violence against referees in the school sport context are still incipient. Having pointed out this limitation, we assessed different scientific reports focused on refereeing. In a systematic review on refereeing in gymnastics conducted by Debien *et al.*¹³ between 1993-2013, none of the studies reviewed dealt with school sports. Along this line of thought, Deal *et al.*⁵ reported a correlation between competition level and disciplinary incidents. In that study, the authors observed that the lower the level of competition the higher the incidence of disciplinary incidents.

Violence is a polysemic cultural phenomenon that can be categorized according to the means used, that is, its different forms, intentions and social parameters^{7,15}. Considering its multifarious character, we understand that violence towards referees, either actual or symbolic, may occur as either physical aggression or even in the expression of verbal and non-verbal gestures aimed at producing physical, psychic, moral and affective damage to the individual. Either physical or symbolic, whatever its nature, violence can make the game/competition environment difficult to manage or even undermine it. Therefore, when we acknowledge a referee's role in this context, it is imperative to identify the circumstances that gave rise to the different expressions of violence in an attempt to provide objective and subjective means to mitigate its occurrence and improve the quality of educational intervention in youth sport education, particularly at school.

This investigation sought to understand the representations of violence as perceived by referees in Youth School Sport Competitions (Jogos Escolares da Juventude - JEMs) carried out in the State of Mato Grosso. The results of this study shed light on the different aspects of violence in school sport, as well as on the role of referees in sport education.

Methods

Scenario and subjects

This study on qualitative assumptions¹⁶ on violence in school sport was conducted in the state phase of the 2016 JEMs. These games are promoted and organized by the State Department of Education, Sports and Leisure and make up one of the most important sport events in the state of Mato Grosso. School students aged from 12 to 17 participate in two categories (category B: ages 12 to 14, and category A: ages 15 to 17). The competitions take place in two seven-day phases and are part of the schedule of events of the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB), and approximately 1,500 young athletes participate.

The study population was made up of referees (n=19) who worked in the state phase of the 2016 youth school games in the cities of Campo Verde, Mato Grosso do Sul state (category A) and Água Boa, Mato Grosso do Sul state (category B) in sport modalities handball, basketball, volleyball and indoor soccer (futsal). The referees who participate in the event are referred by the state federations of the respective sport modalities. Table 1 gives the profiles of the referees interviewed.

Table 1. Profile of the referees interviewed

P	S	A	MS	FR	RL	RE	OC	ED
P1	M	43	M	1995	N	11	Accountant/Public Sector	Higher Education
P2	M	29	S	2015	S	1	Tally Clerk/Private Sector	Elementary Education (Grades 1 to 4) (Not completed)
P3	F	28	S	2007	S	8	Jail Ward/Public Sector	Higher Education/Business Administration
P4	M	38	M	1999	N	8	Administrative Assistant/Private Sector	Higher Education (Not completed)
P5	M	22	S	2014	N	1	Sports Trainee/Public Sector	Higher Education (Not completed)
P6	M	42	M	1989	N	8	Agronomic Engineer /Private Sector	Higher Education/Agronomic Engineer
P7	M	33	S	2015	S	5	Physical Education Teacher/Public Sector	Higher Education/Physical Education
P8	M	26	S	2009	S	7	None	Higher Education (Not completed)
P9	M	48	M	2003	S	11	None	Secondary Education (Not completed)
P10	F	23	S	2011	S	3	None	Higher Education (Not completed)
P11	M	30	S	2004	S	8	Administrative Assistant/Public Sector	Higher Education/Public Administrator
P12	M	32	S	2010	S	5	Administrator/ Public Sector	Higher Education/Biology
P13	F	25	S	2011	N	2	Student (Graduate student at UFMT)	Higher Education
P14	M	21	S	2014	S	1	None	Secondary Technical Education/Informatics
P15	M	49	S	2004	S	23	Physical Education Teacher/Public Sector	Higher Education/Physical Education
P16	M	ND	S	1999	N	10	Physical Education Teacher/Public Sector	Higher Education
P17	M	39	M	1995	N	21	Police Officer/Public Sector	Higher Education/Biology
P18	F	30	S	2009	N	10	Physical Education Intern/Public Sector	Higher Education (Not completed)
P19	M	18	S	2015	S	1	None	Secondary Education

Note: Participants (P), Sex (S) Male (M), Female (F), Age (A), Marital Status (MS) Married (M), Single (S), Federation Registration (FR), Refereeing Level (RL) National (N), State (S), Refereeing Experience in years (RE), Occupation (OC), Education (ED), Not Informed (NI).

