



Sport in Society

Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcss20>

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To cite this article: Kim Loyens, Inge Claringbould, Leonie Heres - van Rossem & Frank van Eekeren (2022) The social construction of integrity: a qualitative case study in Dutch Football, *Sport in Society*, 25:9, 1714-1733, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2021.1877661](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1877661)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1877661>



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Published online: 29 Jan 2021.



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The social construction of integrity: a qualitative case study in Dutch Football

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses how the social construction of integrity takes place within the context of football in the Netherlands. Combining a contextual approach to sports integrity with the analytic lens of sensemaking, this qualitative multi-method case study analyses – in one extreme case in Dutch youth amateur football – why and when the ‘incident’ was perceived as an ‘integrity issue’, and how the meaning of (the) integrity (issue) was socially constructed by (interactions between) stakeholders involved in the case. Our findings show why, when, and how moral norms and values are (not) debated and at stake, and that the social construction of sports integrity is intertwined with the institutional context and the role of secondary stakeholders. It provides insights that can help sports organizations to identify risks in their moral sports culture and to develop measures or policies to safeguard integrity in sports.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 September 2020
Accepted 13 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Integrity; amateur football; sport; social constructivism; fair play

Introduction

Integrity in sports has become an emerging concern to the public, since sports are increasingly acknowledged to have public and commercial value (Van Eekeren 2016; Waardenburg 2016). Trust in the integrity of athletes, referees and sports organisations is thus crucial for sports to fulfil its societal function (Gardiner, Parry, and Robinson 2017). At the same time, integrity is also crucial to keep sports in itself attractive: as soon as spectators do not know whether they are watching a fair game, the attention for the sport will decrease – with severe reputational and financial consequences (Forrest, McHale, and McAuley 2008; Numerato 2016). From a social descriptive viewpoint, scholars often observe that integrity is a dynamic concept of which the precise meaning changes both over time and by context as it results from implicit or explicit sensemaking processes among the stakeholders involved (Weick 1995; Hunter 2012). Despite philosophical and normative academic efforts to formulate an ‘objective code of morality’ (Becker 1998), discordant definitions of integrity are used in practice and remain an important source of conflict concerning what should be judged as right or wrong, moral and immoral, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. What ‘integrity’ means and how it is expressed, then, depends upon the beliefs and practices of stakeholders

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in specific contexts (Huberts 2014). When we apply this contextual approach to our research, it means that ideas about how to act are socially constructed and influenced by the socio-psychological and institutional context in sports (Loland 2002). The integrity of sport is thus continually contested, debated, interpreted defined and redefined, and socially (re)constructed, and as such a product of continued interaction, dialogue, and sensemaking (Cleret, McNamee, and Page 2015) in specific contexts. Yet, while many in our field acknowledge the socially constructed nature of integrity, the actual process by which such social construction takes place and the meaning of integrity of sports amongst those involved is very seldom problematized and to the best of our knowledge hardly empirically studied as such.

In sports, integrity is not only contested at the level of professional competitions – as shown in recent scandals (Geeraert 2015 & 2017; Forster 2016; Henne 2015; Hover et al. 2016) – but also at the lower and less eye-catching level. In the Netherlands, an inexplicable 23-0 defeat of an Under-18 football team, as a result of which another club did not become league champion, received national media attention and became subject of a disciplinary case of the Dutch Football Association (KNVB). This case aroused our interest, in particular because it goes against our expectation that integrity violations generally occur in professional sports, where large amounts of money are at stake. We will therefore use this case to answer the following research question: how does the social construction of integrity take place within the context of football in the Netherlands? To answer this question, we investigate (i) why and when the ‘incident’ was perceived as an ‘integrity issue’ and (ii) how the meaning of (the) integrity (issue) was socially constructed by (interactions between) stakeholders involved in the case.

Using this case from Dutch youth amateur football, our aim is to illustrate how an in-depth study of the process of social construction and sensemaking of integrity can improve our understanding of the actions, agreements or rituals that can endanger or enhance integrity. In studying the social construction of integrity in the context of sports, and youth amateur football in particular, our study makes a number of important contributions. First, this case study offers a detailed insight into the meaning-making process of integrity in a specific case. It thereby enables us to better understand why and when divergent expectations and conflicts regarding integrity arise, and how through social interaction between involved stakeholders the meaning of integrity is constructed within a broader institutional context. Second, from a societal perspective, our study provides insights that can help sports organizations to identify important risks in their moral sports culture and help them develop more targeted and effective measures and policies to safeguard integrity in sports.

This paper will first discuss relevant insights in the literature on integrity in sports and the relevance of sensemaking as an analytic lens for examining the social construction of integrity. We will then present the methods and main findings of our empirical study. The paper concludes with a discussion of the main contributions of this study and recommendations for further research and practice.

Literature review

Integrity in sports

Processes and forces of globalization, institutionalization, and commercialization seem to have produced a global sports monoculture (Donnelly 2015). Sports can be seen as a particular social and political context in and of itself that affects how integrity is understood

(Doty 2006). Since its modern version originated in Great Britain, sports can be seen as a cultural product of modernity, emphasizing equality and competition, created by the 19th century upper and middle class Englishmen. In those days, integrity merely concerned ‘fair play’ as the moral creed of sporting ethos (Renson 2009). In recent years, however, as Gardiner and colleagues (2017) note, integrity in relation to sports sometimes simply means ‘honesty’ and sometimes is used as a catch-all phrase. Treagus, Cover, and Beasley (2011) find in an extensive review of the literature, that sports literature typically defines integrity in terms of concepts such as: sportsmanship, fair play, respect for the game, responsibility, compassion, and honesty in adhering to rules. A clear conceptual demarcation between integrity, sportsmanship and related concepts is, however, lacking (Gardiner, Parry, and Robinson 2017). Following Pelaez (2011), Treagus and colleagues (2011, 14) even conclude that ‘there has been [a] consistent inability in research to define and effectively utilize concepts of fair play, sportsmanship, morals, character, and ethical conduct’.

