

Situational Decision Making in the Field of Sports: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Decision Making is a core facet of our lives. When the situation necessitates to swiftly adapt to varied, dynamic, and often unpredictable circumstances, situational decision making is germane. Sports provides one of the prime areas to comprehend decision making processes. To win, a sportsperson has to assess the competitor's move, detect crucial signals and implement the correct response within a matter of seconds, and, recognizing the intentions and decisiveness of the competitor, assessing one's own against the opponent's resources and talents, are all critical components of sound situational decision-making. This narrative review aims to delineate insights on situational decision making, specifically highlighting its importance in the field of sports, where decisions are made under uncertain conditions with time constraints.

Keywords: *Situational decision making, decision making, sports, contingency decision making.*

Introduction

“If a decision-making process is flawed and dysfunctional, decisions will go awry.” - Carly Fiorina

Making decisions is an essential element of our daily lives. Decision making refers to the act of recognizing and assessing alternatives contingent upon the decision maker's beliefs and priorities (Kaya, 2014) and involves utilization of knowledge supplied by an individual's present state coupled with one's capacity in using their understanding of the situation to plan, choose, and implement an acceptable goal-directed action or series of activities (Silva, Conte & Clemente, 2020). Sports is one of the finest areas to examine human decision-making processes as decisions in these sectors are highly complex (Dominic, 2021). Sports literacy is just 5.56 percent in the Indian population i.e. merely 57 lakh people out of more than 125-crore population are either engaged in sports, directly or indirectly, or have extensive knowledge of sports, compared to China or US with a 20 percent sports literacy rate (Reddif, 2019). Thus, the world's second most populated country set the poorest medals per head record in Olympic history (Rowlatt, 2016). On-field decisions in sports are made under immense, emotional and physical stress. The ramifications of sports people's judgments are significant. Years of planning can be overturned in mere seconds (Dominic, 2021). Before making a hasty decision, each player must examine several dynamic aspects. At the Tokyo Olympics 2020

Deepika Kumari defeated two-time Olympic silver medalist Ksenia Perova before succumbing in the semifinals to concluding winner an San of Korea. Deepika Kumari, although being ranked number one archer in the world, was unable to advance past the quarterfinals, obliquing that a mere fraction of a second can spell the difference between winning and losing in sports (Mark, 2022). To win, players must evaluate their opponent's move, recognize critical clues, and execute the appropriate reaction all in a matter of seconds, which necessitates technical and tactical expertise (Biesen et al., 2021). "To swing or not to swing" is a split-second decision with little time for rational thought (Bergland, 2020). The constraints on the human brain are enormous; superabundant alternatives, boundless uncertainties, and countless unpredictable repercussions (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). The brain must make an instinctive "go or no go" judgment, which is achieved via extensive training and practice (Bergland, 2020) as decision making is no different than any other ability; the more one practices it, the finer they get at making split-second decisions in complex situations (Rocky Top Sports World, 2016).

Under controlled conditions, when most aspects remain consistent and predictable, decision-making is rational and relatively simple. The nature of decision making alters when confronted with diverse, dynamic, and usually unexpected situations. There is no one correct decision; rather, there is a "best" decision for the situation given the information available at the time and place (Rhodes, 1988). Situational decision making is thus defined as making effectual and pragmatic decisions in response to a specific circumstance, thereby evading a one-size-fits-all approach (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development). Although there are various decision-making theories, researchers in organizational theory and public management frequently relate to rationality models, wherein an individual analyses all potential possibilities prior to picking the most advantageous path. However, this rational model is practically in-able to effectuate two assumptions and falls short of explaining observed phenomena: First, people lack comprehensive knowledge and hence fail to evaluate all available alternatives; additionally, individuals rarely can rate a list of possibilities on the very same scale to assess which would best achieve the organizational objectives. (Zhu & Rutherford, 2019). According to Herbert Simon (1993)'s strategy of satisficing, individuals are unable to make perfectly rational decisions about complex issues. They attempt to satisfy because they lack the information, aptitude, or capacity to maximize (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). In sports, because a sports person's surroundings alter in real time during game play, quicker decision making, strategy formulation, and response times are essential in performing effectively on the field. When faced with an opponent player, players must make fast and unerring decisions since they have less than a second to

determine whether to strike or withdraw, which is referred to as the decision-making capacity (Furukado et al., 2020). The finest practices in sports, therefore, entail situational decision-making drills (Wolfenbarger, 2016). Some features of elite players' situational decision-making abilities have recently been examined in studies of expertise in interceptive sports such as football and basketball. Kikumasa and Kokubu (2018) discovered that talented people' distinct visual search tactics help them in contributing to effective situational decision-making ability. Furukado and Isogai (2020) have emphasized the significance of visual search tactics that leverage factual knowledge from sports to forecast what will happen next in complicated and dynamic sporting circumstances (Furukado et al., 2020).

