WHY DO FOOTBALL REFEREES QUIT OFFICIATING? INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

FINAL REPORT
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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Referees provide an important service to the game of football and its various stakeholders throughout Europe (International Football Association Board, 2017). Indeed, it is they who are required to carry out a wide range of responsibilities, including managing the behaviours of others (e.g., players, coaches and spectators, among others) and dealing with any conflicts and issues that may arise in accordance with the laws of the game (Catteeuw, Helsen, Gilis, & Wagemans, 2009). However, in performing this essential work, referees also face a number of physiological, psychological, and inter-personal challenges, including but not limited to, maintaining good viewing positions, applying the laws of the game appropriately and consistently, and being the target of intense criticism from groups affected by their decision making and actions (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, and club officials) (Colwell, 2000). Sadly, the latter criticism has been reported to frequently encompass offensive, insulting, abusive and threatening behaviour or language towards officials (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Webb, 2017). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the recruitment and retention of referees has become a significant issue to those who govern football at all levels of participation across Europe and beyond (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Bond, 2015; Nutt, 2007; Parsons & Bairner, 2015; Wicker & Frick, 2016).

Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of research, particularly qualitative work, which has sought to understand the reasons underpinning the prevalence of referee attrition. In order to redress this situation, we adopted a relational and interactionist stance to generate rich insights into the reasoning behind referees' decisions to quit officiating in grassroots and amateur football (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). Indeed, through the utilisation of a multiple-method approach (i.e., online survey and in-depth interviews), this study has developed a substantive and robust dataset directly related to this important workforce issue. Importantly, the results indicated that referee attrition is not a mono-causal problem. Rather, it is the consequence of a variety of interacting social relationships and experiences. These include: a) the nature of refereeing work inclusive of the interactions that occur with a variety of stakeholders (e.g., players, coaches, club administrators, and spectators), b) the formal preparation, development and support mechanisms made available to referees inclusive of the interactions and relationships with various stakeholders (e.g.,

referee administrators, mentors, tutors, and observers), and c) the relationship between refereeing commitments and other important roles and responsibilities (e.g., family, work, and/or education).

We believe that the knowledge generated in this study has provided new, extensive, and nuanced insights that National Associations and UEFA stakeholders at all levels could utilise to inform, adapt, refine, or reinvigorate existing programmes related to the recruitment, retention, and development of referees. Specifically, we invite those responsible for supporting and developing referees to consider the following ideas and suggestions:

- The means through which individual referees can be made to feel more valued, connected and supported members of their wider relational networks.
- The support and advocacy mechanisms which can be implemented around disciplinary processes and procedures.
- Personalised contact to those officials who have decided to cease participation.
- Expansion of the Basic Referees Course (or equivalent) to include broader preparation of referees for the social, relational and emotional demands of their role.
- Scaffolded or progressive support following the successful completion of the training programme.
- A broader range of continual professional development and support opportunities made available to referees at all levels.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Research Aims and Context

Referees provide an important service to players, coaches, and club officials in professional, amateur, and grassroots football throughout Europe (International Football Association Board, 2017). It is they who are responsible for implementing the rules and regulations of the game, ensuring the safety of players, managing the behaviours of others (e.g., players, coaches and spectators, among others) and dealing with any conflicts and issues that may arise (Catteeuw, Helsen, Gilis, & Wagemans, 2009). However, the enactment of the refereeing role is often not a straightforward affair. Alongside the physiological and psychological demands of maintaining credible viewing positions and providing sound game management, referees also have to contend with the scrutiny and criticism of the individuals and groups affected by their decision making and actions (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, and club officials) (Colwell, 2000). Sadly, the latter has been increasingly characterised by threatening and abusive behaviour towards referees (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Webb, 2017). In addition, there has been little consideration of the ways which referees in grassroots and amateur football are expected to prioritise and manage their refereeing commitments alongside other responsibilities (e.g., family, work and/or education) (Pina, Passos, Araújo, & Maynard, 2018). Given the social and psychophysiological demands associated with this role, it is perhaps unsurprising that the recruitment and retention of referees has become a significant issue to those responsible for the sustainability and governance of football at all levels of participation across Europe (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Bond, 2015; Nutt, 2007; Parsons & Bairner, 2015; Wicker & Frick, 2016).

Unfortunately, the factors underpinning referee attrition rates have not been subject to rigorous academic investigation. In this study, we adopted a relational and interactionist stance to generate rich insights into the reasoning behind referees' decisions to quit officiating in grassroots and amateur football (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). Through the application of a multi-method approach (i.e., online survey and in-depth interviews), this study developed a substantive dataset directly addressing this much neglected topic. In particular, this study

illuminated how referee attrition is connected to an individual's experiences and meaning making as they relate to:

- The interactive and relational nature of refereeing work (e.g., relations with players, coaches, club administrators, and spectators).
- The interactions and relationships that referees had with tutors, mentors, observers, and administrators.

2.2 Review of Literature

As outlined above, referees play an essential role in the provision of high-quality football experiences for players, coaches, spectators, and club administrators at all levels of the game in Europe. Indeed, the recruitment and retention of a highly skilled refereeing workforce is essential for sustaining and promoting organised leagues, competitions and, relatedly, providing positive experiences for all parties interested in football. The failure to retain the requisite numbers of referees can result in a number of problematic outcomes. These include, but are not limited to, a reduction in the opportunities for people to safely participate in organised football programmes/ leagues and, relatedly, reduced income for, and reputational damage to, National Football Associations (Wicker & Frick, 2016).

Despite public recognition of the high attrition rates among referees, there is a paucity of academic literature directly engaging with this issue (Pina et al., 2018). To date, the limited available research focusing on referees has tended to coalesce around two main topic areas. These are a) the in-game decision making of referees (e.g., Catteeuw et al., 2009; Lane, Nevill, Ahmad, & Balmer, 2006) and b) the levels of stress experienced by referees and their use of particular coping strategies (e.g., Voight, 2009; Wolfson & Neave, 2007). While not explicitly addressing the reasons why referees cease officiating, studies engaging with the latter topic have suggested that this problematic outcome may be connected to the social and psycho-physiological demands that referees experience. In recent years, scholars (e.g., Cleland et al., 2015; Cleland et al., 2017; Webb, Cleland, & O'Gorman, 2017) have also addressed referees' understandings of The Football Association's 'Respect Campaign'. Unfortunately, the results have indicated that little has changed for referees in terms

of the physical and verbal abuse that they experience at the micro-level of everyday practice. These studies have suggested that The Football Association should provide more assistance to help referees cope with the problematic events and interactions that they are likely to encounter in the field. Such support is deemed essential if this Association is to successfully retain sufficient numbers of referees. However, it should be noted that whilst this evolving line of inquiry has provided valuable insights into how referees have experienced the 'Respect Campaign', it does not directly address the issue of referee attrition.

Few studies have addressed referees' intentions to give up officiating. Taylor, Daniel, Leith, and Burke (1990) conducted early research on this topic in Canada. Their investigation addressed the relationship between perceived stress, burnout, and an official's intention to exit this role. While useful, the positivistic approach to inquiry adopted in this study, which statistically investigates relationships between pre-defined variables, precluded the generation of rich contextual accounts of individual experience and, relatedly, how an individual's decision to cease refereeing may be influenced by a variety of interconnected factors and experiences. More recently, Dell, Gervis, and Rhind (2016) employed a qualitative approach to explore individuals' intentions to dropout of refereeing in football. Their work highlighted how various organisational (e.g., training, support, and development opportunities), match (e.g., psychological and physical abuse), and personal (e.g., additional commitments and ability to buffer the effects of abuse) factors may combine to influence referees' decisions to continue (or not) in this role. While this study is to be applauded for depicting some of the factors that influence a referee's *intention* to quit officiating, it is important to recognise that the sample only included a limited proportion (N= 3) of those who had actually *made the decision to drop out*. Equally, further limitations include the small overall sample size (N= 12) and, restrictions in geographical scale (i.e., referees from the South of England alone).

In summary, this review has highlighted the paucity of available literature that directly examines why referees choose to dropout from officiating. If future interventions are to effectively address this issue, it is important that policy makers and practitioners have a robust and extensive knowledge base to inform and support their efforts. In generating such knowledge, it is important to avoid reducing the

problem of retaining referees to simplistic, mono-causal explanations. Instead, we believe that it is important to develop rich accounts of lived experience, especially in terms of how a referee's decision to stop officiating is connected to his or her visceral experiences of their roles, interactions, and relationships with others.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Justification of Research Design

In this study, we adopted a relational and interactionist stance to explore why referees quit officiating in football (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). Specifically, this work addresses the participants' social encounters with various others, the emotions they experienced in these interactions, the meanings that they attached to them, and, importantly, the choices that they subsequently made about refereeing (Scott, 2015). At the heart this project, then, was a focus on uncovering the subjective workings and critical junctures of the participants' social worlds and the belief that a referee's decision to continue with or, indeed leave this role, was formed and reformed in his or her interactions with various stakeholders and significant others over time (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011).

