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The Role of Emotional Regulation in Refereeing Performance: The Case of Basketball

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Authors' Contribution: A – Study design; B – Data collection; C – Statistical analysis; D – Manuscript Preparation; E – Funds Collection

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Abstract

Background. Emotion regulation refers to how individuals manage the experience and expression of their emotions. It is an integral part of sports training, allowing the maximum potential to be realised.

Objectives. This study aimed to examine the relationship between basketball referees' emotion regulation skills and their refereeing performances, along with certain demographic variables.

Materials and Methods. The study focused on a comprehensive analysis using a relational screening model. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, resulting in a sample of 59 Class-B referees. Class B referees are elite referees. These referees officiate matches in the Women's Super League and Men's 1st League. Among these, females accounted for 10.2 % (n = 6), while males comprised 89.8 % (n = 53) of the sample. The participants had a mean age of 31 and an average refereeing experience of 12 years. During the 2022-2023 season, the referees officiated in a range of 12 to 43 matches, with an average of 26 matches per official. Data was collected using a personal information form and the Referee Emotion Regulation Scale (RERS) developed by Karaçam et al. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 25. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the relationships between variables, with a significance level set at $p < .05$.

Results. The findings showed significant positive correlations between referee performance and total emotional regulation score ($r = .63$, $p < .01$), cognitive reappraisal ($r = .67$, $p < .01$), and suppression ($r = .35$, $p < .01$).

Conclusions. The results of this study emphasize the importance of emotional regulation, refereeing experience, and match exposure in enhancing performance. These findings highlight the critical role of emotional regulation and experience in optimizing performance of basketball referees, and support the inclusion of psychological skills training, particularly emotional competence development, in referee education programs.

Keywords: emotion, basketball, referee, performance, sport officials.

Introduction

Referees are indispensable actors in competitive sports, ensuring that games proceed fairly, smoothly, and within the framework of established rules. Their decisions not only determine the outcome of specific plays but also shape the overall flow and integrity of the game (Karaçam & Pulur, 2017; Tuero et al., 2002). In basketball, a fast-paced, high-stakes sport, referees must rapidly evaluate changing situations, make instantaneous judgments, and clearly communicate their decisions to players, coaches, and spectators (Ekmekçi, 2008; Weinberg & Richardson, 1990). These multifaceted responsibilities demand exceptional cognitive and emotional resources, far beyond technical knowledge of the rules (Blynova et al., 2020; Guillén & Feltz, 2011; Popovych et al., 2021, 2022).

The profession is inherently stressful. Referees operate under constant scrutiny, with every decision examined by athletes, coaches, fans, the media, and even governing bodies (Barr & Hums, 2012). Unlike many other roles in

sport, referees often have no opportunity to correct or revise their decisions once made, which magnifies the psychological pressure. The advent of real-time broadcasting and social media amplifies this scrutiny, exposing referees to immediate and sometimes harsh criticism. Consequently, referees are vulnerable to heightened stress, anxiety, and fear of error, which, if persistent, may lead to decision-making fatigue, reduced performance, and even burnout (Blynova et al., 2020; Chelladurai, 2014; Ekmekçi, 2017).

To cope with such demands, referees often rely on psychological strategies to sustain concentration and impartiality. Research highlights that top-level referees adopt mental skills training techniques such as visualization, controlled breathing, meditation, and cognitive reframing to maintain composure and focus (Chelladurai, 2014). These practices underscore the central role of emotion regulation, which is the ability to influence when, how, and to what extent emotions are experienced and expressed (Gross, 2001). Emotion regulation, as described by Gross et. al. (1998), involves strategies such as situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation. Proficient use of these strategies has been associated with improved mental health, resilience, and occupational performance across various contexts (Berking & Whitley, 2014; Karaçam et al., 2023; Romo-Perez et al., 2023).