Source: Authors' data

Procedures and instruments

As previously described, the data were collected in the context of the 2016 Youth School Games. First, the objectives of the study were presented and permission was requested from the event Central Organizing Commission for conducting the study. Next, the study design was briefly presented to the Refereeing Coordination, who mediated the initial contact with the study subjects. After that, the referees were contacted and introduced to the study objectives, content and procedures that would be adopted in data collection and then interviews were scheduled.

During data collection, one of the researchers conducted the interviews¹⁷ based on a semi-structured questionnaire organized into two blocks, one with closed questions on the referees' profile (sex, age, time of experience as a referee) and another with open questions on the referees' perception of violence in the play environment. The referees' narratives lasted an average of 35 min and were recorded with a digital recorder (Sony[®] ICD-PX312). Later on, the interviews were transcribed seeking to preserve the intent and/or contents before submitting the data to analysis.

Following the ethical research guidelines (Resolution 466/12), the subjects gave their free informed written consent. The study was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings of Mato Grosso State University (Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso – UNEMAT) - (CAAE - *Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* (Certificate of Submission for Ethical Appraisal)): 55729716.7.0000.5166).

Data analysis and reliability

After the interviews, the data were transcribed and edited in the form of a text, which permitted preliminary textual analysis. A preliminary analysis was conducted seeking to select the documents to be used and formally prepare them for subsequent analysis. The data were organized and analyzed using software NVivo 10 for Microsoft Windows[®] for codification, categorization and inference¹⁸. Codification, categorization and inference were performed by three researchers. Three categories were created after the analysis of the content with the analysis method: a) Perception of violence, b) Types/forms of violence and agents, c) Violence control.

Study reliability was approached in three ways¹⁹. First, the researchers' participation in the context of the competition during the 14 days of its duration (two-seven day phases in different municipalities) observing the activities performed by the referees and interacting with the referees²⁰. Their participation in the context of the event allowed them to recognize symbols and meanings associated with the competition environment where the interviewees were inserted and to establish a rapport with the interviewees. Then, second, the fact that the interview was conducted by a single researcher. This ensured that the same approach and procedures were used and allowed the elucidation of discursive elements that would be difficult to recognize in another way. And the third methodological strategy was the procedure for coding the data. Next, the data were transcribed, edited and initially coded by the same researcher who performed the interviews. Following the preliminary data coding, three experienced researchers analyzed them and gave their agreement or disagreement with the data interpretation. The categories and interpretations presented resulted from the analysis and agreement among the researchers. Furthermore, the study validity strategies adopted are documented elsewhere²¹⁻²³.

Results and Discussion

Even though an institutional sport referee has a protagonist role, his or her participation exposes him/her to different situations of violence, either within or outside the

play environment. Violence against referees occurs at different levels of sport practice and its reach is "determined" by the violence control system available. The violence control system grows directly with the level of competitiveness, the interest in the game result and the resources involved⁵. In the school context, the violence control system is fragile, which allows us to propose that the weaker the violence control mechanisms are, the greater the referees' exposure to the different forms of violence.

The results of this study revealed a situation of legitimating violence against referees, as demonstrated by the very relativization observed in the perception of the referees themselves. Generally, the interviewees indicated a need for sport education where the referee is perceived as one of the agents in institutional sport practice.

Perception of violence

Regarding the perception of violence, the referees pointed out physical and verbal aggression (n=5), verbal aggression (n=4) and physical aggression among athletes (n=3). Violence was also associated with professional devaluation, moral and psychological aggression, hooliganism and disrespect (n=6) and lastly, physical and verbal aggression without any possibility of reaction (n=1). The referees characterized violence as physical and verbal (symbolic) actions. Nevertheless, we perceived in the referees' narrative that violence actions are relativized and normalized by them within the play environment.

"Ah, this is a normal verbal thing, verbally in the general context, right, because at the end it's all the referee's responsibility." (Referee 17)

"No, I think not, not so serious to the point of your recalling it and talking about it, right, fans swearing, do you understand, the athlete getting a little excited, but nothing besides that..." (Referee 14)

Violence has a polysemic character^{7,15}, as we previously said, which somehow affects its form, such as the way that the individuals perceive (suffer) it. A kind of naturalization of violence is overlapped with our social cultural structure, which makes its acknowledgement unviable or inhibits its acknowledgement. The relativization of violence in games reported by referees sometimes makes it visible only when the circumstance becomes more serious. Furthermore, violence in games affects not only referees or the immediate context of competition. Its deleterious effects are also felt on sport practice^{21,24,25}, reducing the possibilities of access to and development in sport, as strengthened by Kellett and Shilbury³ when they acknowledged that exposure to violence may lessen the possibility of recruiting and ensuring new teams of referees. There is no doubt that sport education is essential^{2,26,27}, one where the referee is treated as one of the many important teaching and learning contents involved in the process of formation of a sport culture in educational environments with this purpose.