3.2 Justification of Methods Employed

Given the focus on exploring the experiences and meaning-making of the participants, two complementary methods of qualitative data collection were utilised. These were a) an online survey and b) in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The combination of these two research methods facilitated the development of a substantive dataset. For example, the survey enabled the research team to access the meaning-making and interpretations of a large number of participants (251 respondents, 236 male, 12 female, 3 prefer not to say) from across England, while the interviews allowed for a more detailed exploration of the experiences of individual participants (20 participants, 18 male, 2 female). Here, the questions asked in the follow-up interviews were, where appropriate, informed by the findings generated in the online survey. This enabled a greater level of elaboration and clarification within the dataset and is something that the use of one method could not have produced alone (Patton, 2015).

3.3 Key Concepts and Dimensions Explored

Rather than adopting a reductionist, heavily psychologised explanation of this significant workforce issue, the focus of this investigation was on uncovering how the subjective workings and critical junctures of the participants' social worlds informed

their respective decisions to leave their role as a referee (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). To achieve this end, we drew upon the relational theorising of Burkitt (2014) and Crossley (2011), as well as the interactionist thinking of Scott (2015).

Broadly speaking, relational theory seeks to explain how human behaviour and decision making is shaped by the situations in which individuals find themselves, the others involved, and, importantly, the relations that the individual enjoys (or not) with those others (Crossley, 2011). Indeed, Crossley (2011, p. 2) suggested that how an individual "responds to these others, actions and events is influenced by both their impact upon her [sic] and by the opportunities and constraints afforded her within her networks, networks comprising other actors". In the context of this study, relational theorising helped draw attention to why an individual's choice to quit officiating is oriented to the other people (e.g., spectators, player, administrators, among others) events and actions within the networks in which that individual was embedded.

Relational theorising also draws attention to the emotional dimensions of social life (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011). Here, it has been argued that emotions are "a permanent dimension of our being in the world and being towards others" (Crossley, 2011, p. 62). Indeed, rather than being purely an internal, individual phenomenon, emotions such as anger, pride, joy, and fear are inherently produced in our relations and interactions with others. For the purpose of this investigation, then, relational ideas about emotion helped us to consider how the participants' decisions to stop refereeing were informed by the specific emotions that that were generated in their respective interactions and relationships with others (Burkitt, 2014).

The final sense-making framework guiding this investigation is the interactionist thinking provided by Scott (2015). Central in this approach to theorising social life is the concept of identity. Identity refers to a set of integrated ideas about the self and the roles that we undertake. Importantly, our identities (e.g., as a referee) are not stable. Instead, they are created, maintained, challenged, re-invented, or exited through the process of social interaction. For example, how we think about ourselves in a particular social role (i.e., as a referee) is informed by how we think other people (e.g., spectators, players, administrators) act towards us in this role. In this study, Scott's (2015) writings enabled us to consider how referee attrition was grounded in

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an individual's sense-making and responses to the symbolic meanings of other social actors within a particular network of social relationships.

In summary, our intention in this study was to consider how referee attrition is primarily influenced by the social interactions, emotional experiences and accompanying sense-making of those performing this role. Indeed, we have principally sought to illuminate how the relinquishing of identity as a referee was grounded in the participants' relationships with players, coaches, spectators, club officials, league and county officials, mentors, tutors and observers.

3.4 Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited using purposive and opportunistic sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, individuals had: a) undertaken an initial referee qualification with the National Association (e.g., The FA's Basic Referees Course), and b) not engaged in refereeing, or, instead, c) began and then ceased officiating. The Football Association (e.g., FA National Referee Managers) provided expert judgement and support in terms of accessing participants.

3.5 Employing Multiple Methods of Data Generation

3.5.1 Phase 1: Online Survey.

The large-scale, on-line survey sought to generate a robust dataset addressing the broad issues connected to referee dropout. The questionnaire was comprised of several topic blocks that asked participants to reflect upon their personal experiences and meaning-making as they were connected to their decision to stop refereeing. These included:

- The demographic information of participants
- Motives to become a referee
- Expectations of refereeing
- Experiences of participating within The FA's Basic Referees Course
- Feelings about being a match official
- The factors that underpinned the decision to stop being a match official

- Considerations for change (e.g., factors which may have contributed toward changing an individual's decision to cease refereeing)
- An invitation to participate in the interview phase of the study

Before making the survey live, a piloting phase was conducted to assess the suitability of questions for the participant group, and to ensure that questions appropriately addressed the research aims (Boynton, 2004). Extensive and rigorous checks with legal, safeguarding and refereeing departments at The Football Association were completed before the survey was cleared for distribution to participants.

3.5.2 Phase 2: In-Depth Interviews

In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews with individuals, who gave up their role as football referee, were conducted. In depth, semi-structured interviews are excellent tools for gaining rich insights into the meaning-making and emotional experiences of research participants. This type of interviewing allowed the research questions to remain the primary focus of the discussion, whilst also encouraging participants to share any other factors that underpinned their decision to dropout of refereeing (Purdy, 2014).

An interview guide was developed and piloted with a small sample of former referees. This work was undertaken in conjunction with the FA National Referee Managers. The pilot work sought to: a) highlight any ambiguities and issues with the topics explored and questions used to examine them, b) determine the length of time to complete the interview and determine whether it was reasonable, and c) ensure that participant replies could be interpreted in direct relation to the specific research questions guiding this project. Following this process and the making of some minor modifications, the final interview guide was comprised of seven sections and addressed a variety of topics. These included: a) Demographic information, b) Motives to become a referee, c) Expectations of refereeing, d) Participation in The FA's Basic Referees Course, e) Experiences of officiating, f) The decision to stop refereeing, g) The connections between refereeing and life outside of football (e.g., work, family, educational roles and commitments), and h) Ideas for reducing referee attrition.

During the main interviews, the initial questions focused on building rapport and easing the participant into the interview process (e.g., questions concerning the referee's background). These initial questions played an important role in encouraging participants to give detailed narratives, through the development of trust in the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Open-ended questions were then employed to generate rich accounts of individual's decisions to cease refereeing and how this may have been influenced by a variety of interconnected factors. Alongside active listening and attentiveness to participant responses, elaboration and clarification probes (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that" or "Could you provide an example for me?) were used to secure in-depth accounts of each participant's meaning-making (Merriam, 2009, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). At the close of each interview, participants were asked a generic question which aimed to prevent the omission of any pertinent data that was not previously discussed within the interview (e.g., "Are there any other factors, not previously mentioned, which you feel influenced your decision to drop out from refereeing?") (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In line with good practice guidelines, quiet and comfortable public locations with adequate privacy were used to conduct the interviews. Where face-to-face interviews were not feasible (e.g., with participants who had moved abroad), internet technologies such as Skype provided a robust alternative (Hanna, 2012). All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were subject to an iterative and recursive process of analysis where the research team moved back and forth between interpretations of the data and applications of explanatory theory (Tracy, 2013). This interweaving of data collection and analysis allowed the research team to continually assess the depth, richness, and appropriateness of the findings in terms of answering the research question(s) and the theoretical interpretations that were generated. The analysis of data involved alternating between emic and etic perspectives. An emic or emergent analysis of the data entailed developing a deep familiarity with the whole corpus of questionnaire and interview data through reading and re-reading. Preliminary coding was then used to identify data meaningful to the research questions. This involved systematic, line-

by-line scrutiny of transcripts and surveys. Relevant chunks of data were descriptively "coded" with words or phrases that captured their essence. The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) was then utilised to compare and contrast the data applied to each code and avoid definitional drift. Written memos were also used to address any emerging relationships, patterns and comparisons between codes. As meaningful codes were identified, etic analysis was also introduced. The etic perspective shifted the focus of analysis to the development of links to theoretical concepts that offered explanatory value. These included relational and interactionist theorising related to social networks, identity, disidentification, and emotional stamina (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015).

3.7 Ensuring Research Quality

In order to ensure quality and rigour of the findings, critical friends and member reflections were employed throughout the research process (Smith & McGannon, 2017). This included detailed discussions and reflections on the findings as well as our interpretations of them within the research team. We believe these approaches helped to develop insights that were more likely to be of maximal value to the Football Association and, by extension, other European Football Associations.