While the relationship between emotion regulation and performance has been extensively studied in athletes, relatively little attention has been given to referees. However, referees, similar to athletes, perform under intense pressure, and their emotional states can directly influence their judgment, impartiality, and consistency (Barr & Hums, 2012; Chelladurai, 2014; Ekmekçi, 2017). In basketball, where referees must make split-second decisions in a dynamic environment, the ability to regulate emotions may be particularly critical. A referee who succumbs to crowd pressure or becomes emotionally reactive to players' confrontations risks compromising decision accuracy. Conversely, referees with strong emotion regulation skills are better positioned to maintain fairness and objectivity despite external stressors (Gross et al., 1998; Karaçam et al., 2023; Romo-Perez et al., 2023).

Given these considerations, the present study addresses a significant gap in the literature by investigating the relationship between basketball referees' emotional regulation skills and their performance. In addition, the study examines whether demographic variables such as age, refereeing experience, and number of matches officiated play a role in shaping referees' ability to manage emotions. Understanding these dynamics has the potential to inform referee selection, training, and psychological support programs, thereby enhancing both individual well-being and the overall quality of officiating.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature and the objectives of the present study, it was hypothesized that basketball referees' emotional regulation skills would be positively associated with their refereeing performance. Specifically, referees who demonstrate higher levels of cognitive reappraisal and suppression were expected to achieve better performance outcomes. In addition, it was anticipated that emotional regulation skills would increase with referees' age, years of officiating experience, and the number of matches they managed. Finally, it was hypothesized that emotional regulation would serve as a significant predictor of refereeing performance.

Materials and Methods

The study focused on an in-depth analysis of the relational screening model. The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling method. In this non-probabilistic sampling technique, subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Etikan et al., 2016).

Study Participants

In a post-season assessment, performance scoring is exclusively administered to Class-A and Class-B referees. The Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) particularly acknowledges the annual performance scores of Class-B referees. Class B referees, considered elite-level officials, officiate matches in the Women's Super League and Men's 1st League in Türkiye. Utilizing an accessible sampling methodology, the research sample for this subset was meticulously assembled. The sample incorporated a total of 59 Class-B referees. In this cohort, females represented 10.2% (n=6), whereas males constituted 89.8% (n=53) (Table 1). The participants exhibited a mean age of 31,03 and an average refereeing tenure of 12,83 years. During the 2022-2023 season, the span of matches overseen by these referees oscillated between a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 42, averaging 26 matches per official (Table 2). Data assimilation, facilitated through scales, was undertaken in person after the conclusion of the regular season in a competition-free interval. Before starting the research, the present study received approval from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Istanbul Aydın University, Social and Human Sciences (Approval code: 2023/11).

Table1. Gender Distribution of Participants

Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	6	10.2	10.2
Male	53	89.8	89.8
Total	59	100.0	100.0

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Referee Performance, Age, Number of Matches, and Refereeing Experience

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Performance	59	62.00	84.00	73.34	4.94
Age	59	22.00	48.00	31.03	5.62
The Number of Matches	59	12.00	42.00	26.05	5.95
Refereeing Experience	59	5.00	25.00	12.83	5.71

Data Collection Tool

Referee Emotion Regulation Scale (RERS)

In the study by Karaçam et al. (2021), the Referee Emotion Regulation Scale (RERS) was used to assess the participants' emotion regulation levels. This instrument is

grounded on a seven-point Likert scale comprising eight items. The scale has been designed to delve into two primary facets of emotion regulation: Cognitive Reappraisal and Suppression, represented through distinct items within the scale.

A deeper examination reveals that the items corresponding to the Cognitive Reappraisal subdimension are numbered 3, 5, 6, and 8, while those related to the Suppression subdimension are 1, 2, 4, and 7. Due to their theoretical underpinnings, each dimension should be analyzed independently. Consequently, the evaluative range for each dimension oscillates between a minimum score of 4 and a maximum achievable score of 28.

Karaçam et al. (2021) substantiated the RERS's efficacy and reliability through various statistical analyses. The variance elucidated by the RERS amounted to 64.14%, underscoring its potent explanatory power. Moreover, the eigenvalues surpassing one in the component analysis attested to a bifurcated structural emergence, thus reinforcing the scale's two-sub-dimension conceptualization.