Types/forms and agents of violence

Verbal offences (swearing), harassment and effective physical aggression are forms of aggression reported by referees. Verbal aggression (n=15), including racism, sexism, and physical aggression (n=4) predominated. The rationale behind these actions reveals a kind of social representation where the referee is attributed a condition of laxity or unfeelingness, that is, of an individual who is not affected by ontological limits. This founding imaginary certainly gives rise to justifications and reasons for the use of violence as a means of exerting some influence over referees.

“The guys came over at full blast, came to me, hit [kicked] my leg, all the others [pointing] their fingers like this, do you understand?” (Referee 09)

“(…) I also handle a lot of machismo (….) My partner made the same error in the previous game, the teacher thought it fit to shout at me (….)” (Referee 10)

“(…) A league president not only offended, but also abused [me] racially, do you understand, we had problems with this, it was rather unpleasant because skin color determines nothing, everyone knows that, it is ignorance, however, unfortunately this happened.” (Referee 16)

“Including last year, one of our colleagues, one of our referees, was attacked by a 15-year-old athlete because he was given a red card, he went round the court and gave one of our workmates a high kick”. (Referee 18)

“The same thing happened to me right here.” (….)Two months ago in a match between [City A] and [City B], yes... “[City A] was losing, right, and the drunken fans did not accept the defeat, right, then they started to throw beer [cans at us] and call us names.” (Referee 19)

The scenario presented was also reported in studies by Deal *et al.*⁵ and Dorsch and Paskevich¹¹. Its consequences may reach refereeing work health hazard, either for its recurrence or intensity, and ensuing mental exhaustion in referees^{10,14}.

“[...] Sometimes you are refereeing a match and some coaches start to offend you, especially when he starts to offend you so only you can hear, not the others. I have had this kind of experience, now I've learned, right, but it is awful, leaving a match and feeling like crying.” (Referee 13)

We thus notice that the expressions of violence in the field of sport towards referees are not limited to situations within competitions; they reach other levels of representation such as gender. In general we can state that the collective imaginary on the role of referees ends up reflecting historically constructed stereotypes in relation to “women”, considering that female referees are deemed “fragile”²⁸⁻³⁰.

“There are many, many people who still criticize, who say ‘ah, I don’t want this woman in my match’, ‘she is weak, I don’t know what she is’, ‘she is psychologically weak’.” (Referee 3)

“If I am refereeing a match together with a man, if I make a mistake in something, [...] this coach thinks he can shout at me or do anything else” (Referee 10).

“This happens a lot ‘This is no place for a woman’, especially in adult competitions, ‘A woman’s place is in the kitchen’, ‘Go do the laundry’, ‘A woman isn’t capable of refereeing a match at this level’, I have already heard a lot of things like this.” (Referee 18)

The female referees interviewed revealed a sexist perspective of women’s incapacity in their position of power, control and autonomy in competitions. A study on female referees in the soccer environment conducted by Monteiro³⁰ pointed out that “[...]female referees are ridiculed, there is a biased consensus on their lack of competence to perform this activity and a naturalization of male referees' expertise (p. 64). Thus, we can notice the maintenance or reproduction of this kind of gender bias and the exacerbation of psychological violence in these environments. Furthermore, it is not always the athletes who start to behave violently, but coaches, team presidents and even the fans.

Regarding the agents that stimulate a violent atmosphere and violent actions and coercion against referees, athletes stand out (n=12), followed by coaches (n=11), fans (n=8), team presidents (n=3). The data presented corroborate the fact that internal and external factors influence the process of construction of violence in sport. This was also reported by Ackery, Tator and Snider⁹, Aragão and Pina *et al.*¹⁰, Deal *et al.*⁵, Dorsch and Paskevich¹¹ and Righeto and Reis⁷. Let us consider that reported by our interviewees:

“I’ve been through situations when the coach told [the athlete] to hit me and I heard him saying so. Then I told the athlete: ‘if you do what the coach has told you to, it’s you who will be suspended, not him.’” (Referee 6)

“[...]I ended up confirming the goal and then the opponent team came over to me, gripped my arm, pushed me and it was kind of upsetting and such, we had no support, nothing, there was no security personnel to intervene, nothing [...]” (Referee 7)

Observe the frequency that referees are blamed for violent reactions during competitions. The situation reported feeds a perverse social imaginary that consolidates the notion that referees are not allowed to make mistakes, and, consequently, their actions are rarely perceived as positive, as also reported by Kellett and Shilbury³. There also occurs a situation where the victim (referee) is seen as responsible for the violence suffered, as well as for the whole tension during the match from different perspectives – athletes, fans, coaches, team presidents, among others. There is also a sort of normalization of actions of resolution of conflicts or disagreements through violence as being inherent to the play environment.

