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Fear, anger, and loneliness: Emotional pain and referee attrition in English grassroots football.

Abstract

This interpretive study provides original insights into the socio-emotional experiences that contributed to referee attrition in English grassroots football. Data were generated using an online survey (n=251) and in-depth interviews (n=20) with former referees. Using complementary symbolic interactionist and relational conceptualisations of identity, social interaction, and emotional pain, our analysis addressed the participants' interpretations of their problematic encounters with the various significant others (e.g., coaches, managers, players, spectators, and administrators) that comprised their respective social networks in grassroots football. Importantly, the participants described several emotionally painful issues related to matchday environments, disciplinary proceedings, and deployment and development processes that simultaneously co-existed alongside and exacerbated one another. Our findings present important implications for those individuals and governing bodies who are responsible for referee retention.

Keywords: role identity, role exit, emotional pain, social interaction, football, match officials.

Introduction

According to Frost (2007), emotional pain is an enduring feature of organisational life that stems from a variety of sources. These include, for example, the unreasonable behaviours of stakeholders, the manipulative acts of co-workers, the unrealistic expectations of superiors, disempowering organisational policies, or the loss of a co-worker (Frost, 2007; Ward & McMurray, 2016). When unchecked or ameliorated, such pain can “transform into something more sinister and arguably more dangerous: emotional toxicity” (Ward & McMurray, 2016, p. 72). This refers to both the overt, dramatic or visible (e.g., large scale redundancy programmes) ‘poisoning’ of individuals and organisations, as well as that which occurs in a slow, pervasive and invisible manner (e.g., the bureaucratic erosion of a worker’s enthusiasm over time). Left unabated, this toxicity can lead individuals to exit a particular role (be it paid employment or voluntary in nature) within an organisation. While these issues have received increasing scrutiny in the mainstream sociological study of emotions, work and organisational life (see Walby & Spencer, 2020; Ward & McMurray, 2016; Ward, McMurray & Sutcliffe, 2020), they have received comparably less coverage in the sociology of sport (McNarry & Allen-Collinson, 2020; Nelson, Potrac, Gilbourne, Allanson, Gale, & Marshall, 2012; Roderick, Smith & Potrac, 2017).

In this study, we addressed the emotional pain (Frost, 2007) experienced by former referees and the ways in which their estrangement from the various significant others that formed their respective networks of interaction in English grassroots football (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, administrators, mentors, and observers) became toxic and ultimately led them to voluntarily exit their officiating role (Ebaugh, 1988; Tracy, 2020; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Sadly, while referees make a significant contribution to the provision of organised sports, their attrition in grassroots and community settings remains a deep-rooted, pervasive and enduring issue for sport managers, administrators, and policy makers alike (Webb, Dicks, Thelwell, van der Kamp, & Rix-Lievre, 2020; Webb, Rayner, Cleland, & O’Gorman, 2021). Indeed, the continued failure to retain the requisite numbers of match officials could have significant, problematic outcomes. These include, but are not

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limited to, a reduction in the opportunities for people to safely participate in organised sporting programmes/leagues and, relatedly, reduced income for, and reputational damage to, national sporting associations (Wicker & Frick, 2016; Webb et al, 2021).

Unfortunately, while the social dimensions and challenges of sport officiating have received increased attention (e.g., Cleland, O’Gorman, & Bond, 2015; Forbes, & Livingston, 2012; Hacicaferoglu, Serkan & Gundogdu, 2014; Jones & Edwards, 2013; Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016; Reid & Dallaire, 2019, 2020; Webb, Cleland, & O’Gorman, 2017; Webb et al., 2020), limited work has been conducted with those individuals who have voluntarily chosen to discard this role identity (e.g., Warner, Tingle & Kellett, 2013; Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Webb et al. 2021). While some levels of official attrition are natural due to the changing desires, commitments, priorities (e.g., work, family and/or education), and health of individuals, the worryingly high levels of attrition in many sports cannot be explained by such individual factors alone (Warner et al., 2013; Forbes and Livingston, 2013). Indeed, there is a small but growing evidence base that also connects this problem with match officials’ lived experiences of their roles and interactions in their respective sporting contexts, as well as the ways in which sports organisations prepare, support, reward and generally cater for their well-being (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Webb et al., 2021). For example, Warner et al.’s (2013) study with former basketball officials in the United States of America (USA) illuminated how the participants’ decisions to discontinue in this role were connected to various on- and off-court issues at two key career points. These were a) the retention phase after referees have been recruited into their roles and b) the advancing stage where referees are nurtured towards higher levels of involvement. Interestingly, for referees in the retention phase, problematic social interactions, limited training/mentoring, and the absence of a referee community were highlighted as significant issues. Meanwhile, at the advancing stage, lack of administrator consideration and equity in their decision making were found to be more prevalent in contributing to dropout. In a similar vein, Forbes and Livingston’s (2013) work indicated how the decision to quit officiating in Canadian amateur ice-