In terms of judging this study, we invite readers to consider its goodness in relation to the non-foundational lists provided by Smith et al. (2014). Specifically, we ask:

- Does this investigation make a *valuable contribution* to our understanding of referee attrition in the UK?
- Is this project rich in *rigour* in terms of data collection and analysis?
- Does this investigation demonstrate *credibility* through the presentation of mutually harmonious data and theoretical interpretations?
- Does this study provide *resonance* in terms of understanding why individuals quit refereeing?
- Does this study provide *heuristic significance* in terms of inspiring you to further question, probe, and explore the social and emotional dimensions of refereeing?

3.8 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Northumbria University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, this study was conducted according to University regulations regarding a) the anonymity of research participants, b) the confidentiality of the data obtained, and c) the storage and retention of data (including GDPR regulations).

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
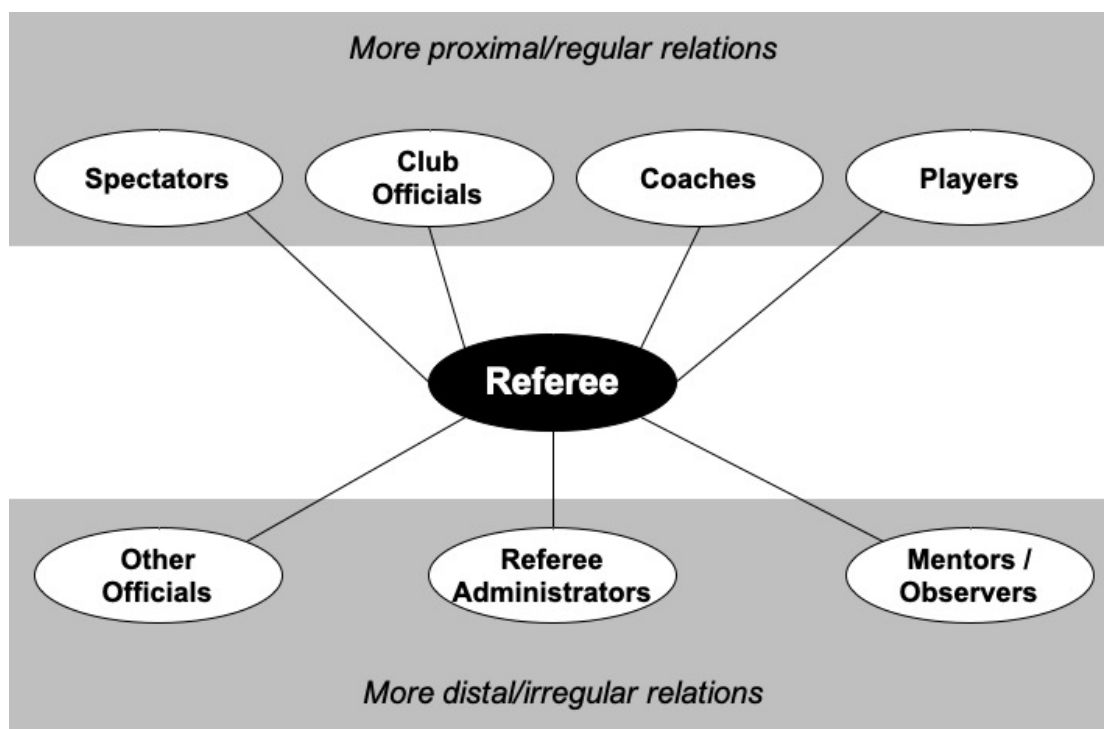
4.1 Referee Attrition: A Social Issue

Figure 1.0 Key social relations impacting referee attrition.

Only a small number of the participants in this study highlighted how their decision to stop refereeing was primarily informed by physical factors (e.g., age and injury), as opposed to their subjective experience of refereeing. Importantly, the majority of the participants highlighted how their choice to quit officiating was directly related to the quality of their relationships with others in the football environment, or, how the demands and experiences of refereeing co-existed problematically alongside other roles and priorities that mattered to them (e.g., work, education, family, and other leisure commitments). Ultimately, for these participants, it was their experiences of the network of social relations with others in football that proved to be detrimental to their engagement in refereeing. As illustrated in Figure 1.0 above, this network included players, coaches, club officials and spectators with whom the participants had more proximal and regular relations, as well as various administrators, match observers (assessors), mentors and other officials, with whom contact was more distal and less regular. Importantly, our analysis did not reveal any notable or diverging sensemaking between male and female or, indeed, older and younger participants. Instead, the decision to stop officiating was grounded in the meanings that each

participant attached to their role as a referee and, relatedly, the emotional stamina (i.e., being able to sustain a particular emotional outlook towards an activity) that each individual was prepared to invest into this role (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). This was neatly summed up by one participant, who eloquently noted:

> ...I'll come back to that word, that 'filter', where everybody does have a filter and it doesn't matter how tall you are, how big you are, everyone's got their own mental strengths and limits. Sometimes you just think my filter is full: what is the point [of carrying on as a referee]?

In sections 4.2 and 4.3 below, we provide rich insights and examples of how the participants' relations with various others informed their choice to stop officiating.

4.2. Interactions with Players, Coaches, Spectators and Club Officials

The participants stated how their respective decisions to stop officiating were significantly influenced by their dissatisfaction with the nature and quality of their interactions and relationships with players, coaches, spectators and club officials. These interactions were described as frequently 'unappreciative' and 'abusive'. For example, in terms of their interactions with players the participants noted:

> I think it was just… Sometimes you get some teams that sort of operated on a bit of a siege mentality, that they'd sort of gang up on you, verbally. Those annoying players that would constantly just be in your ear but they wouldn't be saying anything bad enough that would get them carded or anything but just challenging everything, you know, every decision that you'd make, almost to the point where… you're a bit like a pressure cooker where you'd just want to sort of blow off and give them a good old mouthful back, but you couldn't, you know?

> Virtually no help or support for young up and coming referees like myself who were just chucked in at the deep end and expected to be 'top drawer' [good]. I felt uncomfortable with the abuse I was getting from players on the pitch. I was young at the time and wanted to learn and develop at a new

hobby. I was keen to enjoy, just like the players on the pitch, but I wasn't given that opportunity because people forgot I was a human being and not an emotionless machine. When you're branded 'a joke' when I didn't give a decision the way of the team of the person shouting this then what hope have you got of progressing? Grassroots football in this country is a disgrace in terms of how it views officials and the notion that there is apparently a well ran "Respect" campaign is a total lie as nobody (apart from my Dad) at the game gave a hoot about how I was getting on or feeling.

Similarly, examples of problematic interactions were also provided in terms of the participants' interactions with coaches and club officials. Here it was noted:

The incident had a fair impact on me in all honesty. It had as much impact as when that… The first time that player actually went nose-to-nose to me in a different game. That had an impact on me, 'cos that had never happened. But when he [the manager] said to me that I'd played the race card and he said, "you've just played the race card; that's all you've done is played the race card" and I felt… You know, I'll be honest; I felt really alone at the time.

At the end of the match, one of the managers, who was a bit notorious, I'd made – in his mind – a couple of decisions which didn't go his way and I said, "Hi, mate, where do I go to get my 18 quid?" and he just sort of said, "Oh, I'll give you it now, mate, but in my mind, you shouldn't really have it" and it was just… little sentences like that, which started the ball rolling of just going: you know what? I just don't… I can't deal with this anymore. I'd just go home to my mum and dad just in floods of tears and just thinking: Why am I doing this? What am I doing this for?... It was just the conduct of some managers that just sort of knocked the enthusiasm out of me.

I stopped refereeing after my first game. It wasn't anything dramatic, the game went fairly well. I had to make some big decisions - goal not allowed, penalty given, reckless challenges, but they all went okay. I controlled the players and the game and gave a good account of myself. Honestly though, I just did not enjoy a single moment of it, it made me feel sick. I couldn't wait for the game

to end. It was just constant pressure and a never-ending stream of mild abuse, mostly from coaches and club officials... What really turned me off it, being a player and knowing how games at amateur level can get, was knowing that that game was fairly mild and non-contentious. The thought of what it would be like to try and officiate a difficult game just seemed so unappealing. My overall thought was I just didn't need that in my life - why worry about what I'm going to face on a weekend?