In the sphere of sports, there are no standard decisions, (Kaya, 2014; Johnson, 2006) i.e. decision making is not a generic problem, rather, a distinctly situational one (Hansen, 1967); nonetheless, Johnson (2006) and Orasanu & Connolly (1993) emphasize certain common aspects of decision-making in sports. To begin, he asserts that sports decisions contain external dynamism, suggesting that the situation alters over time. Due to different impediments, a certain piece of information may be available one instant and not the next. The author also underlines decisions that are commonly made "online" in high-stress situations, which are related to but distinct from the dynamic nature of sports decisions. As a result, most of the decisions made by sports people, coaches, and referees are taken during the game. Finally, an element of unpredictability must be addressed while analyzing sports decisions. In sporting situations, it is critical to avoid a deterministic mapping from situation to reaction (Johnson, 2006). Although the application of "if-then" rules is a popular method of training, there is a risk of repeating the same behaviour every time one finds themselves in a certain circumstance (Kaya, 2014; Johnson, 2006; Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012). However, according to Johnson (Johnson, 2006), these elements are insufficient to define every sporting decision. Expert performance in group sports is defined by skilled perception and decision making (Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012). Whether it's determining how to prepare for a competition, implementing a recovery plan, or avoiding shortcuts, effective decision making is a skill that, although being difficult to teach, is critical to a sports person's success (True Sport, 2019). This skill is closely tied to decision-making capacity, which is a complicated process that occurs in complex contexts and under time restrictions. Because expert decision-making is an important component of attaining optimum performance in sports, it is important to investigate which factors contribute the most to competent decision-making (Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012). Sports people who can make quick and decisive decisions

may regulate the pace of the game and feel competent and in control. Over-thinkers, in contrast to players who think on their feet, second-guess their decisions, probe too deeply, and lack confidence in their capability to make the right decision, giving their opponent a huge competitive edge. Competitive sports necessitate rapid judgments with no time to weigh the possibilities. The players 'don't have time to ponder, just react' in the few seconds they have (Buck, 2013). The choice between anticipation and waiting tactics is situational, and the advantages and downsides must be assessed in each scenario. However, there are situations when time constraints make waiting strategies ineffective and necessitating. For these reasons, anticipation, which is commonly seen as a sign of expertise, should be managed based on individual activities and contexts, always after weighing the benefits and drawbacks. As a result, such analysis will rely on a full grasp of the situational possibilities, allowing for a more exact description of the scope of the research as well as an increase in the speed and precision of decision-making. (Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012). Sports people must make the appropriate decision in order to optimize their game performance by evaluating the situation, processing the inputs, and making the right decision at the right moment (Kaya, 2014). Understanding the mechanics behind making decisions and solving problems might help in explaining why people pick one alternative over another from a set of options when the outcome is unpredictable (Marasso et al., 2014). In predictable situations, decision making is rational, but when a situation is uncertain and dynamic (as in the field of sports), decision making is situational, providing the best possible solution to situations (Rhodes, 1988). Recent meta analyses, papers, and special journal issues show that sports decision making has been intensively explored. These overviews addressed a wide range of theories and empirical findings, and they give good direction for further research on certain decision-making components (Marasso et al., 2014). Studies reveal that the earlier approaches of decision making do not work in the current scenario as situations are rapidly changing. Making decisions does not always follow a set pattern, i.e., decision making is situational, and situational decision-making is essential in the 21st century to conquer difficult times (The European Business Review, 2022).

Methodology

The current paper is a narrative review of situational decision making, specifically highlighting its significance in the field of sports. This narrative review focuses on the period from 1966-2022 as the earliest mention of situational decision making can be traced back to Fletcher's book of *Situational Ethics* (1966) and Hansen's *Design for Decision* (1967). A thorough and comprehensive exploratory search of available literature

was conducted on various databases including Web Of Science to detect relevant articles for inclusion in this review. Google scholar was also explored using keyword searches: “situation* decision making”, “situation* approach to decision making”, “situational”, “decision making”, “contingent decision making” and “decision making” with “sports” in which “situation* decision making” yielded the most relevant results. Manual searches of the reference lists which were found in the primary articles were also conducted. Major studies in the area of situational decision making has been in the field of Criminology (Rossmo & Summers, 2021; Rossmo & Summers, 2022; Summers & Rossmo, 2018; Hogget, et al, 2019; Hayes, 1999; Bowen, Roberts & Kocien, 2016), Medicine & Psychiatry (Naeini, et al, 2020; Li, et al, 2016; Chang & Basnyat, 2014; Al-Azri, 2020) and in the field of Education (Hansen, 1967; Bolster, 1983; Rhodes, 1988; Graham et al., 1993) however, no major studies have been conducted with respect to situational decision making in the field of sports. Given the scarcity of studies in this area, a narrative review is considered more appropriate than a systematic review (Mcuffie et al., 2021).