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hockey was often connected to various issues that match officials had with their local ice-hockey associations. Specifically, these included the former's perceptions of a lack of a) opportunities to move up ranks, b) appropriate fee structures and compensation, c) assistance to help perform duties effectively, d) consideration given to match officials' best interests when decisions were being made, and e) appreciation of their efforts. Importantly, these studies suggested that referee dropout is unlikely to be monocausal in nature or, indeed, a problem solely located in the characteristics of individuals (i.e., their affective, cognitive and physical stamina and/or desire to succeed) (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Warner et al., 2013). While the above work has laid important foundations for and progressed our understanding of referee attrition, we believe that there is scope for developing rich, nuanced insights into the social and emotional features of this pervasive issue and to understand this issue in the context of other nations and sporting subcultures (i.e., grassroots football in England).

In seeking to build upon the work described above, this study employed multiple methods and complementary symbolic interactionist (e.g., Charmaz, Harris, & Irvine, 2019; Ebaugh, 1988; Scott, 2015; Ward & McMurray, 2016) and relational theorising (e.g., Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011) to provide novel and detailed insights into: a) how the participants' decisions to stop officiating were influenced by their emotional experiences (e.g., fear, guilt, anger, and loneliness) and meaning-making as referees, and b) how their individual sensemaking was, in turn, inextricably entwined with, and generated through, their interactions and exchanges with the various social actors (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, administrators, mentors, and observers) that comprised their respective footballing networks. Importantly, the findings illustrate both the dramatic/overt and the invisible/pervasive dimensions of the emotional pain experienced by the participants (Frost, 2007; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Alongside providing new empirical insights and novel theorisations of referee attrition in grassroots sport, we firmly believe that this study has the potential to support social transformation in this context (Tracy, 2020). Indeed, while some individuals give up refereeing due to various personal (e.g., family, work, and educational commitments) and/or health-related

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reasons (e.g., injury, ill health, mobility issues), we believe it is important that policy makers and managers responsible for recruiting, training, deploying, and supporting match officials recognise the ways in which various sport-specific factors may also contribute to this problem and actively seek to ameliorate them (Ebaugh, 1988; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ward & McMurray, 2016; Webb et al., 2020). After all, these are the issues that those responsible for leading and managing sports organisations can seek to positively influence the most (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Tracy, 2020; Webb et al., 2021).

Methodology

This interpretive study employed two complementary methods to generate a rich and substantive data set. These were a) an online survey and b) in-depth semi-structured interviews. The online survey enabled the research team to access the sense-making of a large number of former referees (251 respondents, 236 males, 12 females, 3 prefer not to say) from across England. The interviews permitted a more detailed exploration of the experiences of individual participants (20 participants, 18 males, 2 females). Here, the questions asked in the follow-up interviews were informed by the findings generated in the online survey. Combined, these methods produced a breadth and depth of data that one method could not have produced alone (Patton, 2015; Tracey, 2020).

Sampling and participant recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited using purposive and opportunistic sampling techniques (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, all participants were required to have a) undertaken an initial referee qualification with the National Association (e.g., The FA's Basic Referee Course) and b) to have engaged in and then ceased officiating in grassroots football in England. For clarity, grassroots football was defined as a physical leisure activity, typically, local and community based in its scope, pursued primarily for health, educational and social benefit, and not necessarily competitive (House of Lords European Union Committee, 2011; European Commission, 2016). In the context of this study, grassroots football is constituted of organised recreational leagues

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and programmes of fixtures for adults, youths, and children, respectively. The Football Association (e.g., FA National Referee Managers) provided expert judgement and support in terms of accessing participants. Following the receipt of institutional ethical approval, the research team was provided with a contact list of all officials who had dropped out (i.e., not re-affiliated as a match official with their respective County Football Association). Subsequently, all former officials on the database were contacted by e-mail and provided with a link to the online survey. The link to this survey was simultaneously posted on social media platforms to increase outreach. Upon completion of the survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to take part in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Participants who consented to being interviewed were contacted by e-mail to arrange a convenient date, time and format. The interviews were then conducted in person or via Skype or telephone. All participants provided written and verbal consent before participating in the survey and/or interview phase of the research. The mean age of participants was 41 years of age (the youngest was 16 years and oldest was 81 years).