Internal consistency, a pivotal metric in scale reliability, exhibited robust alpha coefficients: 0.83 for the Cognitive Reappraisal dimension and 0.76 for the Suppression dimension. Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was calculated to be 0.76, indicating a satisfactory level for conducting a factor analysis.

In addition to the reliability indices, the confirmatory factor analysis delineated promising results, underlining the scale's construct validity. The values were represented as χ^2/sd = 1.603, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.96, GFI = 0.93, RMR = 0.10, NFI = 0.90, and IFI = 0.96. These outcomes collectively attest to the goodness of fit of the scale's structure, suggesting an acceptable to excellent fit to the data.

Referees' Performance Scores (RPS)

Performance scoring is conducted exclusively for Class A and Class B referees after each season. However, the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) authorizes the use of year-end performance scores only for Class-B referees. In this study, referee performance scores refer to the average scores calculated by the CAC at the end of the 2022–2023 season. These scores are classified as follows: 90–100 points indicate excellent performance, 80–89 points indicate above-average performance, 70–79 points indicate average performance, 60–69 points indicate below-average performance, and scores of 59 or lower are considered unacceptable. All performance data used in this study were obtained with the official permission of the CAC.

Assessing the performance of referees presents considerable complexity and challenges. Evaluation of referee performance should be carried out by experts in the field (Spencer, 2015). Since the 2016–2017 season, the Turkish Basketball Federation (TBF) has established a referee rater group comprising 20 individuals to evaluate Class-B referees. These raters are selected by the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) from among experienced referees. The evaluation criteria to be used by the rater group are introduced during pre-season training sessions. They are based on a standardized referee evaluation form to assess core competencies. This form includes various sections: competition difficulty level, referee preparation, physical condition, mechanics and teamwork, foul and violation assessments, consistency in rule enforcement throughout the game, game control, disciplinary practices, and overall performance. Additional sections are dedicated to personal evaluations and video-based observations. A referee rater was assigned for all matches played during the 2022–2023 season. These raters observed the games live and were required to complete the evaluation form within 24 hours, assigning a score out of 100 points.

At the end of the season, the rankings of the referees are announced by considering the averages of the scores given to each referee. The year-end mean scores for each Class-B were used in the study.

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25. Before the main analyses, the dataset was examined for potential errors, outliers, normality assumptions, and multicollinearity. In addition to descriptive statistics, distributions were examined for normality using kurtosis and skewness tests. Since the skewness and kurtosis coefficients were between -1.5 and +1.5, the distribution was determined to be normal (Tabachenik & Fidel, 2012). Parametric tests were used because the assumptions of normal distribution were met. Subsequently, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient and Simple Linear Regression analysis were applied to evaluate the relationships between variables. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Table 3. The Relationship Between Basketball RPS and Emotion Regulation

Indicators	Emotional Regulation Total	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression
RPS	.63**	.67**	.35**

**p < .01, *p < .05

Table 3 shows that a positive and significant relationship was found between basketball RPS and emotion regulation total score (r =.63, p = 0.00), cognitive reappraisal (r =.67, p = 0.00) and suppression(r =.35, p = 0.00). As referees enhance their emotion regulation skills, their performance improves.

Table 4. Correlation Between RPS and Age, Number of Matches Managed and Refereeing Experience

Indicators	Age	The Number of Matches	Refereeing Experience
RPS	.65**	.78**	.77**

**p < .01, *p < .05

Table 4 shows a positive and significant relationship between the RPS and their age(r =.65, p = 0.00), the number of matches (r =.78, p = 0.00) and experience (r =.77, p = 0.00).

Table 5 shows a positive and significant relationship between basketball referees' emotion regulation total score (r =.40, p = 0.00), cognitive reappraisal (r =.41, p = 0.00), and suppression (r =.24, p = 0.00) scores and their age. This

Table 5. The Relationship Between Age and Emotion Regulation

Indicators	Emotional Regulation Total	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression
Age	.40**	.41**	.24**

**p <.01, *p <.05

situation can be interpreted as the emotional regulation skills of the referees increasing as they age.