Violence control

In relation to the referees’ attitudes in violence control, some reported giving penalties and penalty cards (n=6) and 2-min suspension from matches (n=1). Team punishment situations were also evident (n=6), considering actions against athletes, coaches and team presidents, and reports of violence during matches (n=5). Avoiding refereeing errors, together with following and enforcing regulations, was also pointed out (n=2). Extreme situations that required police action, especially involving fans, were also mentioned (n=2), and so were extreme cases when the match was terminated (n=1).

“(...) it was all in the report, a report I wrote, [describing] everything that a guy in a competition with children said. After saying all that he did, I’d expect at least one-year suspension! He got suspended for three matches.” (Referee 08)

“I wrote a report, the one who pushed the table got a two-year suspension and the other five, six matches, six months, five months.” (Referee 09)

“Then, to try to balance the match, we started to manage it on the spot and they did not accept it and we had to interrupt the match.” (Referee 19)

“[...] avoid errors to the most, so that a major act of physical or verbal violence is not neglected in the future.” (Referee 05)

A recent study on young soccer players pointed out the fact that competition level is inversely proportional to the occurrence of violent actions⁵. In contrast, we can infer that school matches are characteristically more violent than professional league matches. Likewise, we predominantly observe that violence control is limited only to referees’ match management. However, we understand that play environment management, especially at

school level, cannot be left only on the hands of referees. It must be the responsibility of all the agents involved in sport practice context, from young athletes to fans.

There is also a need for violence control to prevail in institutional sport practice, reaching the spheres of behavior and emotion self-control (intrinsic control). Sport being a social cultural phenomenon, therefore, impregnated with knowledge and expertise produced along the history of humanity, it is possible to share experiences that allow young athletes to develop a form of sport practice where violence is never stimulated.

Conclusions

The present study afforded knowledge on violence from the point of view of referees of group sport modalities (handball, basketball, futsal and volleyball) in the Youth School Games of the state of Mato Grosso, as well as considering mechanisms of control that clarify or point out the different forms of violence. We expect that the current results shed light on the different aspects of violence in sport at school level, starting from the role of referees, and also stimulate educational intervention and training actions in sport.

We observed that violence is present as a phenomenon in the sport context at school level and that it affects referees in different ways. The referees' various points of view presented revealed the polysemic character of violence and the many deplorable forms of occurrence. Violence control was found to be fragile and predominantly the referees' responsibility. Furthermore, gender violence was reported and characterized by belittling of female referees by athletes/students, coaches and fans.

Problematization of the issue of violence against referees in the school sport context is fundamental and puts into evidence one among other possibilities of conducting the sport education process (the development of a sport culture). Aggressive attitudes may reflect on the development of athletes, considering that there is interdependence among players and referees. The scenario presented requires reflection on the possibilities and experiences that may reduce violent actions in school sport competitions. Concerning especially refereeing in the school sport context, the search for sport education models where the referees' role is dealt with as content⁶, stimulating learning and educational meaning for a positive development of young students, thus suggesting a reduction in violent behavior in play environments, as well as the possibility of envisioning referees as important agents in the sport context.

Finally, we acknowledge that the investigation of referees of only group sports was a study limitation. However, the study design does not decrease its contribution, or make it inviable, considering the small number of studies dedicated to the investigation of violence related to referees. We believe that further investigation in other sport contexts, such as individual sport modalities, may contribute in new ways to an understanding of violence in this environment. We believe that sport practice will only be significant if it includes conscientious education, full of humanizing practices². To this end, sport education needs to reach and affect different sport practice agents and contexts.

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Authors' ORCID:

João Carlos Martins Bressan: 0000-0002-6975-1174

Kleber Tuxen Carneiro: 0000-0003-0826-6172

Viviane Teixeira Silveira: 0000-0002-4383-7412

Dominique Stefany Gomes dos Santos: 0000-0001-8305-0692

Riller Silva Reverdito: 0000-0003-0556-9151

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Author address: João Carlos Martins Bressan. Cidade Universitária, Centro Interdisciplinar de Pesquisas em Esporte e Exercício Físico (CIPEEF), Ginásio Poliesportivo, Rua Santos Dumont, s/n, CEP 78200-000, Cáceres-MT, Brasil. E-mail: bressan@unemat.br