This lack of conceptual clarity may hinder research and discussions on ethics in sports. As a first step towards a better understanding of how integrity is socially constructed in sports, we thus need to clarify how we ourselves define integrity and briefly explore its meaning in relationship to specific sports-related concepts. In our view, sports integrity refers to the broader set of moral values, norms and rules that apply to all decisions and behaviours that take place within the context of sports – whether these directly affect the game or not. These values, norms and rules together form a coherent whole that pertains to the integrity of the sport and that determine the possibilities and limitations of athletes and sports institutions (Archer 2016). This coherence must be accepted and observed by athletes and institutions, if not, the integrity of the sport is at stake. For example, the use of doping in cycling, and its institutional embedding, can be seen as a violation of the sport’s integrity.

To allow for sufficient sensitivity to and understanding of the moral interpretations and practices specific to the sports context, we define integrity as the quality of acting in accordance with the moral values, norms, and rules that are considered valid and relevant within the context in which the actor operates (cf. Huberts 2014, 44–45). Within this definition, we view sportsmanship, fair play, and respect for the game as a subset of the relevant moral values that relate specifically to and affect the game or sport itself and how it is played. Contrary to most sports ethics studies we thus do not place integrity under the general heading of ‘sportsmanship’ (e.g., Boxill 2003; Butcher and Schneider 2003; Keating 2007; Morgan 2007), but instead consider sportsmanship one of the key components of integrity in the sports context.

In this study we focus primarily, in terms of Gardiner and colleagues (2017), on the inherent integrity of sport, expressed in terms of fair play, procedures and processes. In this respect the central question is: how should sports games be played? The fairness norm is supposed to describe how to act *in play* (Loland and McNamee 2000). This means that our focus goes beyond formal fair play, i.e. keeping the written rules of the game. Our focus is merely on informal fair play, which refers to mutual respect between the stakeholders engaged and, as Loland (2002: xiv) puts it, ‘to the ideal attitudes and virtues they ought to compete’. Of particular importance to our case study are two key elements of fair play: 1) the obligation to play (fairly) to win and 2) the equality of opportunity to perform (Loland 2002).

First, the predominant norm in sport is ‘play to win’. Sporting games, in contrast to recreational games, are organized to measure, compare, and rank participants according to their sporting performance. This implies that all participants have to do their best to win the game. The ‘play to win’ norm does not allow players to give up a match or lose

intentionally, so-called 'tanking' (Masters 2015). The 'play to win' norm is different from the 'win' norm, which implies that winning is always just, even in the case of unfair play. Second, justice or 'equal opportunity to perform' is a key element of fair play that is, for example, expressed in the predominant norm that all competitors ought to be given an equal opportunity to perform (Loland and McNamee 2000). The rules of the games are applicable and equal to all participants, but each rule and rule system leaves room for interpretation and the way the game is played must be built on shared norms of interpretation among the parties concerned. The referee plays an important role in keeping and interpreting the rules and may interfere and interact with the players in order to establish a consensus on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable conduct during the game (Loland 2002). When players or spectators do not consider the referee to be impartial, it will lead to feelings of unfairness. Especially in the lower levels of amateur football, where the home team often appoints referees, these feelings of unfairness can easily be experienced.

Both predominant fair play norms, i.e. 'play to win' and 'equal opportunity to perform', seem to be under pressure, due to the growing pressure to perform ever better and to win, at all levels in sports (Cleret, McNamee, and Page 2015; Van Eekeren 2016). This endangers the moral potential of sports, its societal promise and its attractiveness of 'the sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome' (Fraleigh 1984, 90–91). Whereas the increased value of 'winning' and 'competitiveness' in sports is often linked to the commercialization of sports and the ever-greater economic interests of sports organizations (Kelly and Hickey 2008), scholars who study amateur or recreational sports also find that external recognition, status, and esteem associated with winning is considered essential to ensure sufficient membership and sponsors to support their organizations financially and ensure their survival (Loland and McNamee 2000).

These developments have drastically altered the moral sports culture. As Boxill (2003) and others (e.g. Walsh and Giulianotti 2001) argue, they lead to players, coaches and clubs becoming more and more extrinsically motivated and lowering their moral norms. McNamee (2009), for instance, finds that across different sports, players and referees consistently blur the lines between breaking and bending the rules and actually consider strategically fouling a morally acceptable and even necessary practice that is all just 'part of the game'. Boardley and Kavussanu (2009; 2011)'s research furthermore suggests that the sports climate and coaching practices can cause athletes to become morally disengaged, allowing them to view unethical behaviour as benign or even laudable, while externalizing their morality and abdicating their responsibility to sports officials and coaches. Spectators, finally, seem to have become more concerned with heroism, daring and spectacle and less with aesthetics and athletic skill (Macaulay 1987), thereby encouraging violent and aggressive behaviours even at recreational and young age group levels (Treagus, Cover, and Beasley 2011).