At the end of the game there was a mass brawl broke out, absolute, it was about 12 or 14 guys punching each other. And, you know, the manager came up to me and sort of said, "Are you not going to go in there and break it up?". And I said, "Are you absolutely out of your mind that I have got to go and step in between 12 people and stop a fight?". I said what I will do is I will watch goes on and I will put a report in. So, I put a report in and I was threatened again after the game, you know, because I didn't step in, that all the hoo-ha was all my fault because I didn't step in and finish it.

The participants also described several problematic situations and interactions that they experienced with spectators. In their own words:

Why am I doing this for a bit of fun, when some fucking idiot from the bloody local village has turned up just to berate me? You know? End of. And again… You know…? Sometimes it was just a fan; sometimes it was a parent, because they felt that you were maybe not giving their little Johnny all the decisions, you know? And they just wanted to bully you into letting you know how they felt and, again, all just little small factors that sort of accumulate into helping you make that decision, to give up… What's the point? You know?

And also, some of the time, you know, every village or town has an idiot and most of the time, those idiots seem to turn up to watch the football and for some reason, they seemed to think as well that it's okay that they can turn up and for an hour and a half, just abuse you, verbally. And again, very difficult to take and accept, really, when you're just… You know, a young dad, father of two, not much different to them, you work for a living and for your bit of

fun, you want to officiate games, but they seem to think that it's okay to turn up, abuse you, say stuff to you and when they're only a fan, there's nothing you can do about it at all, apart from, you know, try and not listen to it.. I'll come back to that word, that 'filter', where everybody does have a filter and it doesn't matter how tall you are, how big you are, everyone's got their own mental strengths and sometimes you just think: what is the point [of carrying on with refereeing]?

These encounters also included abusive and derogatory remarks about the participant's race, ethnicity, and gender. Comments from the participants included the following:

Player behaviour was a key factor, but I had one match where I was subjected to homophobic insults and threats against my wellbeing. These were made behind my back, so it was difficult to single out individuals. One of the players was even a registered referee. After the match there was an insulting match report. I sent a report to the County FA and although they initially came back to me saying they would investigate my allegations I never heard from them again. One of the players said to me, "I don't know why you bother getting out of bed". I thought to myself, why do I bother, to put up with this? So, I started following my son who had started playing for a team and I run the line for them.

The very last game that I did, I actually had some homophobic abuse and sexist abuse thrown at me and I'd got to the point where I'd just had enough. And I was like: you know what? I used to do this because I wanted to sort of, you know, show that women can do this job as well and… You know? I did enjoy it to begin with, and then this bloke turned round and called me a dyke and this, that and the other and really gave me a lot of grief and I turned round and I was like: "I've had enough" so 25 minutes in and I blew the full-time whistle, 'cos I didn't know who it was and they refused to admit it and I said, "Right, get off. Everyone off the pitch; I've had enough".

Alarmingly, the participants highlighted, how on occasions, the abusive behaviour included both threats, and indeed actual acts, of physical violence. For example:

I have been punched, intimidated, threatened and more, and this is the reason I have quit. I'm not risking injury to referee someone's game. It's not worth it.

I didn't fancy giving up any more of my weekends to get verbally and physically assaulted, despite the money.

During heated games, it was common to get threatened. This is intensified when there is only one of you and 22 other opposing players.

Finally, on occasions, the participants noted that the abusive behaviour went beyond them as individuals to also include threats to their families:

And it was a cup semi-final and it was 2:2 with, I can remember, [name] I can remember this as clear as the day it was there, and there was a shot on goal and the ball was going in the net and there was a guy in the offside position who wanted to be the hero so he touched the ball, so obviously I gave it as an offside goal. You know, and I disallowed it, and after the game, I
still see the guy, came up to me and he said, "You lost that game for us", and I went, "No, I didn't", I said, "the guy who lost the game for you was the guy who wanted to be the hero who if he hadn't touched the ball it would have gone in, but he wanted it". And the guy turned around and said to me, "I know where you live, I know where your wife goes to school [to work] and I know where your children live. Just watch what happens next". I said, you know, this [is] all outrageous and I dropped the letter into [place] county and they just sort of said well did anyone else hear it? And I said, "Well I don't know", and they said, "Well if no one else heard it, it's his word against yours, nothing we can do".

My family was threatened, you know, I know it was a heat of the moment thing but, you know, you don't come up to people and do that. You just can't do that.

Importantly, the participants described how their exposure to such interactions had a variety of negative impacts. Chief among these were feelings of fear and anxiety about their safety. Here, the participants noted:

I think it was, if I ever made a mistake... I was scared more for myself that if I made a wrong decision, what the backlash would be. You know, how could I control if the managers started having a go at me, the players, you know what I mean, it was only kids, but if they started having a go at me or the mums and dads on the side lines. What would they do? That's what sort of frightened me the most; their reaction if I made a bad decision... This team, I can't remember their name for the life of me; if I made a bad decision with this manager who was a bit notorious, if I gave a free kick against the other team, I'd just hear him shouting "Oh, ref, that's obviously wrong! Oh, ref, what are you doing? You're ruining us!" And I just remember that struck more fear than anything else as to what he was going to do if I gave a massive decision, if he just sort of snapped, what would he…?

I think it was just… I mean, I know… I don't want to sound like a ponce or expecting like, a full squad of four match officials to go to a junior football league game, but I think it was just: if I made a bad decision, there was nobody else there who had my back. If I made… I'm not saying this should be the case, 'cos I know this isn't football, but if I made a decision and it went against one team, obviously that manager would go "oh, ref, what are you doing?" But the other manager, who I gave the decision for, wouldn't shout across and say the opposite; he would just sort of sit there and stay quiet. Or she, sorry. And I just felt that if I made a bad decision, what was to stop somebody…? 'Cos I was only 15, 16 at the time; I was never sort of very muscular or anything like that, what was to stop them coming over and grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and throwing me to the ground? Or I was always frightened that one of them would just come over and whack me in the head. That's what frightened me… That's what the fear factor was. That if I made a bad decision, I'm not tall enough, I'm not strong enough to fight some of these off. If it got to that and that's what I always seem to think the

worst if I have a bad decision, so if I gave a penalty or something major, he'd just come over, lose his temper and just whack me for five.

Berated by parents on sideline, decisions questioned by the team managers. Aggressive behaviour, threats of being reported to the FA... I was 14 years of age and not prepared for all this...It was scary and I just had to get away from it.

The participants also described how this anxiety was not limited to the immediate experiences of officiating a match, but how it would also be frequently felt for several days prior to and after a match. Specifically, the participants described how they had come to dread officiating matches that included teams that had gained notoriety for the behaviour of their players, coaches, spectators or club officials. Here it was noted:

I was a bit nervous before the game, but I felt that was natural given it was my first time. During the game however, I was surprised to feel that I couldn't wait for it to be over - the level of pressure was unexpected. After the game, my primary feeling was one of relief, I couldn't wait to get out of there. The main thing that put me off going back again was the feeling after the game - I was absolutely dreading the thought of the following weekend. I had a really bad night's sleep the night after that first game, and when I got up the next day I just thought "I don't need this". I texted the club and told them I wouldn't be available the following week and haven't regretted that decision.

Sometimes you know when you haven't had a good game, but you've done it, you've done your bit and you would go into your week and then the nervousness would build up again.

I think when I got up on a Sunday morning, I would sort of… I wouldn't have as much of a breakfast as I would through the week... I could feel my belly sort of turning. Just sort of oh my God, it's in two hours. Then I'd sort of count down in my head. Even if… Like, jump in the shower and when I get up, it's like, "Oh my God, right, an hour and a hal"f. Oh my God. Okay.

Right, try and get it together. And then I remember even getting my referee gear on and stuff, sometimes not even being able to put my boots on first time round for my hands shaking. Then even getting there and meeting all the managers and stuff and just… I could feel myself [hyperventilates] speaking to everybody "hi, you okay?" So short of breath, just with… You know, oh my God, it's ten minutes away, now. And that's everything… As soon as it was over, for the rest of the Sunday, the rest of the Sunday was great, then. And then on the Monday, it would sort of… Right, okay. Next Sunday. That's how it felt every week... [After dropping out] I wasn't worried all week about the match that was coming up. I felt it was more… I think it was easier to get through the week knowing that I didn't have that worry or that anxiety, about feeling alone, feeling scared on the football pitch on a Sunday morning or a Sunday afternoon. I felt it was just a damn sight easier to get through the week… I felt like that was always on my mind; oh my God, the game on Sunday. What's it going to be like? What's the manager going to be and what…?