Table 6. Relationship Between Refereeing Experience and Emotion Regulation

Indicators	Emotional Regulation Total	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression
Refereeing Experience	.59**	.56**	.39**

**p <.01, *p <.05

Table 6 shows a positive and significant correlation between basketball referees' total emotion regulation score (r =.59, p = 0.00), cognitive reappraisal (r =.56, p = 0.00), and suppression (r =.39, p = 0.00) scores and their years of refereeing. This suggests that referees' emotional regulation skills improve as their years of officiating increase.

Table 7. Relationship Between The Number of Matches Refereed and Emotion Regulation

	Emotional Regulation Total	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression
The Number of Matches	.64**	.59**	.45**

**p <.01, *p <.05

Table 7 shows a positive and significant relationship between basketball referees' emotion regulation total score (r =.64, p = 0.00), cognitive reappraisal (r =.59, p = 0.00), and suppression (r =.45, p = 0.00) scores and the number of games managed. This situation can be interpreted as the referees' emotional regulation skills increasing as the number of matches increases.

Table 8. Regression Analysis Regarding the Prediction of Referee Performance by Emotion Regulation

Variable	B	Std. Error B	β	t	p
Constant	55.497	2.941		18.872	.00*
Emotional Regulation Total	.430	.070	.632	6.159	.00*

R = .632; R2 = .400 Adj. R2 = .389 F = 37.929, p = .00

*p <.05

According to the regression analysis results presented in Table 8, emotional regulation significantly predicts referee performance (R = .632, R^2 = .400, Adj. R^2 = .389, F(37.929, p = 0.00). The model explains approximately 40% of the variance in referee performance. The standardised regression coefficient (β = .632) indicates that higher emotional regulation scores strongly and positively predict referee performance (t = 6.159, p = 0.00).

Discussion

This study demonstrated a positive relationship between basketball referees' emotional regulation skills and their performance, particularly in the dimensions of cognitive reappraisal and suppression. In addition, the regression analysis results show that emotion regulation is a significant predictor of referee performance, explaining approximately 40% of the variance in performance. This finding reveals the critical role of psychological competencies, especially emotion regulation skills, in a profession such as refereeing, which involves intense stress, pressure, and emotional burden. The strong predictive effect (β = .632) found in this study suggests that referees with higher emotional regulation abilities are better equipped to cope with stressors inherent in the game, which in turn positively affects their performance. This aligns with Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation, emphasising the role of cognitive change and response modulation in managing emotional demands (Gross, 2001; Gross et al., 1998).

Consistent with earlier findings by Spencer (2015), this study confirms that experience is a strong predictor of refereeing performance. This trend is also supported by studies highlighting the performance benefits of accumulated officiating experience (Catteeuw et al., 2009; Dosseville et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2012; Pizzera & Raab, 2012). In this respect, the study parallels other studies in the literature. Considering the results of studies in the literature, it is observed that the relationship of refereeing performance with experience, in particular, is significant. The number of matches increases as their performance increases. Karaçam & Adıgüzel (2019) reached similar results in their study. In this respect, the study parallels other studies in the literature.

The study found that emotional regulation, particularly cognitive reappraisal and suppression, increased with both age and refereeing experience. This can aid referees in providing emotionally healthier responses and effectively managing their decision-making processes. In the literature, Karaçam et al. (2022) found no significant relationship between emotional regulation levels and age and experience in a study on referees. When looking at studies outside of the referee group in the literature, results were encountered parallel (Riza, 2016) and contrary (Goodall et al., 2012; Karaçam et al., 2023; Turner, 2014) to the study. These discrepancies could be due to differences in referee groups or contextual factors.