Concluding, 'winning' has become a first-order value and many in sports even consider it to be a virtue in and of itself (Treagus, Cover, and Beasley 2011). This seems to apply to all modern sports across all different levels. Both in elite and in amateur sports, as well as across different types of sports, the value of sports is primarily measured by tallying victories instead of aspects such as participation, social connection, health goals, and enjoyment (see e.g. Toohey 2010). Yet 'winning', Treagus and colleagues (2011) note, may actually be antithetical to sports integrity as it can undermine sportsmanship and respect for the game. Within sports, the relation between integrity on the one hand, and winning and competitiveness, on the other, is hence ambiguous but essential to sport and therefore fundamentally subject of discussion.

The construction of integrity from a sensemaking approach

Given that there is a dearth of studies on the process of social construction of the meaning of integrity, organization studies provide a promising starting point for better understanding how meanings of integrity come about. Most of these studies draw on symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934), which holds the assumption that individuals within organizations are constantly involved in meaning-making. It argues that ‘symbolic constructions (cognitions, expressions, norms, meaning constructions) [are] depend[ent] on the interest of the individual [or individuals] in them’ (Munch 1986, 49). While this meaning-making process sometimes leads to shared meanings and interpretations, organization members who find themselves in ambiguous or ill-defined situations, such as when moral norms and values are debated and at stake, ‘proactively negotiate and shape their own reality’ (Treviño, Lengel, and Daft 1987, 556).

To understand these processes of meaning-making, the seminal work by Weick (1995) about sensemaking in organizations is especially helpful. Weick (1995, xi) describes sensemaking as ‘[a] developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than as a body of knowledge. This means that the topic exists in the form of an ongoing conversation.’ Weick (1995) assumes that sensemaking is based on the ordering of ideas, experiences, and knowledge of those involved in the organization. He refers not just to individual ideas, experiences and knowledge but to more or less common values and norms constructed and agreed upon at organizational levels. This process of shared organizational sensemaking is a selection of many different ways of sensemaking, based on interaction within a specific (organizational) context. Rather than based on accuracy, is sensemaking based on making a situation plausible, even in retrospective. This process, Weick (1979) calls it ‘enactment’, is an active process of sensemaking, realized in interaction by those involved in the event. Weick (1979) assumes that organizations are continuously under construction by those involved in the organizational process and he thus concludes that there is no true knowledge of organizations. In the same line of reasoning, Weick (1995) supposes that social context of an event cannot be seen as an objective fact, but rather as part of the social (re-)construction of the event.

Weick’s concept of sensemaking has been applied to study organizational practices in different sports domains, although not to a great extent (e.g. Claringbould and Knoppers 2008; Djaballah, Hautbois, and Desbordes 2015; Verweel 2006). Yet, Weick’s approach of sensemaking is very useful to study the sport domain, specifically for understanding organizational processes at the social-psychological level and their consequences at the organizational level. We therefore use this approach of sensemaking in organisations as an analytic lens to reflect on the social construction of integrity in the Dutch youth football case. And we expect it provides a better understanding of ambivalent ways in which meanings of integrity are constructed and that it recognizes the social impact of meanings at an organizational level.

Methods

This study was funded by [anonymized for review]. It used an exploratory, qualitative, multi-method case study design. By means of purposive sampling, one case was selected from a longer list of ‘incidents’ in Dutch amateur football in which there had been discussion in the (social) media about the integrity of stakeholders involved without there being a clear and proven integrity violation. Such ‘gray area’ cases in which integrity is discussed and contested are particularly useful to analyse the social construction of integrity. We selected

a case that involved the final game of a juniors' football competition in May 2016 between Eendracht '30 (further Eendracht) and ST Avios-DBV (further Avios). The 23-0 score led to a third club, Diosa-Niftrik (further Diosa), losing the championship because of goal difference, even though the club had already celebrated it the week before after winning against Avios. News media quickly suggested that there had been a 'deal' between Eendracht and Avios, as a revenge for alleged partiality by Diosa's referees in several matches. However, this deal has never been proven and based on the interviews we held with players, it seems rather a spontaneous action between Eendracht and Avios in response to an accumulation of alleged unsportsmanlike behaviour by Diosa during the competition. But, given the hassle that arose about this case, it is also possible that players wanted to make their actions appear less deliberately afterwards. Even though match-fixing was not proved, Avios was reprimanded by the Royal Dutch Football Association for lack of sportsmanship and given a fine of 2500 euro. In addition, all results of Avios in the season were retrospectively cancelled, leading to Diosa becoming the champion after all. Whereas this case may be considered an extreme case (Patton 1990) – given (1) the unexpected broad media coverage in both local and national media (which is very uncommon for a youth amateur game) and (2) the seriousness of the event, both in terms of behaviour and consequences for several actors – we also consider it a critical case for our purpose that can provide rich data (Patton 1990) about how integrity is socially constructed. We have at least three reasons for this decision. First, both of the abovementioned fair play norms (i.e. 'play to win' and 'equal opportunity to perform') are under pressure in this case. Second, many stakeholders are involved, which enables to analyse the complexity of various (partly overlapping) sense-making processes over a longer period of time. Third, it is our expectation that in an extreme case, where stakes are high and conflict between actors is intense, there will be more explicit discussion and reflection about integrity, resulting in more accessible data for the research.