These feelings of anxiety were frequently accompanied by equally strong feelings of anger, frustration and powerlessness. Here, the participants explained how these emotions were grounded in their thoughts that there was little they could do to challenge or prevent the problematic encounters described above from reoccurring. In their own words:

I was, well, I was, angry, frightened, and pissed off all at the same. Because the guy cornered me in the referees' room, and I couldn't get out and he was a big man. And you know, and, I can look after myself, you know, if I make a mistake, or you know, I will put my hands up and accept the mistake because I am not perfect, but when my family is threatened, that is, that is beyond the pale, that is when, that's when I gave up the first time. I just walked away on that day and I just sort of said to the referee's associate at [place], "Look don't call me again, I am done".

Sometimes things happen to you and you feel powerless to sort of stop it, if that makes sense? So, you know, if the manager tells you, you know, to do one

or whatever, sometimes you don't feel like you can report it because at the end of the day your club marks will be a detriment to it. You kind of feel trapped and it's really frustrating.

As well as being unpleasant to experience, some of the participants described how the abusive and disrespectful comments and actions of others led them to question their ability as a referee. In particular, this led to an on-going questioning of their respective performances as referees and, as one participant articulated, feelings of shame and of "never being good enough": For example:

I felt like it was my fault that I… That these managers were saying these things. I felt like it wasn't me, but I felt like: 'My God, I'm being a bad referee here'; you know, maybe… 'Did I do that decision'... And then I'd be in the car home and I'd sort of start to overthink every decision and think: Oh, maybe it was me who made that bad decision; maybe if I said, "This manager's being an arse, maybe they'll say, well "did you make a bad decision or…?" and looking back on it, I know they wouldn't have said that but at that moment, because I had no… Sort of no authority and no assertiveness over anything, really – I was never a very assertive person – is that what…? Was it my fault that the managers were being like that because I was making bad decisions? And I didn't want to say that to them because that might make me look like a bad referee.

The ball then went out of play and the kid who was challenged in the tackle sort of just went down on his haunches, so I obviously went over and said, "Are you okay, mate? What's up?" And then this bad manager came sprinting on to the pitch, sort of trying to help the kid on his team and just looked up at me and said, "Ref, what are you doing? You've got no idea what you're doing. You've got no control. Rubbish". And then he got off – so the kid was alright – and he just got off and walked away. And that's the one thing that sort of stuck. I think I was in my third or maybe second to last game and that was like the biggest moment where I... couldn't work out if he was being sort of rude and not very nice or if he was being truthful and well maybe I don't have any control on this game. That's the one thing that sort of really sticks in my head.

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Sometimes I think, when you had that time on your own, you'd just sort of let your mind wander… You'd start sort of interrogating your own game, really. You'd probably more concentrate on the things that you'd done wrong, rather than the things that you'd done right and…You know?

I was getting very little satisfaction from officiating. I was dwelling too much on poor decisions that I made during games (even though I knew every official makes the occasional poor decision). I began to dread the inevitable questioning by players, club officials and spectators of decisions made. I was also finding it increasingly difficult to bear the hostility and abuse shown to me on-field by people who, when not playing, would be perfectly decent human beings.

Usually when you're getting criticised verbally during the game from many people. It withdraws you into your shell and this obviously affects your performance. When I transitioned into adult football, I absolutely hated it for this reason. I got so much abuse during one game it got to a level where I didn't know what to do and I just got home and cried for the first time in years.

In summarising the impact of these problematic encounters with others, the participants described how they contributed to a strong sense of loneliness and social isolation. In this respect, they believed that they lacked a meaningful social connection or bond with the community (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, club officials) that they sought to help in their role as a referee. In their own words:

I felt these horrible emotions when officiating games, did not know if I was making the right calls. Was receiving lots of abuse and harassment from fans, players and managers. Felt lonely as a match official as there was nobody that I could turn to.

The job is lonely. It's lonely in the middle there, 'cos you've got 22 on the field plus managers and supporters and subs all screaming at you. You are the one focal point. Anything goes wrong, it's your fault.

When you made a perceived bad decision or two in a match, particularly if both sides felt hard-done by, then it felt like the whole world was against you and you couldn't wait to go home. I never knew who I could really speak to about it all either to be honest.

Travelling to a game on your own, turning up on your own; you weren't turning up as you always had done as a player with all your mates in a car or on a minibus. Turned up on your own, changing room on your own, warned up on your own and then, a lot of the time, probably felt very alone in the middle of the pitch as well, because, depending on how the game was going, always… Not every game just runs seamlessly and smoothly and nicely, so again, feeling very much alone in the middle of the pitch. Again, alone at half time. You know, sometimes you'd have nice clubs where, you know, you'd have an old face, they'd be nice to go and talk to and they'd make you feel welcome, but more often than not, you'd just be stood on your own with your bottle of juice and you know, having five, ten minutes at half time. And then sitting again on your own, just driving home again on your own for half an hour, forty minutes and er, it… In a way, sometimes it's quite nice that you just have that sort of time just to sort of recover and think things through, talk them through in your head, but again, I don't know… Maybe a bit of my old self coming out, but missing a bit of the camaraderie after the match, you know, going for a pint or, you know, having a bit of a craic and talking things through, you're just in your car, home and then er… You know, there was another Saturday gone, so yeah, it was just… Quite a lonely occupation, really, is officiating. Quite a lonely one. Erm… but again, just something that you learn in time really, is that it's a choice that you've taken and, you know, sometimes it helps that my wife and kids came with me, you know, just sort of broke up the nerves before a game and then also broke up the conversation on the way home, but that didn't happen all the time, so, yeah. Just a bit of a lonely place sometimes.

There were no assistant referees, nothing like that. It was just me on my own; no other referees around. If I made a bad decision, I was on my own. There was nobody else to sort of protect me. There was nothing… If I made a bad

decision, I had to live with it on my own and that's what sort of frightened me the most.

Yeah. It's almost loneliness, I suppose. It felt like, you know, no matter what you did, there would be half a team against you anyway. You get the odd game where it's so one-sided that no one really cares anyway and you get the game where they were perfectly fine and it was competitive but it felt like the games that were competitive and not always pleasant to referee, there was always someone against you. Which is to be expected to a certain extent, but I felt like there was no one immediately I could go to and say "was that right? What would I have done differently?" Erm, because if I had, I would speak to the other manager and say [I was defiant] whether it would be a biased opinion or… You know? There wasn't anyone there who I could immediately go to and say "was that the right decision afterwards?" You know, and even from a personal safety perspective I suppose, as well. I felt like if they had all turned on me, then it would literally just be me against everyone else and I would have to make a run for it or… You know, I don't feel like there was anyone there who might be able to step in and sort it out. I mean, I wouldn't expect them to provide bodyguards or anything like that but just a friendly face to make it two against 22 or whatever.

4.3. Interactions with Administrators, Mentors, Tutors and Observers

In addition to the encounters and relationships described in section 4.2 above, the participants also highlighted how their choice to stop officiating was influenced by their respective interactions (or, indeed, lack of) with league and county officials, mentors, tutors and observers. With regard to their interactions with league officials, the participants outlined two key issues. The first related to a strong sense of being underappreciated by league officials. For example, the participants noted:

I think to conclude, I would have to probably say that if I didn't end up feeling almost like a bit of a resource, you know, just a name against a list of fixtures, then I probably would still be… You know, registered, and I'd probably still be fulfilling fixtures myself, so… If there wasn't that feeling about it, then I'd

probably still be donning the old outfit... But it just got to the point where enough was enough; I just felt as though I was being used and abused and… That was it, really.

You're very much just left to your own accord, really and that's where it sort of brings me round again to where I very much felt you were just a resource that was just a ticking a box against a fixture and as long as the game had an official, that was them being able to fulfil their statistics for the larger FA etc. etc. and it all probably just… In my mind probably just came down to statistics that, you know, 85 or 90% of their games were able to be fulfilled by referees, but you know, how do your 85 or 90% of referees that you do have feel? You know?