Conclusions

This study underscores the pivotal role of emotional regulation in basketball refereeing, showing that strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and suppression are positively linked to officiating effectiveness. Referees with greater age, experience, and match exposure demonstrated stronger emotional regulation abilities, which likely enable them to remain composed and consistent when making critical decisions under pressure. These findings not only advance understanding within basketball officiating but also

contribute to the broader domain of sports psychology, where the psychological demands of refereeing have often been overlooked.

From a practical standpoint, the results highlight the importance of systematically integrating psychological skill development—particularly emotional regulation—into referee training and education programs. Workshops on cognitive reappraisal, stress management, and mindfulness techniques could help referees maintain focus during high-pressure moments, while mentorship programs pairing novice referees with experienced officials may foster adaptive coping strategies. Moreover, providing access to sport psychologists and ongoing mental health support could mitigate stress and reduce the risk of burnout, thereby enhancing both individual well-being and officiating quality.

Despite these contributions, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small and predominantly male sample limits the generalizability of the findings, while reliance on self-report instruments may introduce bias. In addition, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences regarding the relationship between emotional regulation and refereeing performance.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how referees' emotional regulation skills evolve over time and influence performance across different competitive contexts. Intervention-based research, such as randomized controlled trials that implement emotion regulation training into referee development programs, would also provide valuable evidence for its practical effectiveness. Expanding participant diversity across gender, competition level, and cultural backgrounds would further enrich the field, enabling more comprehensive and applicable insights into the psychological dimensions of refereeing.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interests declared by the authors.

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Роль емоційної регуляції у результативності суддівства: Приклад баскетболу

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Авторський вклад: A – дизайн дослідження; B – збір даних; C – статаналіз; D – підготовка рукопису; E – збір коштів

Реферат. Стаття: 7 с., 8 табл., 28 джерел.

Історія питання. Емоційна регуляція означає те, як індивіди керують переживаннями та вираженням своїх емоцій. Вона є невід'ємною частиною спортивної підготовки, що дозволяє максимально розкрити свій потенціал.

Мета дослідження. Мета цього дослідження полягала у вивченні взаємозв'язку між навичками регулювання емоцій баскетбольних суддів та їхніми показниками суддівської діяльності, а також певними демографічними змінними.

Матеріали та методи. Дослідження зосереджено на комплексному аналізі із використанням реляційної моделі скринінгу. Учасників було відібрано за допомогою методу цільової вибірки, що дозволило отримати вибірку з 59 арбітрів класу B. Арбітри класу B належать до елітних арбітрів. Ці арбітри судять матчі жіночої Суперліги та чоловічої 1-ї ліги. Серед них жінки складали 10.2% (n=6), а чоловіки — 89.8% (n=53) вибірки. Середній вік учасників становив 31 рік, а середній стаж роботи арбітром — 12 років. Протягом сезону 2022-2023 років судді обслуговували від 12 до 43 матчів, в середньому 26 матчів на одного суддю. Збір даних здійснювався за допомогою анкети з особистими даними та шкали емоційної регуляції суддів (RERS), розробленої Карачамом та ін. Аналіз даних проведено із використанням програмного забезпечення SPSS 25. Для вивчення взаємозв'язків між змінними застосовано коефіцієнт кореляції моменту добутку Пірсона, рівень значущості встановлено на рівні $p < .05$.

Результати. Результати показали значні позитивні кореляції між результативністю суддівства та загальним показником емоційної регуляції ($r = .63$, $p < .01$), когнітивною переоцінкою ($r = .67$, $p < .01$) та подавленням емоцій ($r = .35$, $p < .01$).

Висновки. Результати цього дослідження підкреслюють важливість емоційної регуляції, досвіду суддівства та впливу гри у підвищенні результативності. Отримані дані наголошують на вирішальній ролі емоційної регуляції та досвіду в оптимізації результативності баскетбольних суддів й підтверджують доцільність включення тренувань психологічних навичок, зокрема розвитку емоційної компетентності, до освітніх програм з підготовки суддів.

Ключові слова: емоція, баскетбол, арбітр, результативність, спортивні судді.

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