Literature Review

In Design for Decision Hansen K (1967) explains that decision making is not a generalized problem, but rather a highly situational one. It is not mandatory to follow a set pattern of decision making because no conclusion can be characterized as “correct” (Hansen, 1967). What is good or terrible is determined by the situation, not by absolute values (Hansen, 1967; Götz, 1970). Lewis A. Rhodes (1988) explains that under controlled situations where majority of elements are stable and predictable, decision making is rational and simple. However, when one must respond swiftly to various, changing, and frequently unexpected circumstances, the nature of decision making alters. There is no one correct option, rather, the “best” decision for the situation given the knowledge at the time and place (Rhodes, 1988), as stated by the Contingency Theory of Decision Making, there is no one best approach to handle a task. The best approach for any situation is the one that best fits that situation (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). Because of fluctuating situational circumstances, each situation requires a distinct course of action. Every decision is impacted by the situational context, and the situational context is critical in identifying the best course of action, which is why there are no hard and fast rules dictating the outcome of competent situational decision making (Stouffer & Seiler, 2010).

Chartered Institute of Personnel Development defines situational decision-making, making effectual and pragmatic decisions in response to a specific circumstance, thereby evading a one-size-fits-all approach. It entails

identifying alternatives, together with the risks and benefits affiliated with them, and their alliance to professional principles and values. In view of the dynamic nature of the environment, decisions are required to be adaptable enough to new changes or situations, and people should be vigilant regarding evaluating their consequence to enlighten future practice (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2022; Hulst et al., 2014). Situational Decision-Making entails comprehending the current situation, potential future situations, mission goals, and added restrictions such as safety for proper action selection. On this premise, situational decision making necessitates some level of situation awareness (Hagele & Sarkheyli-Hagele, 2021).

In the field of education, Arthur S. Bolster (1983) conceptualizes teaching as situational decision making by identifying productive situational decision making as the touchstone of teaching craft. Skilled teachers make decisions based on predictions about how their actions would affect students' task accomplishment. Teachers make anticipatory predictions which are notably affected by experience when they plan. The capacity to advance precise predictions regarding the correlations between classroom circumstances and students' task and social conduct is critical to the teacher's efficacy as a situational decision maker (S. Bolster, 1983). Rhodes (1988) further argues that the underlying character of education is responsive situational decision making, as teachers must continually be alert for the unexpected, assess expectations for the unexpected, and make progress by making incremental decisions based on prior ones (Rhodes, 1988). In a classroom, predictions are formed more existentially via a process of providing and receiving cues (S. Bolster, 1983).

In the field of criminology, Gill et al (2016) analyzed the role of fear and emotions in the offender's situational decision-making concluding that situational decision-making by offenders is dominated by negative emotions, fear being the most prominent. Fear serves as a compensating strategy to warn offenders to the possible hazards and to maintain a level of readiness among people considering criminal activity. Therefore, interventions that elevate this fear during situational decision-making are desirable. The biggest fear is of the "unknown." This source of fear comprises of subjective aspects of the environment that the potential offender "feels," rather than formalizing. But we shouldn't anticipate criminals to precisely identify all the security elements there because decision-making at the moment is carried out in an extreme emotional state (Gill et al., 2019). Background factors (upbringing, personality, etc) and current life circumstances (neighborhood conditions, employment) affect an offender's situational decision making. The same elements influencing one's predisposition for crime also affect perceptions and behavior in particular situations (Pickett et al., 2017). Bowen, Roberts &

Kocian (2016) evaluated 330 male adult offenders' self-reported situational decision making along with anger-and hostile attribution bias (HAB), in predicting reported results that are likely to be violent vignettes. The outcomes of this study lend credence to Social Information Processing (SIP) theory as an explanation for violence in a group of adult offenders. The use of vignettes demonstrates the possibility of comprehending how people make decisions in a situational context. Individuals in social situations, according to reformulated SIP theory, go through six sequential, mutually independent steps to decide. Anger and hostile attributions (self-reported situational decision making) are both anticipated to be present at various stages of the SIP model and to enhance the likelihood of aggressive and violent action. According to the study, understanding situational decision making in the criminal population is crucial, and using social information processing theory to this complex phenomenon may provide the means to examine it (Bowen et al., 2016).