Well because, you know, sometimes, there was times where I've felt that the FA just didn't understand. You know? And let me just start…There was one occasion I remember on there, I was doing a game at the XXX [league] and it was a top of the table game, really and one player had constantly been on my back and I had warned him and eventually, he got a yellow card for dissent. And then he got a second yellow for dissent, he came right into my face… Now the chair of the league was watching that game; this kid came right into my face, got a red card and it took me a while… 'Cos the game wasn't going to start unless I got him well away from the pitch… And then his mate went in and racially abused the kid on the line for me, who was running the line, who was an Irish guy, so I got rid of him as well, so, as you can imagine what it was like… But, the chair of the league didn't even come into the changing rooms after. He was watching the game and he knew how tough it was, didn't even come into the changing rooms to see what the impact was, what the effect was and I remember thinking to myself: having dealt with everything for years and years and years as a referee and that was the first time somebody came nose-to-nose really, with me, and you know, I really needed that support but the chair wasn't there and the league sort of said, "Oh yeah, well you know, he was aware of it; we're going to support you and this and that…

...when I fully called it a day, I didn't even get any sort of phone calls or anything off the, like, the fixtures secretary or anything or anyone to try and make me stay, which, it almost compounded my decision to think: well, I've done the right thing. You know? I think a few of my colleagues texted me and said they'd noticed my name come off the fixture list and stuff and I got some nice words off them and text messages, but in terms of anyone of any importance, nothing really, and I thought, well: you've done the right thing.

You'd have felt more wanted and you'd have felt that the leagues couldn't do without you in your own sort of pathetic way… But… It didn't happen, so… The way I felt, I could have pushed another season in. I was fit enough. I could have done it, but there was nobody that really wanted us to… Or I got any communication to say… I never got an email that tried to stop us... If you had somebody that you'd trained in the business for ten years, would you let them just wander off? I don't think so.

No one's that arsed. They've probably got now enough referees against the games that they've got, so they're quite happy and that was it and never heard off anyone since, really. So… On one hand, you know, extremely disappointing, but on the other hand, I'm glad I refereed for seven years anyway. I really am.

In expanding upon this issue the participants described what they understood to be a lack of consideration for the needs of referees. Here, several participants noted how their respective requests for a reduced officiating schedule for a variety of reasons (e.g., returning from injury, work, family and educational obligations) were largely ignored. In their own words:

… I then can remember sending an email to [name] – I'd come back from a calf injury – and I announced I was back and set my dates would be open and, erm, to find… And I said, "Look, I'd be quite happy to get three, four games a month, hopefully middles, until I get my fitness back up" and that was no problem where I was… You know, my first month come through and I had four games a week…. So, I did it. You know, you've announced yourself fit;

okay, I'm fit. I just thought the protection of the player in football, you wouldn't give the guy 90 minutes four days a week, but the FA were at that time… So, I did the same again before the next month and just said, "Look, I'm still coming back from this injury; could you reduce my games". "Yep. No problem" and you know where I am… I got four [games] a week for the next month and I thought: right, now it's a job and I knew within my last season, I was finishing.

...so yes, for me it was too burdensome… I felt like if I did reduce my availability my chance of promotion would have been a lot lower or you're seen to not have the right attitude. It's like you had to be all in or not in at all. We all have things to think about and do outside of refereeing, but it was like that stuff didn't matter. I think some flexibility would have made things easier for me to stay involved.

Interestingly, the participants described how assistance from league or county officials when relocating from one region to another for work, family or education reasons (e.g., attending University) would have likely led to them continuing to officiate matches. For example:

When I moved out to XXXX, I said, "Okay, well I'm no longer in XXXXXX [County] FA; it's halfway through the season; I'm not going to register the second half of the season at XXXX… I'll get into it next season"... I probably would have [started again if someone contacted me]. 'Cos I was thinking about it; I was like: Hmm. I've got nothing to so on a Sunday. Could probably go back into refereeing. There is all these youth clubs right here. I could go and do that. Get a little money on a Sunday. You know? At that point, it would have been… Yeah, a little bit of money. So yeah, it might have been… If he'd got to me first, I might have got back into it on a Sunday.

I think the main one was moving to university, so I moved from… I was registered with XXXXXX [location] and I go to university in XXXX [location] right now, so it would have been impossible for me to keep

refereeing in the league that I was, so it would have meant transferring counties and then trying to find a league or someone here that could allocate me matches. And I didn't know how I could be at university… I didn't know how easy it would be to get around to the fields… So, I just thought: well, I'll leave it for a year and then if I get settled in and don't have a job or anything… And if I want to get going again, then I would try and make an effort to get involved again… [but] I haven't heard anything from XXXXXX [County] FA.

The participants also highlighted a number of problematic aspects regarding referees' complaints about the behaviours of players, coaches, club administrators and/or spectators were 'played-down' or 'ignored' by officials. In particular the participants noted:

Complete lack of support from XXX [County] FA after being threatened with violence and having to defend myself on numerous occasions.

...another significant factor was the fact I was assaulted by a 14-year-old schoolboy who jumped on me from behind, knocked me to the floor and repeatedly hit me around the head whilst I was on the floor. There was a lot of sympathy, support and kindness offered by numerous FA bodies, but the child was given a "telling off" and I was offered a "mediation" meeting with him by the Police which would have meant taking a day off work for him to say sorry. I declined. Once I started my Mon-Fri role I did not feel the desire to referee again. The aggravation I had encountered most definitely played a major contributing factor in that decision, so currently my referee's kit remains unused in the garage.

You know, I didn't have somebody around me who really understood or had the empathy I was looking for at the time. I guess, as strange as it may seem, even as a senior cop, I guess I needed an arm round us [me], to be honest…And when I got to the hearing and I didn't get that there either and I didn't get the understanding, I just felt: well, it's a waste of time, this. You don't know… You need to hammer this bloke. You need to hammer this guy

really well; you need to give him the tough fine, the top banning… In fact, I remember thinking to myself: there was a point in that hearing where I was just going to say: "I want this hearing to stop… But all he wanted was to make sure it wasn't race related and they had it down on tape and they had it noted…

It's still hugely dispiriting to see that neither the FA or local leagues are acting in any meaningful way to support the officials through direct action to promote a more positive and respectful outlook from participants.

When referee complaints were acted upon, the participants outlined how they considered the disciplinary system to frequently work against their interests. Here, they described a lack of empathy and advocacy for referees during these processes and disciplinary procedures:

The disciplinary process I had to go through following being assaulted was dreadful. There was zero pre-support before the hearing and the hearing was not victim focused. Totally ended my motivation to continue refereeing.

So, we got to the hearing at [another county] FA who, in my opinion are pretty awful really. Really poor. And the discussion was: they wanted to make it crystal clear that it wasn't race related – it wasn't race related, [name], it wasn't – and I said, "Well, the black and white shout wasn't but the fact that the assistant manager walked off the pitch and said to me, "You've played the race card", that indicated that he's just walked into a different area of discussion. Erm, they didn't want that. They didn't want that and I got that from them; they didn't really want to have to deal with that kind of issue or you know, or… Not once did they say to me "you know what? We understand where you're coming from". You know, "we understand the impact on you or what your perception was of that, of why he said it". You know, and, you know, when you want to hear words such as: it's really unacceptable what this person has actually said, "We're not going to tolerate it". When you want to hear all these words… Bearing in mind that these people didn't even turn up for the hearing. None of these words were used; none of these supporting

words to say it was wrong and this and that… and then the worst thing about it all is that they never tell you the outcome.

I have had, from the days of where it went to hearings at the FA, I felt a couple of times let down by results of, you know, where I think the referee gets undermined, unfortunately. I had one that sticks in my mind, where a guy came in; it was a horrible, horrible tackle. It was a clear red, he was going… And the lad got up and gave the lad the best thump I've ever seen, so I then obviously sent them both off the field of play and the guy that got tackled and did the punching, he appealed. And he won his appeal and the red card got overturned and I thought: where does that leave us? You know, and I went to my RDO [Referee Development Officer] and I said, "I just can't understand how that can be"… And I had to continue in that league. Luckily enough, the team wasn't a bad team that I had ever had any previous with, but your authority's totally undermined at that stage.

I suppose… I spent… I can remember it clearly. I spent the next couple of weeks thinking that's it. I'm done. You know, if nobody's got my back, then why…? You know, we give up our time. If anybody thinks we do it for the money, well, you know, let them get out there and see what we do earn out of the game. We do it for the love of the game, the passion of the game and that was, I think that's a major let-down and I was let down and I was probably not even a level five at that stage and that was me really contemplating to move forward... … One thing… I did find very strange, me as the referee didn't get told the verdict until the next time, I had the team and I asked the player... And that was a real let down...You think: where's your crutch? Who's going to support you?

Although I had two assistants and they were fairly understanding as well. I felt quite alone, really…I didn't have somebody around me who really understood or had the empathy I was looking for at the time.

Combined, these perceived actions were significant, as they were seen to contribute to the feelings of anger and powerlessness that were described in section 4.2.