Data collection in this study was done between September 2016 and June 2017 in a twofold way, which allows for triangulation of the findings: (1) documentary analysis and (2) semi-structured interviews. First, to prepare for the interviews a thorough documentary analysis was conducted, which included a content analysis of local, regional and national media coverage about the case, and of websites of the football clubs involved. These data were collected as a means to identify the central stakeholders, to reconstruct the global time line of the incident, to gain information about how several stakeholders responded to the events and to prepare the interview guide. We also conducted a content analysis of the documents, pictures and footage provided by interviewees. Second, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders, who were selected by means of snowball sampling (Bryman 2016). Of those who were interviewed, 11 were directly involved in the case, either as a football player, parent of players, trainer, referee, manager or supporter. These interviews focused on what happened and who was involved in the 'incident', how the stakeholders interpreted the event and especially their moral meaning, to what extent it was discussed by involved stakeholders (or not) and how, and how it was responded to or should have been responded to according to the interviewees by sports organizations and governing bodies. The data from these interviews were thus central to answer our research questions. The other six interviewees were members of governing bodies, such as the Royal Dutch Football Association and the Dutch Olympic Committee* Dutch Sports Federation, who were asked to reflect on the case from a more general and distanced perspective. These data helped to contextualize and better understand the findings of the case study. All

interviews were transcribed verbatim. To avoid social desirability bias, and thereby increasing the validity of the study, interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality, and personal details about the interviewees were omitted if they could result in them being identified.

Data analysis of the interviews was done by means of Nvivo and MAXQDA software using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) with regular iteration between data and theory. First, two interviews with key stakeholders were inductively coded by two members of the research team, on the basis of which a preliminary coding tree was developed and thereafter discussed with the entire team. After being applied to the other interviews, the coding tree was re-evaluated and adapted to better fit the data. By means of axial coding, the coding tree was further refined, and interview data were reanalysed by means of the definitive coding tree, after which central themes and topics unfolded from the data, such as framing of the problem, responsibility and response; (not) discussing the event; institutional context; paradoxes; interests. Data from the documentary analysis were used to contextualize and to better understand the findings. As part of member checking to increase validity of the study (Bryman 2016), the preliminary findings were presented to the interviewees with the explicit question to suggest changes if considered necessary.

Results

This section discusses how the social construction of integrity takes place within the context of the selected youth amateur football case, respectively focusing on both sub questions of the study. The first paragraph will show why and when the incident was perceived as an integrity issue. We will also describe which aspects of integrity were emphasized by different stakeholders. In the second paragraph we will discuss how stakeholders involved have constructed the meaning of the integrity issue, and to what extent this is the result of a process of sensemaking and interaction between various actors.

Why and when was the incident perceived as an integrity issue?

Our data show that various actors have different reasons *why* they perceived the incident as an integrity issue. In general, two main reasons were mentioned during the interviews for using this integrity frame. Although both reasons are linked to fair play, different parties had a different perspective on how the principle of fair play was violated precisely during the course of events. Some of them referred to the ‘play to win’ norm, while others stressed the ‘equal opportunity to perform’ norm. On the one hand, players and manager of Diosa considered the behaviour of Avios unsportsmanlike, because it led to Diosa not getting (what they perceive as) their deserved championship. Fair play, it was said, implies that players show that they are willing to win, so that the competition runs in an honest way. This means that players must do their utter best until the very last match of the competition, even if for them there is nothing at stake anymore.

“You just have to do your fair duty, even if it is the last match”. (manager)

On the other hand, from the perspective of Avios players, the alleged impartiality of the referee in previous matches (against Avios and other clubs) was seen as the real integrity matter in this case. They considered this (perceived) bias as unfair, even so that Diosa did not really deserve the championship in their view. Other interviewees linked to Avios (such

as the coach and parents of players) showed some understanding for the behaviour of the Avios players or downplayed it by saying the players did not mean any harm.

“The response should not have been so severe if you ask me. It was not that bad. In fact, it was more like a joke that got out of hand.” (parent of Avios players from another team)

Hence, not only are both key elements of fair play – being the ‘play to win’ and the ‘equality of opportunity to perform’ norms (Loland 2002; Loland and McNamee 2000) – referred to by our interviewees, they even divided the parties involved in two different groups with opposing views on why integrity was harmed in this case.

The data further show the crucial role that context plays in why the incident was perceived as an integrity issue. Several interviewees referred to the importance of the outcome of this particular match. The ethical concerns arose because the stakes were high. It was not only about winning or losing this one match, but more importantly about the championship. Additionally, it seems as if the term ‘integrity’ is taken up quickly here precisely *because* of the high interests for the club. Interviewees considered the violation of sportsmanship or fair play in itself as not so problematic. Their judgement on these matters depended mainly on the (possible) consequences of these violations for their own position in relation to winning the match or their rank in the competition.

“And when you play such a game, you just expect good competition. Look, when nothing can be achieved anymore or there are no stakes at all, it doesn’t really matter, but then no such deals will be made of course. But if there is still something at stake, how small it may be, then I think you should play the game fairly, and not come up with things like [...] offering players something, which unfortunately still happens nowadays.” (coach)

Whereas the ‘play to win’ norm seemed to be important for these interviewees, their response to the issue was mainly based on moral indignation about the consequences of the issue for their own position, which shows a rather opportunistic view on integrity. We even suspect that if the integrity issue would have had no detrimental consequences for the club, the issue was probably downplayed by the club’s management, as shown in the following quotation from an Avios player about a talk he and another player had with the management board:

“They [referring to the management board] said it would have been better if we had lost with 19-0. Then we would have made a statement, but they [Diosa] would still have become champion, and then there would have been no problem at all [according to the board]. Then they [Diosa] would not have contacted the media, the KNVB would perhaps have thought ‘hm that’s fascinating’, but would not have acted upon that. But now the KNVB was obliged to do something because of the negative media attention.” (Avios player)

Context is also crucial to understand *when* the incident became an integrity issue. The data show that integrity issues are not isolated in time and space, but have their own history and should thus be analysed as part of this broader, historical context. Particularly, the sequence of past events (see also: Strauss 1982) is important to understand that interviewees from Avios already began seeing the incident as an integrity issue (particularly in terms of violation of the ‘equality of opportunity to perform’ norm) one week before their notorious 23-0 game. The alleged partisanship of the Diosa referee during the deciding game between Diosa and Avios had – according to Avios players – determined the course of events during the final Avios-Eendracht match. Moreover, this referee had previously also been accused of being a so-called ‘home whistler’ (or partisan referee). Partisanship of referees is a

widespread phenomenon within amateur football in the Netherlands and is, according to interviewees, caused by the current system whereby the home playing club has to provide a referee. This system encourages partisan whistling and is seen as a serious problem in Dutch amateur football.