Clair & Winter (2016) theorized situational decision making in the judicial system. The study on state judges undertaking in this paper reveals that judges use two types of methods, interventionist and non-interventionist, during four phases of the criminal justice process, namely arraignment, plea session, jury selection, and sentence. Noninterventionist tactics are concerned exclusively with a judge's personal distinctive approach, but interventionist solutions are concerned with the probable distinctive treatment of others, along with the divergent effect of poverty and facially impartial legislation. Majority judges in the sample made non-interventionist decisions at each step of the trial, which explains why racial inequities persist in the criminal justice system despite well-intentioned judgment, which is central to the author's situational approach to decision making. In addition to the focal concern and uncertainty avoidance perspectives, their situational approach recognizes the potential for biases and stereotypes in situational decision-making of judges. The situational approach to decision-making employed in this article enables researchers to track the repercussions for criminal litigants of a range of decisions that are made by judicial officers and other organizational actors. Given the societal constraints and opportunities, each judge's views change, resulting in stage-specific strategies utilized at each level of criminal proceedings. This article advocates for a situational approach to decision making in the criminal justice system, which may be adapted to a broader range of organizational situations. By investigating how situation-specific decisions are impacted by broader social and cultural processes, researchers may pinpoint specific, controllable scenarios wherein people add to discrepancy producing processes (Clair & Winter, 2016).

Hugo Chu (2009) describes situational decision making as the fourth hierarchical layer of the New Leadership paradigm in the twenty-first

century. According to his hierarchical framework, the first three layers, value and vision, trait and learning, and communication are the foundation of situational decision making. Leaders that employ the situational decision-making style make decisions based on the present situation, whether it is about conveying vision, organizational development, or task management. Leaders who are unfamiliar with the first three levels are unfit to make situational decisions because leaders who lack vision, self-reflection, and communication do not make quick, unique, or flexible decisions. Situational decision-making is a cornerstone of situational leadership theory, which claims that the capacity and motivation of followers determine the most productive conduct. Nonetheless, situational decision-making focuses on the crisis rather than the skill of the follower (Chu, 2009).

The rules of the American Health Care Association represent the concept of situational decision-making competency, which defines decisions based on the repercussions for a person, ranging from everyday decisions with small repercussions to critical medical care life and death decisions (Pratt et al., 1989). Stubbings et al., (2012) identify several environmental and individual factors such as experience, expertise and intuition as antecedents of critical decision making by medical practitioners (Stubbings et al., 2012). As per the study conducted by Li et al (2016) analyzing the health beliefs of Taiwanese women, cultural beliefs, such as medicine-diet homology and reliance on both doctor and deity, frame the situational decision making of the participants (Li et al, 2016). According to Meier et al (2022), stable personality traits influence situational decision making by shaping how individuals interpret specific situations (Meier et al., 2022). Moreover, personal values, which are beliefs concerning what is the correct thing to do in a situation, have an impact on organizational situational decision-making in a manner that is compatible with the individuals' values (Cassemetis & Wortley, 2013). In the study of Responsible Leadership of Swiss Military Officers, Stouffer & Seiler (2010) found that comprehending the cultural backdrop, norms, regulations, and expectations is critical in situational decision making, and dilemma training assists in establishing new substitutes as a roadmap for situational decision making (Stouffer & Seiler, 2010). In the study of relationship between interoceptive sensibility, age and Covid-19 anxiety during UK's first lockdown, Elliot & Pfeifer (2022) concluded that individuals with strong interoceptive accuracy indicated higher emotional reaction and better situational decision making. Individuals with flawed interoceptive capacities may be more vulnerable to muted emotional experiences, which may impede responsible decision making to shield themselves and others from the Covid-19 virus (Elliot & Pfeifer, 2022).