The issues of support and advocacy were not limited to the participants' discussion of their interactions and relationships with League and County FA officials. Many of the participants described how access to mentors would have helped to reduce the feelings of loneliness and anxiety that were described in sections 4.2. In their own words:

> I feel if I had some support at that first match - another referee present to watch over me, or offer words of support/advice pre-match, at half-time and full-time, this might have helped relieve some of the pressure. They might have been able to talk me round and encourage me to come back again, but I doubt it. To show up on that first match day alone, having completed a single weekend's training, seemed bizarre. I just felt I was filling a space.

> There are games where I was watched by the FA and those were the ones where it felt a lot different. 'Cos there's be someone at half time speak to you… so I didn't feel too daunted there. 'Cos even you know, they'd come up and half time and say "Oh, you didn't put your hand up for this" or, you know, "Your positioning was a bit wrong for that" then it felt like I was being supported.

> There was no one immediately I could go to and say "Was that right? What would I have done differently?"... There wasn't anyone there who I could immediately go to and say "Was that the right decision, afterwards?" and even from a personal safety perspective I suppose, as well. I felt like if they had all turned on me, then it would literally just be me against everyone else and I would have to make a run for it or… I don't feel like there was anyone there who might be able to step in and sort it out. I mean, I wouldn't expect them to provide bodyguards or anything like that but just a friendly face to make it two against 22 or whatever.

Equally, for those participants who had access to mentors, issues regarding the quality of mentoring were raised. Specifically, the participants described how they felt some mentors did not engage with them in a particularly productive manner in terms of the time they afforded to a referee and, relatedly, the way in which referees' concerns were addressed. In their own words:

It would be a lie if I said there was absolutely nothing. I was assigned a mentor who was really helpful when she was there, but she only turned up for one of my first games and then I never heard from her again. The worst part about the level you start out at is that there are no other officials there on a match day to help you and you have to use club officials to run the line who are all totally useless at it. There was a cup semi-final and a XXX XXXX [Club] academy match where I had other officials there too and in the case where there were more experienced ones it was great because you had people to look up to base your performance on and evaluate how well you respond to criticism. However, I was mostly in cold, wet fields on Sunday mornings that I had to travel a considerable distance to get to only to be out there on my own getting no encouragement, advice or feedback on how I could improve. Instead I was berated every time I made a decision nearly and was told it was wrong. This was extremely damaging to my self-confidence with nobody there to reassure if I had made the correct decision or not. I believe that if I did have the appropriate support and mentoring then I would still be officiating now but for the sake of my own mental well-being I simply had to stop.

I think we spoke all of three times in an entire season. Entire season. I showed up, I watched one of his games...After his match, he'd come and... He would just talk to me for like 15 minutes. I'd travelled there, spent an hour there and he'd talk to me for 15 minutes and you're off...I think he came to two of my matches. He watched the first half and the second one. He came and watched the full match and the second match he came to, he watched the first half, then

he was off... He did not impassion me to continue being a referee. As a mentor, you should be encouraging me to want to do this and be better.

I did have a mentor, but he wasn't at my first game; it was another referee who was quite senior in the local area who helped me out and he was friendly, he gave me advice. It was after the first game that support sort of dwindled a bit. I didn't have anyone there for my second game and because of that, the teams were not informed that it was only my second game ever, so they were not quite as nice… I do remember coming back from that, thinking that was really hard. It was probably just a few basic mistakes that I made or decisions that the teams weren't a huge fan of me – or at least one of them and I felt a bit defeated after that, really. I didn't really know exactly what to do because I was still a kid at the time, really, so there weren't really any adults to ask for any help from because all the adults there were team members, really. Just… I couldn't tell how many of the mistakes that I made were acceptable mistakes for someone of my level and how many of them were unacceptable; things that I probably shouldn't have screwed up on. And there was no tutor there to be asked the question, so…

For some of the participants, the decision to cease officiating was not only influenced by the events and occurrences outlined above and in section 4.2, but also the frustrations they associated with a lack of progression and promotion opportunities. Here, the participants described what they considered to be a 'glass ceiling' that limited their access to higher levels of officiating, and problems associated with a change in the promotion criteria for referees. For example:

But I always said to myself, as soon as I felt it was a task, a chore, or it was feeling like work, I would stop…And I think that's where I got to…, there was a few things… Disappointment…We've all had it; people will think it's sour grapes, disappointing assessments, you know, where… We're not silly. It's like all footballers; you know if you've had a good game; you know if you don't… I had games… Some I can still remember, clearly, I had a brilliant

game, I come off the field of play, assessor come in, or observer, spoke to us after a brilliant, brilliant game. I thought: this [is] it. And you get a 72, 73 and I thought: what's the next stage above 'excellence'? Where do I go? You know, to me, excellence is the pinnacle. So I've done excellent to get a 72, 73, so… You know, we all know 75 plus and… It's a strange one to bring up but I've always struggled to understand how it's out of 100.

The FA changed the promotion criteria at a point in the season when nothing could be done about it. I had finished in the top percentile of referees over several seasons and in that season had finished top of the county list at level 3. I had only had four AR [assistant referee] appointments by end November and even though the promotion criteria did not state a minimum number of AR roles to be completed XXXX decided at an FA meeting after November that any promotion candidate had had to have had five AR appointments. I was totally disillusioned by the fact that this could be done when no one had any chance of doing anything about it. Personally felt that this had been done in a draconian way.

Frustration at lack of support from FA and also at the promotion system - which is based only on time served rather than ability and talent. There's no mentoring or supervision or encouragement. We are treated like cattle. It's not surprising people give up.

I felt that the promotion system was flawed. Two seasons in a row I was very close to being in the top band and in the last game I was assessed I was assessed by assessors from other member Associations who gave me really poor marks in games where I'd fulfilled enough of the promotion criteria to warrant a higher mark. Until the promotion system isn't based on how well someone can write a report it will be flawed. In my opinion it should just be a series of yes/no questions for the assessor to fill in and it come out with a mark at the end of it. At the moment there is too much politics in refereeing.

The second time this happened I initially decided to take a year out as I was demotivated, thinking I would come back. However, I re-joined my local tennis club and found I enjoy doing that far more so didn't go back.

When sharing their thoughts and feelings on this topic, the participants also highlighted a mismatch between the verbal feedback they received from observers (assessors) and the written comments that were subsequently provided in the observers' written reports. For example, participants recounted the following:

Right, so, I found myself quite near the top of the league table and I went into this game and this assessor – it was my last assessment; I'd already had my five assessments – but they sent an assessor for this day and he was a county [place] official and a [place] official. I got there and for some reason this assessor knew exactly where I was in the league table, he told me where everybody else was in the league table, how well I was doing, blah, blah, blah blah… and the game itself passed without incident and I thought that's going to be an average mark, I am going to be absolutely fine. The mark came back – completely was, it was, it didn't, erm, what's the word I am looking for, it didn't correspond to the writing in the report in my opinion. And that knocked me… Had an assessment in March, so the new season had started for us and that assessment went well, it was a XXXXXX [place] FA official, assessor, I believe, it went absolutely fine, and then I got given the same assessor in April and he did exactly the same thing again, and that point I just thought I am going to have to wait 11 months to get another chance of getting promoted again, and even then, you know, it's going to be very difficult for me after that, and to be fair, I found it really demotivating, and because of that, and I didn't actually have the drive, do you know, I didn't have the incentive… it impacted on my refereeing quite considerably, and I found my personal performance completely dropped off a cliff after that happened.

I thought I was banging my head against the wall. I was getting good marks

but not the great marks I was after. Sometimes, I'd be really enthused by the post-game comments and then the report would knock me back. It was good, don't get me wrong. But sometimes I'd thought I'd cracked it and got above 75. Then the report would arrive and I hadn't. I just didn't know how I could get 75 and above...Eventually, I thought I couldn't get to where I wanted to with refereeing and it dulled my enthusiasm. I didn't want to stay at the level I was at indefinitely.

Finally, while the participants generally found their interactions with tutors during the Basic Referees Course to be positive, they outlined how they wished the tutors could have facilitated learning experiences that did not just focus on knowing, interpreting and applying the laws of the game. Whilst clearly appreciating the need to develop their knowledge of the rules of the game and their application, the participants also believed that it would also have been helpful to engage in learning that prepared them for managing relationships with people and dealing with conflict. In their own words:

Think there could be a little more emphasis on how to deal with spectators, particularly if people intend to go into the junior game. From both my playing and officiating experience, the level of anger is obscene from people on the sidelines. It doesn't tend to be coaches, more parents that aren't involved with the running of the team

The practical elements of the course were far too brief. You're given a few minutes of officiating a 4/5-a-side game between the other candidates, and it doesn't come close to replicating a likely real-life match environment. For people who haven't experienced amateur football in-depth, the first match-day experience would be a severe shock to the system. Also, there were some candidates on the course who clearly weren't suitable. I remember thinking they were going to get eaten alive as referees. It didn't give me much confidence in the process - indeed it made me assume the Referees Course

was maybe just a money-spinner for the FA, in the same way the Level 1 coaching course is viewed by many in the football coaching community.