“This [partiality] is inherent in the fact that [...] the club playing at home arranges the referee. I come from volleyball and there you never had that problem, there always was a referee from a third club, then you had only two linesmen who were from your own club.” (coach)

In fact, a certain degree of bias is assumed from referees and certainly from linesmen. For example, it seems legitimate that a referee decides in favour of his own team when in doubt, as long as it is not too obvious. It is even expected from his own club that a linesman should not flag ‘too honestly’.

“Be honest and do not only make decisions in favour of your own team. When in doubt, ok [then you decide] in favour of the home team. In my opinion that is no problem at all.” (board member)

Within this broader historical (and moral) context, Avios players thus presented their behaviour as an appropriate (or at least understandable) response to the perceived impartiality of the referee of Diosa in former matches, such as the one they had played against Diosa a week before the incident.

“Well Diosa and Eendracht and we all still had opportunities to become champion. We played against Diosa the week before, and for us their referee was so partial. From the first minute, we did not have a fair shot to win the match, and that of course felt very bad. And eh, at Diosa the party cars and the flowers were already there, ready to celebrate their championship, while there was still a match that had to be played [...]. Other clubs had also told us beforehand that ‘you can never win at that club’.” (Avios player)

To conclude, different reasons (linked to different interpretations of fair play) were emphasized by involved stakeholders when discussing this case, which must be understood within the historical context of the course of events. The next section analyses *how* these various perspectives were constructed by means of interaction and sensemaking between the stakeholders.

How was the meaning of (the) integrity (issue) socially constructed?

While the previous paragraph focused on *why* and *when* the case became an integrity issue, this part will describe *how* involved stakeholders socially constructed the meaning of the issue at hand. We will first explain what happened in the built-up to and during the 23-0 game between players, team leaders and board members of the football clubs involved (4.2.1) – emphasizing the sensemaking of the context – and then what happened after the game, focusing not only on the football clubs themselves, but also on the role of the media and the KNVB (4.2.2) – emphasizing the role of the broader institutional context (Strauss 1982).

The role of (non-)verbal interactions in sensemaking before and during the game

Our data show that the meaning various stakeholders attached to the events was not developed in isolation, but the result of a social process within a specific context. In this process,

there was no open discussion about integrity, but rather a sequence of mainly non-verbal interactions before and during the game in which those involved influenced each other's interpretation and response to the events. The interpretation of the events by players of both teams were particularly influenced by social interaction with each other and the other team. First, Avios players were demotivated as a result of the alleged partiality of a Diosa referee and the audacity of Diosa players to celebrate their championship a week before the final game. This resulted in a negative atmosphere and feelings of resentment amongst the team members. Interviewees explained that these negative emotions were, however, not discussed in the week between this game and the 23-0 game. Rather, these feelings (so they said) slumbered during that week and resulted in a constantly decreasing motivation within the team to do their best for the final game.

"I must say that it is difficult to explain that no one openly spoke about it to the others, not even within their own team, you know. That is the weird thing in all this. [...] Well, it was not at all discussed [before the game], that is the strange thing, while everyone thinks that we consciously planned to lose that game beforehand. We did not plan anything, but that was what the media said." (Avios team leader)

The already hostile attitude towards Diosa and lack of interest to play the game became even stronger when Avios observed that a number of Diosa players had come to make video footage of the game in an attempt to ensure that there would be no unfair play. An Avios player explained in an interview that he perceived this action as 'the last straw that broke the camel's back'.

"And then, at the beginning of the game, those guys of Diosa came to the playing field and they started filming the game. And then something crept into the team. We thought: 'What is all this? What are they doing here?' The week before they had screwed us with their partial referee, and now they were checking if we would do our sportsman's duty, or something like that!?" (Avios player)

"And I am still convinced that them filming us, led to 'bad blood'. No one said anything about it, but everybody saw it." (Avios team leader)

Although we did take into the account the possibility of socially desirable responses by the interviewees from Avios, both interviewers were convinced of their sincerity, because of the sense of guilt that they expressed about their behaviour and their emotional response during the interviews. Diosa players, who were aware that their championship depended on Avios just doing their best (and thereby not lose with too many goals), attended the game to fortify the importance of the 'play to win' norm. However, right before the game started, Diosa players observed how the captains of Eendracht and Avios were talking with each other, both of them laughing. Diosa players interpreted this as a confirmation of their fear that a secret agreement had been made about the result of the game, which was a false interpretation according to an Avios player whom we interviewed. However, no explicit allegations were uttered by Diosa players before the game.