The decision-making literature is diverse, extensive, and complicated. It

spans personal decision making, classroom decision making, and organizational decision making. It is instinctive, logical, philosophical, and scientific at times. Its foundations are in social psychology, political theory, organizational theory, and economic theory (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). Making decisions is an essential component of any sport (Biesen et al., 2021). Numerous studies on sports decision making have been conducted. However, future research must evaluate specific decision-making components. Understanding the mechanisms that drive decision making is critical for comprehending why people pick one alternative over another from several alternatives when the outcome is uncertain (Marasso et al, 2014). Competitive sports necessitate rapid decisions with no time to weigh the possibilities (Cohn, 2021). When one must respond fast to diverse, dynamic, and frequently unexpected conditions, the nature of decision making alters. There is no one correct option, just the “best” decision for the situation, depending on the knowledge available at the time and place, which is where situational decision making comes in, to be continually aware of the unexpected and monitor expectations for the unexpected (Rhodes, 1988). In certain situations, time restrictions make waiting tactics unfeasible, forcing the adoption of anticipation procedures. For these reasons, anticipation, which is commonly seen as a sign of expertise, must be managed based on individual activities and contexts, always after weighing the benefits and drawbacks. As a result, such analysis will be predicated on a full grasp of the situational probabilities, allowing for a clearer definition of the scope of the research as well as greater decision-making speed and precision (Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012). Recognizing the underlying intention and decisiveness of the opposing party, comprehending their culture, and assessing one’s own vs opposing resources and capabilities are critical components of sound situational decision-making (Stouffer & Seiler, 2010). The capacity to make decisions, which is a complicated process that occurs in complex contexts and under time restrictions, is closely tied to expertise. Because expert decision-making is vital in obtaining peak performance in sports, it is important to explore which factors lead the best to efficient decision-making (Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012).

Conclusion

Situational decision making is about making productive and pragmatic decisions while taking into account the specific situation or context, avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach. It entails recognizing several possibilities, as well as the pros and cons connected with them, along with their compatibility with professional beliefs and values (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2022). Decision making is a critical component of any sport (Kaya, 2014) where a fraction of a second can spell the

difference between winning and losing in sports (Sports and themind, 2022). To be victorious, players need to analyze the opponent's move, detect important cues and execute the right response, all within a matter of seconds (Biesen et al, 2021); recognizing the intentions and decisiveness of the competitor, assessing one's own resources and talents against that of the opponent, are all critical components of sound situational decision-making (Stouffer & Seiler, 2010). Prior to making a hasty decision, every player must consider a variety of dynamic factors as competitive sports decisions are made under extreme physical and emotional stress and have far-reaching consequences. Years of planning might be undone in an instant (Dominic, 2021). The field of sports necessitates split-second decisions with little room for rational thought where the brain must make an instinctually go or no go decision, which can only be accomplished by rigorous training and practice, thus necessitating research in this area (Bergland, 2020). Additionally, corroborating this concept, the contingency theory of decision-making states that there is no one best approach to handle a task. The "best approach" for any situation is the one that best fits that situation (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). The earlier approaches of decision making do not work in the current scenario as situations are rapidly changing. Making decisions does not always follow a set pattern, i.e., decision making is situational, and situational decision-making is essential in the 21st century to conquer difficult times (The European Business Review, 2022).

Scope for Future Research

Various studies have been conducted in the domain of sports decision making. However, as discovered in this review, there is a pressing need to focus on situational decision making of sports professionals, which has often been bypassed by researchers (Kaya, 2014; Johnson, 2006). Coaches and players are expected to follow a generic game plan during matches; however, players are forced to make spontaneous decisions on field. Processing disparate signals on the field is difficult, and the range of possible actions and outcomes is enormous, making it difficult for players to spontaneously find the optimal strategy when they do not have time to observe the situation and act is difficult (Chen et al., 2022). Competitive sports require making quick decisions with no time to assess the options (Buck, 2013). Understanding the mechanisms that underpin decision making to understand why people choose one option over another from a collection of possibilities when the result is unknown is essential (Marasso et al., 2014). Several studies have been conducted in the field of decision making in sports (Orasanu & Connolly, 1993; Johnson, 2006; Afonso, Garganta & Mesquita, 2012; Kaya, 2014; Marasso et al., 2014) and of situational decision making in the fields of Criminology (Rossmo &

Summers, 2021; Rossmo & Summers, 2022; Summers & Rossmo, 2018; Hogget, et al, 2019; Hayes, 1999; Bowen, Roberts & Kocien, 2016), Medicine and Psychiatry (Naeini, et al, 2020; Li, et al, 2016; Chang & Basnyat, 2014; Al-Azri, 2020) and in the field of Education (Hansen, 1967; Bolster, 1983; Rhodes, 1988; Graham, 1993). However, it is crucial to study situational decision making in the field of sports as decisions in this area are particularly complicated and require quick and flexible decision making under uncertain conditions.

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