Online survey

The online survey sought to generate a robust dataset addressing the social and emotional issues connected to referee dropout. The questionnaire consisted 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 were a) the demographic information of participants, b) motives to become a referee, c) expectations of refereeing, d) experiences of participating within The FA's Basic Referee Course, e) in-role interactions and emotions as a referee, f) factors that underpinned the decision to stop being a match official, g) considerations for change (e.g., factors which may have contributed toward changing an individual's decision to cease refereeing), and h) an invitation to participate in the interview phase of the study.

In-depth interviews

In addition to the survey, in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted. In-depth interviews are excellent tools for gaining rich insights into the meaning-making and emotional experiences of research participants. They also enabled us to further explore a number of issues identified in our analysis of the online survey data (Josselson, 2013). Indeed, 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 drop out of refereeing (Josselson, 2013). An interview guide was developed and piloted with a small sample of former referees. Following this process and the making of some minor modifications, the final interview guide comprised seven sections. These were: a) demographic information, b) motives to become a referee, c) expectations of refereeing, d) participation in The FA's Basic Referee 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 interviews, the initial questions focused on building rapport and easing the participant into the interview process (e.g., questions concerning the referee's background) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). 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 (e.g., Can you tell me more about that?), clarification (e.g., Could you provide an example for me?) and detail oriented (e.g., Who was with you when that happened?) probes were used to secure in-depth accounts of each participant's experiences and meaning-making (Gale, Ives, Nelson, & Potrac, 2019; Merriam, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). At the close of each interview, participants were asked an open 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

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& Brinkmann, 2009). 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 or telephone interviewing provided a robust alternative (Hanna, 2012). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were subject to an iterative and recursive process of analysis. This involved moving between the emic interpretation of the data and the etic application of explanatory social theory (Tracy, 2020). The initial emic (or emergent) analysis 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 (e.g., who, what, when, and where). This required the 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 document any emerging relationships, patterns, and comparisons between codes (Tracy, 2020).

Following the completion of the initial primary coding cycle, the analysis moved to the secondary, etic phase. Here, theory and literature were used to generate explanations (e.g., how, why, because) of the participants’ understandings and experiences (Ives, Gale, Nelson, & Potrac, in press; Tracy, 2020). This primarily entailed utilising interactionist (Charmaz et al., 2019; Ebaugh, 1988; Sandstrom, Lively, Martin, & Fine, 2014; Scott, 2015) and relational theorising (Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011). The secondary cycle also entailed grouping primary codes into hierarchical categories, identifying codes that were a consequence of another, and critically considering how the codes connected to the overarching aims of the study (Tracy, 2020). Throughout the analysis, member reflections and discussions with critical friends were employed to support the development of the findings presented and the theoretical sense-making that accompanied them (Gale et al., 2019;

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Ives et al., in press; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Overall, this approach allowed us to a) ‘listen’ to the data, b) share, consider, and fuse complementary theoretical ideas, and c) develop nuanced insights into the inextricably social, relational and emotionally laden features of the participants’ decisions to stop refereeing in grassroots football.

Heuristic framework

Given our focus was on examining the relationally constructed nature of the participants’ emotional experiences and meaning-making, we fused complementary symbolic interactionist (e.g., Charmaz et al., 2019; Ebaugh, 1988; Sandstrom et al., 2014; Scott, 2015; Ward & McMurray, 2016) and relational theorising (e.g., Burkitt, 2014; Crossley, 2011) to form our heuristic framework. Here, their respective discussions of role identities, role expectations, social networks/worlds, and emotions proved to be especially valuable to our theoretical sense-making. From symbolic interactionist and relational perspectives, identity refers to “the set of integrated ideas about the self, the roles we play, and the qualities that make us unique” (Scott, 2015, p. 2). In our social lives, we can assume a multitude of role identities (i.e., a position that one holds and enacts within a particular social structure) (Charmaz et al., 2019; Scott, 2015). However, role identities are not stable or permanent entities. Instead, they are processual (i.e., capable of continuous change), performative (i.e., formed, revised, or discarded through interactions and encounters with others), and pragmatic (i.e., made tangible through specific courses of action) in nature (Burkitt, 2014; Scott, 2015). Essentially, then, they are created, maintained, challenged, or exited through the process of social interaction, with an individual’s sense-making and responses to the symbolic meanings of other social actors being important (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Scott, 2015). Importantly, Ebaugh (1988) outlined how role identities can vary in their centrality or importance to an individual. Specifically, she highlighted how some of the role identities we play are afforded master status (i.e., they are strongly imbued with emotion). These are the role identities around which we organise our self-identities and are the ones whose loss can have devastating consequences for an individual. In contrast, other role identities are