During the game, some attempts were made to openly discuss what was going on, through explicit, verbal utterances. This was particularly done by a board member of Diosa who only went to the match after having been alarmed by his players during the game that Avios was not performing as expected, and thus seemed to violate the 'play to win' norm. Although these attempts were meant to change the behaviour of Avios players, they had the reverse effect and resulted in a downward spiral of negative feelings of resentment among Avios players, and even worse play. In a first attempt, the Diosa board member directly addressed

an Avios player, particularly the keeper, with the request to do a better job. Under the assumption that both teams had made an agreement about the result of the game, he added that if Eendracht had not offered Avios a beer crate in exchange for losing the game, he would do so in exchange for doing their best. This proposition, however, only added fuel to the fire, as illustrated by the following quotations:

“He [board member of Diosa] arrived during the game. He was called by his players. Those guys of course saw where the game was heading to. So he was called, and he came to tell us that we had to do our sportsman’s duty, but we were filled with anger and then he dared to say that he would give us a beer crate if we would do our sportsman’s duty. Yeah he also feared the worst, even though it was not lost for them [Diosa] yet.” (Avios player)

“In those moments such things are said [like offering a beer crate], but I mostly don’t pay attention to them. But in this case it added fuel to the fire. It had the reverse effect.” (Avios team leader)

In a second attempt, the Diosa board member addressed the team leader and board members of Avios to take their responsibility and stimulate their players to do their best. This was in part effective, because the team leader of Avios did have a serious conversation with his players during the break. However, the team leader was not able to get through to them either. Their built-up resentment, which increased during the game by Diosa players making video footage, had a greater impact on their behaviour than the verbal utterances by others. In other words, the sensemaking process seemed to be more covert than overt (Strauss 1978), and more implicit than explicit (Farberman 1979). Concluding, this case shows the difficulty in practice to openly discuss moral boundaries and the violation of moral norms, and the importance of implicit, non-verbal behaviour in how involved actors give meaning to and respond to an integrity issue.

Framing of the events after the game

After the game there was still no open discussion and reflection about integrity, although players of Diosa and Avios did reach out to one another. They drank beer together immediately after the match and Avios players apologized for their behaviour, after which Diosa players laughingly said that they had already had their championship party anyway. However, at the level of the managerial board of both clubs the resentment remained. A distance was created – shown for example by Diosa refusing to accept the invitation to a football tournament organized by Avios – and still existed at the time of the interviews. The resentment and distance between both clubs, which discouraged open discussion and reflection about integrity, can at least partly be explained by the one-sided framing of the incident by the media. From the start, the media framed the case as a ‘deal’ between two football clubs, based on a disputable statement by a board member of Eendracht. The first article by the local newspaper ‘De Gelderlander’ set the tone for this one-sided framing in which the broader context of allegations about partisan refereeing was ignored. Of the 58 media articles that were written about this case, just one explicitly discussed the context in which such incidents commonly happen in amateur football, but only after the KNVB had announced to investigate this particular case.

“The KNVB has stated to investigate the monster score. They should, but thereby possible partisan referees and linesmen remain out of range for now, as is often the case. For the KNVB it is very difficult to prove or prevent such forms of cheating. The problem can only be solved if everyone only wants to win honestly, and when partisan referees are addressed by their own club or team. That seems a utopia. Like Acda and De Munnik already sang in ‘Groen als Gras’ [‘Green

as grass’], the song that is part of the series All Stars: ‘The referee was pathetic as usual, but it was always someone’s dad, so you kept quiet.’ (Stet 2016)

Several interviewees explained that *how* the story was told in the media impacted their interpretation of and response to the events. Whereas some Diosa players were afraid *before* the game that Avios could have made a secret deal with Eendracht, they were sure about such a deal *after* having read the article. Also other interviewees explained that the article was for them enough proof of the existence of a deal, even though Eendracht stated several times that they had not made a deal with Avios. Also Avios denied it, and moreover, decided to install a media-stop because they did not trust the media anymore, by which they in fact lost their chance to try to correct the framing. In other words, by stepping out of the public arena, the club weakened its position in the process of sensemaking about the incident (Strauss 1982).

Several interviewees further claimed that even the KNVB was influenced by the media in two ways. First, some interviewees stated that the interrogations by the KNVB during the hearing seemed biased, as shown in the following conversation between interviewer (I), player of Avios (R1) and coach of Avios (R2):

“R1: Because our coach received a question [during the hearing], a question and he wanted to explain it, but he was constantly interrupted. And then the question was asked again, and he said that he wanted to explain it, but then the man of the KNVB got a bit mad.

I: And what was it that he wanted to explain, but did not get the chance?

R1: Well, why we did it.

R2: What they [KNVB representatives during the hearing] wanted to hear was that they [players of Avios and Eendracht] planned it beforehand. That’s what they [KNVB representatives during the hearing] wanted to hear, and when I tried to explain that it did not happen like that, I did not get the chance.”

Second, also the decision to start an investigation was, according to most interviewees, linked to the media storm. They stated that the KNVB would not have known about the incident if there would have been no media attention (which seems plausible given that it was a youth football match), but also that *because of* the media attention the KNVB was in fact forced to respond. However, like the football clubs involved, the KNVB treated the event as a rare incident, and did not consider it an opportunity to start an open discussion about integrity, or to reflect upon the broader context of such incidents that are often linked to allegations of partisan refereeing in Dutch amateur football.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we examined how the social construction of integrity takes place within the context of football in the Netherlands. To do so, we analysed why and when an ‘incident’ becomes an ‘integrity issue’ and how stakeholders make sense and interact amongst themselves to construct the meaning of the integrity issue. Our findings provide valuable insights into why, when and how moral norms and values are (not) debated and at stake, as well as how the social construction of sports integrity is intertwined with the institutional context and the role of secondary stakeholders. These findings also imply practical implications for various actors in sports.

When?