Of course, it's important to have a thorough knowledge of the rules and the processes. You've got to have that. But you're dealing with people and that's not always a bed of roses. I think spending more time on the realities of dealing with people would have been good. Make the preparation fit the reality. You know, how to handle aggressive players and spectators and the like. A lot of the job is about that, sadly.

I've always been… I don't want to say a 'yes man' in that sort of sense, but just sort of: no sort of self-assertiveness or anything like that; after this refereeing, in my future job, my boss, who was great, said, "you're not a very assertive person, are you?" And I'd known her for about ten years by this time and she sort of did some assertiveness training with me… I didn't know if there was any… Any sort of assertiveness training or stuff about making yourself heard on the pitch, but I feel that's one thing that wasn't in the courses that I did. They taught you all about the laws of the game and how to speak to managers and, you know, just go up to a manager and just say "you, know, any more words out of you and just I'm going to: one email; a nice 50-mile round trip for you. Shut up. I've had enough". And I got that but, in my brain,, I know it sounds stupid, but I don't have the balls to say that to a manager. It's like I've got all the know-how and I've got all the knowledge of the game in my head and everything but I haven't got the balls to say it to anybody and I think that was my problem and that's the one thing that I felt was missing.

4.4 Making Sense of Referee Attrition: A relational and Interactionist Reading

In this section we provide a brief theoretical interpretation of the participants' experiences and sense-making outlined in sections 4.2 and 4.3. Crucially, the data

highlighted how the participants' decision to stop officiating was grounded in their embodied, dialogical relations with others (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011). In particular, the findings illustrated how their choices to leave the refereeing role were formed amid relationships with various significant others over time (Crossley, 2011). These primarily included regular interactions with players, coaches, club officials and spectators, and also less frequent but equally important connections with other officials, referee administrators and mentors or assessors. The nature of relations within this web of interactions generated "opportunities and constraints both in general, for all of those involved, and more specifically for those who occup[ied] particular positions within them" (Crossley, 2010, p.347). For the participants in this study, the constraints associated with their position included the problematic interactions with the various others explored in sections 4.2 and 4.3. These ultimately led to the participants to feel underappreciated, lonely and unsupported in their role as a referee. As a consequence, the participants increasingly questioned the value of this activity and the time spent away from family, friends and other leisure activities, performing it. It is perhaps unsurprising that they then chose to leave the refereeing role.

A further key issue highlighted in this study is that being a member of a social network is to occupy a position in relation to others (e.g., to be a mentee to a mentor; a referee to players) that also entails exchange and interdependence (Crossley, 2016). For example, players, coaches and spectators are dependent on the referee to be able to play, coach and watch a game of football, and referees are dependent on these others have a game to referee. To enact this interdependence, referees exchange their skills and time in return for a modest fee and trusting that certain working conditions will be maintained. These social positions, exchanges and interdependencies are thus characterised by social conventions that influence expectations about behaviour (e.g., being treated with respect and dignity). Continued interaction within the network becomes "problematic when these conventions break down or cease to work" (Crossley, 2011 p.34). Put simply, contravening expectations has consequences (Crossley, 2010). For instance, the participants in this study clearly expected to be able to 'reach out' to mentors and FA officials who could empathise and counsel them. In the absence of this anticipated support, and as their emotional patience, tolerance and stamina became increasingly strained by the issues outlined in sections

4.2 and 4.3 (Burkitt, 2014), continuing to referee became untenable and they withdrew from the network.

Our findings also illustrated the inherently emotional dimensions of refereeing and how repeated and strong feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, guilt and loneliness contributed to the participants' decision to cease officiating. Rather than being an a dispassionate, rational and calculating activity, refereeing was, for the participants in this study at least, imbued with emotion. That is, emotions were a permanent dimension of their being in the social world of football and their relations with others (Crossley, 2011). Importantly, the study illuminated some of the ways in which the participants' emotional experiences were produced in, as well as through, the interaction of self and other in a particular social context (Burkitt, 2014). Indeed, rather than being "internal to an individual and his or her biological constitution" (Burkitt, 2014, p. 127), the emotions the participants experienced were generated, experienced, and expressed through their interdependent relations with others. For example, the participants' experiences of anger, self-doubt, and loneliness were rooted in how the participants thought others felt about them. This was primarily determined by how the participants evaluated the "actions, looks, gestures and intonations" of others (Burkitt, 2014, p.111). Ultimately, it was the persistent experiencing of these negative emotions that informed the participants to question the value and future of their identity as a referee. In particular, it could be suggested that the participants became increasingly disenchanted with this role and, ultimately, engaged in a process of emergent self-loss (Scott, 2015). That is, it was the participants' "private feelings of discomfort" that culminated in their desire to be free from the role of a referee (Scott, 2015, p. 166).

5.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

While the present study has provided the largest dataset currently addressing the attrition of referees, it is important to acknowledge that the number of responses is small when compared to the overall national dropout rate (circa. 7,000 referees per annum). Nonetheless, the richness of data provided by the in-depth, qualitative methodology employed in this study has helped to contribute important initial insights on this issue. Importantly, it provides those who govern the game with important considerations for the shaping of policy and practice that attempts to reduce the pervasiveness of this issue. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints imposed on this study and the availability of participants it was not possible to conduct a greater number of interviews or, indeed, to undertake them in an iterative and cyclical manner (i.e., interviewing participants on multiple occasions). As such, while the deadline for submitting this report has been adhered to, we will continue to generate additional data and build an even richer body of researched-evidence on this topic. It is also important to recognise the paradigmatic assumptions that have underpinned this inquiry. Specifically, our approach to studying referee attrition is firmly grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises depth and detail collected from [relatively] small populations as opposed to prioritising a breadth of data upon which to formulate 'law-like' generalisations about the issue in question. We, of course, recognise that researchers subscribing to alternative paradigms (e.g., positivism, post-positivism, critical realism) may explore this topic using a different set of assumptions, methodologies, and claims about the quality or goodness of the research produced.

6.0. IMPACT AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present report has provided the most robust and comprehensive investigation into reasons for referee dropout to date. Specifically, the data set provides novel findings pertaining to the social, emotional and relational nature of this significant international issue. While, we believe that it is not possible to infer direct generalisability to other National Football Associations, our findings provide a fruitful opportunity for *transferability* into nuanced settings (Smith, 2018). Specifically, our findings can be utilised as a critical heuristic device to help national managers reflect upon and consider what can practically be achieved to prevent referees from leaving the game within the bounds of their specific contextual circumstances. Perhaps of most significance is the notable implication that factors contributing toward decisions to dropout of officiating do not stand apart from referees or, indeed, inside referees alone; they are, instead, an intricate part of their interactions, relations and emotional experiences with others. It is in these areas that we believe meaningful work can be advanced to reduce levels of referee attrition. In line with our findings and acknowledging that there is no straightforward panacea to this pressing issue, we encourage National Football Associations to consider how they might foster a sense of community, value and solidarity with and between referees, and, indeed, the amateur/grassroots football network. In order to achieve this goal, Associations may wish to consider the following issues and suggestions:

- The means through which individual referees can be made to feel more valued, connected and supported members of their wider relational networks (i.e., in their interactions with county/national officials, other referees, mentors, observers, club officials, players, league officials and spectators).
- The support and advocacy mechanisms which can be implemented around disciplinary processes and procedures.
- Many referees within our sample implied that if they had been contacted personally by a member within their relational network (i.e., a national, county, or league official) regarding their decision to dropout, they would have been more likely to still be in their role as a match official today. Key to these conversations, in the eyes of participants, was the need for individualised enquiry into their personal wellbeing to demonstrate care and empathy, as

opposed to pleas for continued participation being based solely around the shortage of officials facing the game.

- To consider how the existing Basic Referees Course could be expanded to include broader preparation of referees for the social, relational and emotional demands of their role (e.g., providing referees with key examples to reflect upon in terms of how they might be able to effectively manage their interactions with multiple stakeholders of the game).

- Scaffolded or progressive support following the successful completion of the programme (e.g., structured opportunities to observe and learn from other more experienced match officials).

- A broader range of continual professional development and support opportunities made available to referees at all levels. This may include specifically considering the psychosocial wellbeing of referees.

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