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more peripheral to an individual's sense of self and, as such, their abandonment can be experienced with "little personal trauma or sense of loss" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 36).

Rather than being monads or formed through dyadic interaction, role identities are developed, enacted, revised, and exited in networks of multiple relations and interactions (Crossley, 2011; Salvini, 2010; Scott, 2015). As such, role-based decision making (e.g., to stop refereeing) is shaped by the configuration of relations (e.g., players, coaches, spectators, league administrators, referee observers, and referee mentors, among others) in which an individual is embedded and, importantly, the quality of relationships that they enjoy (or not) with these others (Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015). Indeed, Crossley (2011) noted that how a social actor responds to 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" (p. 2). In a related vein, interactionist thought suggests that the decision to leave or exit a particular role identity is often based on an individual's doubts about their ability or willingness to continue performing it, which, in turn, emerge out of interaction with others (Sandstrom et al., 2014). That is, "we define the situation and decide how to act towards it [a role identity] by taking account the unfolding intentions, actions, and expressions of others" (Sandstrom et al., 2014, p. 12). Indeed, the work of Ward and McMurray (2016) and Ebaugh (1988) suggested that an individual's decision to exit or disengage from a role identity can emanate from particular events and interactions that may cause disappointments, negative changes in relationships and/or, overtime, lead to burnout (i.e., lost enthusiasm, frustration, and exhaustion).

As well as being interactive social constructions, role identities are experienced, or felt, emotionally. Instead of being something that can be turned on or off in our relations with others, emotions are "a permanent dimension of our being in the world and being towards others" (Crossley, 2011, p. 62). Emotions (e.g., anger, pride, joy, and fear, among others) are, therefore, not a solely internal and individual phenomenon. Instead, they are socially acquired and structured (Crossley, 2011; Burkitt, 2014; Thoits, 2013); they are produced in, and through, our relations and interactions

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with others. For example, Burkitt (2014, p. 15) argued that we cannot love or hate “without that relational sense”; it is the behaviours and choices of others that can affect us. Similarly, interactionist theorising has highlighted how emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride “arise when we evaluate our own conduct through the eyes of significant others and consider its implications for our social and moral status” (Scott, 2015, p. 7). Equally, negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, and disappointment) can also emanate from our belief that those in our social networks do not regard, or respond to, us in a role appropriate or confirming manner (Burke & Erven, 2019).

The issues of emotional pain and emotional toxicity in the workplace have been considered by Ward and McMurray (2016). Drawing on the work of Frost (2007), they suggested that emotional pain can be caused by intention (e.g., the purposeful degradation of other), incompetence (e.g., poor leadership and management practices), infidelity (e.g., a sense of betrayal or an erosion of trust), insensitivity (e.g., a lack of empathy, compassion and appreciation) and institutional forces, (e.g., policies that erode the confidence of ‘workers’ or harm them). For them, when organisations provide few or no (formal or informal) mechanisms for alleviating the emotional pain of workers, this pain can become emotionally toxic. This can not only degrade the organisational commitment and performances of an individual, but it can also spread to ‘infect’ or ‘malaise’ those who come into contact with it. Voluntarily exiting a particular role identity often then becomes an indicator of, as well as a method for coping with, emotional pain that has become toxic. (Ward & McMurray, 2016).

Results

Similar to the findings of recent related research in other sporting contexts (e.g., Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Warner et al., 2013), the participants highlighted how their choice to quit refereeing was a result of the emotional pain that they experienced in their encounters with a range of interdependent stakeholders in grassroots football (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Scott, 2015). For some, these interactions led them to discard their refereeing role identity very quickly. For others, the decision to stop officiating was one that took a longer period of time and reflection to arrive at.