A first contribution of our study is that it underscores the importance of historical context and historically grown interrelations between actors in the social construction of integrity. The data show that in the present case, what stakeholders considered to be an integrity issue, or the most important integrity issue at stake, depended directly on how they perceived and experienced events that occurred during previous matches, especially in relation to the alleged bias of the Dioso referee and Dioso's early celebration of their expected win. In other words, the social construction of integrity does not merely take place in relation to a specific incident but rather develops over the course of a series of events that each hold specific moral signals and implications for the actors involved and that interact over time to influence the moral interpretations, decisions and actions of those involved at later stages. Herein, we recognize what Weick (1995) considers the ongoing conversation as part of the sensemaking process in organizations, based on ordering and re-ordering of ideas, experiences and knowledge.

As indicated by the failed attempt of the Avios trainer to intervene and motivate his team members to play to win, it may be difficult to disrupt existing constructions of integrity when such constructions are based on multiple, repeated experiences and perceptions that have occurred over greater lengths of time and have been allowed to fester. This aligns with what issue definition theory (Wood and Vedlitz 2007) and social feedback theory (Keiser 2010) suggest about how social relationships and interactions between people in a social network shape (biased) perceptions of events. Keiser (2010, 251), referring to Wood and Vedlitz (2007), explains that 'individuals' perceptions of information are shaped by their perceptions of how others in their social networks perceive [that] information'. Moreover, these authors emphasize the stability of already established perceptions and frames over time, so that single divergent informational signals (like, in our case, the attempts to motivate the players to play to win) cannot easily change them (Wood and Vedlitz 2007; Keiser 2010). This finding points towards the critical importance of early and repeated signalling, intervention, and *explicit* and *deliberate* discussion when incidents occur, especially when those involved disagree whether the behaviour violates integrity norms or even entails an integrity issue, but nevertheless raises moral questions or could be considered disputable. To this end, proactive ethical leadership at all levels in sports and sports organizations (see e.g., Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh 2011) may be of particular importance.

Why and how?

An important second contribution of the present study is that it shows that in the sensemaking process the agency of actors may not actually express itself through a deliberate, proactive, or even verbal discussion of norms and values amongst stakeholders. Instead, it rather is a process of 'enactment' (Weick 1995): an active process of sensemaking whereas those involved in the process tend to make the situation plausible for themselves, possibly in retrospective. Treviño and colleagues (1987, 556) argue that people 'negotiate and shape their own reality'. Such ways of sensemaking implies a certain agency on behalf of the actors involved and is often presumed to take place proactively (Treviño, Lengel, and Daft 1987). Instead, the construction of integrity in the case at hand was primarily reactive, non-verbal and even seemingly unintentional. Even in their post hoc discussion of the case, interviewees engaged in surprisingly little explicit reflection on the incident in terms of integrity. Taken

together, these results suggest that a specific context may not only include covert characters and covert agreements (Strauss 1978), but that the sensemaking process *itself* may in fact be more or less covert as well – to some extent even to the actors themselves, even though they do sense that something is not morally right. This covert and non-verbal nature of sensemaking of moral norms and values may be an important hurdle to improve ethical behaviour: it reinforces moral muteness (Bird and Waters 1989; Menzel 2007), thereby increasing the risk that moral values and norms are constructed and justified primarily as a response to (possibly biased) perceptions and attributions of others' behaviour and intentions. As a result, our case study illustrates how non-verbal cues and implicit processes of sensemaking may ultimately lead to lower rather than higher moral standards. It echoes what we know about the use of sensemaking strategies by citizen-clients, who – because of self-interest (Raaphorst and Loyens 2020) or cynicism (Evans 2007) – rather opportunistically 'adapt the system and make it work for them' (Evans 2007, 226).

Institutional context

The third contribution of our study is that it shows how closely intertwined the social construction of integrity is with the institutional context in which it takes place, and thus how critical it is to consider not only personal and organizational but also the inherent integrity of how to act *in play* (Gardiner, Parry, and Robinson 2017; Loland and McNamee 2000). Consistent with the strong focus on performing, winning and competition that characterizes football (Duina 2013; Renson 2009), we find that there is a predominance of consequentialist (see for instance Kaptein and Wempe 2002) and opportunistic thinking about ethics: interviewees conceived of integrity as primarily dependent on the consequences of the action for immediate stakeholders, particularly as these consequences relate to one's chances of winning a game or the competition. In other words, and consistent with Weick's (1995) notion that the strategies of the parties involved in sensemaking are key to understanding the specific context, discussions about integrity seemed to be not essentially about integrity in football. Rather, discussions of integrity seemed to be about creating attention for and defending (one's own) specific interests. It seems that the moral responsibilities involved in football and perhaps sports more in general, is easily passed on to others. For instance, Avios players used the alleged impartiality of the Diosa referee to justify and rationalize their own lack of sportsmanship and absolve themselves of accusations of unfair play or moral wrongdoing. Such findings resonate with prior research by Corrion et al. (2009), which shows that certain forms of abdication of moral responsibilities ('it's not my fault') are particularly notable in sports and that the consequences of one's own behaviour are minimized ('it's not serious'). Such mechanisms of 'moral disengagement' are often part of the process of winning (Boardley and Kavussanu 2011; Kavussanu 2012).

An interesting venue for future research would be to explore whether a consequentialist, opportunistic approach to integrity is indeed typical for sports and sports organizations. Sports is often characterized as a monoculture, wherein organizations operate in a sort of separate sphere, detached from normal rules and regulations in society (Bruyninckx 2012), and where a unique understanding of integrity exists that is different from accountable institutions of public law (Forster 2016). The question is, however, whether the opportunistic and consequentialist understandings of integrity are not in fact typical of highly competitive environments in general (cf. Cohn, Fehr, and Maréchal 2014; Feltovich 2019; Kulik, O'Fallon,

and Salimath 2008) and would thus apply to other fields such as politics and the financial sector as well.

Secondary stakeholders

A fourth and final contribution of the study that we want to highlight, is that it points to a rather critical role of secondary stakeholders within the institutional context in the social constructions of integrity. While such stakeholders, like the KNVB, club managers and the media, were not directly involved in the actions or discussions amongst actors during the incident itself, they turned out to have a vital influence on how the incident was framed and understood not only by outsiders but also by the players and team leaders themselves. The frames used by these secondary stakeholders – such as it being ‘a mere incident’, ‘an exceptional yet small and simple case’ and ‘the result of a deliberate deal being struck between Avios and Eendracht’ – only resulted in the reinforcement of negative perceptions between the clubs and inhibited learning amongst all actors involved. Moreover, the narrowing of the incident to only questioning who was primarily responsible for or guilty of the unfair behaviour and the punishment that followed, turned attention away from discussions about the broader responsibilities of other actors involved, among whom coaches, club boards and the KNVB.

As a result, even after the incident was considered an integrity issue, actors seemed to experience mental barriers to talk about integrity (see Maesschalck and Bertok 2009, 19–21) and made little attempt to turn the incident into a learning experience for sports more in general. In all, the case confirms the dominance of the ‘bad/rotten apple’ over the ‘rotten barrel’ perspective on integrity violations within organizations, emphasizing the incidental nature and individual responsibilities of the case over the cultural, structural and other contextual factors that contribute to unethical behaviour (Gonin, Palazzo, and Hoffrage 2012; Gottschalk 2012; Treviño and Youngblood 1990). Yet when we consider this case from the second perspective, that of the ‘rotten barrel’, we see that escalation of the case is at least in part attributable to insufficient attention to and discussion of prior incidents of questionable behaviour. Had players addressed their concerns regarding fair play to their trainer, leader or the board, or had the Avios board discussed the matter with Diosa, the case might have unfolded quite differently. Explicit, open and deliberate discussions of integrity issues and dilemmas can have a preventive effect on integrity violations in the future, as they may raise moral awareness and stimulate ethical behaviour (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Treviño, Brown, and Hartman 2003).

Practical implications

The sports sector and relevant stakeholders in sports are increasingly aware of the importance of integrity in and around the sports field. Yet, influencing the systemic causes of integrity violations, such as commercialization and instrumentalization, seems to be a bridge too far (Geeraert 2017). Sports federations and governments are now focusing primarily on structural measures in the form of (good) governance codes, in which organizations record how they are supposed to operate. The question is whether such codes lead to substantially different behaviour, since our case study shows that integrity is constructed ‘in the moment’ and as a result of a series of events.

This finding requires, in addition to a clear set of basic standards – for example about fair play – guidance and motivation from sports organizations to make moral awareness discussable and discussions about the moral aspects of behaviour acceptable. To this end, for example, professional training of coaches, sports managers and directors is envisaged, not only in terms of openly discussing and actively dealing with dilemmas, but also in terms of ethical leadership. Appealing and highly visible role models as leaders might help, just like quality standards, and proactive communication and meetings organized on a larger scale. At the same time, amateur sport associations (that rely heavily on volunteers in the Netherlands) will have to reflect on what is feasible.

We also recommend that sports organizations take a look beyond the boundaries of sport: they could compare the so-called unique context of sport with other contexts that are also characterized by, for example, a strong urge to compete or their dependence on volunteers. Lessons can be learned from other sectors when it comes to finding the right balance between governance structures and attention to culture and leadership, making integrity issues subject of continuous sensemaking.

Limitations of the research

A single and extreme case study obviously has limitations when it comes to generalizability. In addition, two specific aspects of our case study should be taken into account. First, the case concerned a youth competition and many of those directly involved are young adults. It is possible that the age and development phase of the players influenced the extent to which meaning was explicitly given to integrity. It cannot be excluded that more maturity of those directly involved or the involvement of role models from higher teams may lead to more explicit sensemaking about integrity: people who are further developed socially-emotionally and cognitively may feel a lower threshold for verbal interpretations, although involved adults in this case also seem to have failed to intervene sufficiently. This issue offers interesting angles for further research.

Second, the case only concerns (primarily adolescent) men. It is interesting to investigate the extent to which construction of integrity proceeds in the same or different way in women's sports or mixed sports contexts. For the time being it is unclear to what extent and how sensemaking of integrity takes place in all-female contexts and mixed male-female contexts. We also consider this as an interesting topic for further research.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, our case selection was based on the expectation that in a case where stakes are high and conflict between actors is intense, there would be more explicit sensemaking through interaction, discussion, and reflection about integrity, resulting in a valuable contribution to the current practice of, and future research into, the negotiation of integrity in sports. The case indeed shows that integrity is constantly under construction, which requires in-depth studies of how that process takes place exactly. Studies like this provide a better understanding of how and why integrity issues arise and where and when interventions seem useful. It becomes clear in this case, by looking at the issue of integrity in a historical and institutional context, that those involved missed several opportunities to prevent integrity violations. Moreover, the study shows how *not* intervening can *increase*

integrity risks. When we take the scandals of today's sport sector into account, but also the various integrity violations in other sectors, organizations should be keen to take up the integrity challenge earlier and more effectively, learn from so-called 'incidents' and put integrity on the agenda more explicitly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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