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Often, it was the coexistence and inter-related nature of these negative interactions and relationships with multiple stakeholders that ultimately led the participants to reach a critical juncture or turning point regarding their refereeing role identity (Ebaugh, 1988; Scott, 2015; Strauss, 1969; Ward & McMurray, 2016). This was eloquently illustrated by one participant, who 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]?

(Participant 64, Interview)

In the rest of this results section, we present the participants' understandings of problematic encounters and relationships with key stakeholders that formed their networks of interaction in grassroots football. These are: a) matchday encounters with players, coaches, and spectators, b) interactions with league administrators and participation in formal disciplinary matters, and c) engagement with league officials, referee administrators, mentors, observers, and educators regarding their education, development, deployment, and progression as referees. Within each subsection, we provide specific examples of the participants' experiences and meaning making, the emotions that featured in these interactions, as well as the ways in which each subsection is interconnected with the others. These data extracts are drawn from our integrated analysis of both the open-ended survey questions and the interview dataset.

Match day interactions: Fear, anger, guilt and loneliness

The participants frequently characterised their match day interactions with players, coaches, spectators, and club officials as abusive and unappreciative affairs, which caused them to have significant doubts about their ongoing participation and competence as a referee. This included being the recipients of verbal and, sometimes, physical abuse, which could also be racist or homophobic in form. In their own words:

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 show that women can do this job as well. I did

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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".

(Participant 04, Interview)

Importantly, the participants explained how their exposure to, and reflections on, such encounters had generated strong, negative emotions. Chief among these were feelings of fear and anxiety about their safety. For example, one participant 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 - 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, 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...?

(Participant 40, Interview)

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

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 half". 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. As soon as it was over the rest of the Sunday was great, then. And then on 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

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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 like and all the rest of them [i.e., players and spectators].

(Participant 17, Interview)

This sense of anxiety was frequently accompanied by feelings of anger and powerlessness.

Here, the participants explained how these emotions were grounded in their belief that little could or would be done to challenge or prevent the problematic encounters described above from reoccurring.

For example:

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 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.

(Participant 30, Survey)

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 doubt their competence as a referee. In particular, this on-going questioning of their respective performances as referees led to feelings of shame. For example:

I felt like it was my fault that managers were saying these things. I felt like: 'My God, I'm being a bad referee here'; 'Did I make 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.

(Participant 33, Interview)

In summarising the impact of these problematic match day encounters with others, the participants illuminated how they ultimately contributed to a strong sense of loneliness. In this respect, they believed that they lacked a meaningful social connection or bond with the community

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(e.g., players, coaches, spectators, club officials) that they sought to help most in their refereeing role.

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.

(Participant, 179, Survey)

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, warmed up on your own and then, a lot of the time, probably felt very alone in the middle of the pitch as well, because... not every game just runs seamlessly and smoothly and nicely. So again, feeling very much alone in the middle of the pitch.

(Participant 64, Interview)

Inadequate advocacy and support regarding disciplinary matters: Betrayal, frustration and loneliness

The participants highlighted how their problematic encounters and relationships on match days were interconnected with, and exacerbated by, feelings of betrayal, frustration and loneliness that they experienced in and through their interactions with those who were responsible for the welfare of the referee in disciplinary matters. Immediately after matches where league representatives had been in attendance, some referees felt let down by a lack of advocacy or support:

There were times where I've felt that The FA just didn't understand. You know? There was one occasion I remember, 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 [assistant referee], 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, 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...

(Participant 18, Interview)

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Where these matters were escalated to disciplinary hearings, the participants highlighted that they often felt very alone in these meetings and, relatedly, that there was a lack of empathy and advocacy for referees from the administrators who were supposed to be responsible for their well-being and development. For example:

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 need to hammer this bloke; 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 [the reported incident] wasn't race related and they had it down on tape.

(Participant 18, Interview)

The participants also felt that, where instances had been reported or where complaints had been made, these were often "played down" or "ignored" by officials. One participant noted: "Complete lack of support from [County] FA after being threatened with violence and having to defend myself on numerous occasions" (*Participant 153, survey*). Where the outcome of these hearings was perceived to be unjust, the participants felt that their authority and integrity had been undermined and that they had been betrayed by those who should hold a duty of care towards referees. This exacerbated the sense of powerlessness referred to in section above. One participant noted:

I have had, from the days of where it went to hearings at the [county] 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? 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... our authority is totally undermined at that stage.

(Participant 204, Interview)

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In some cases, the referees reported that they did not receive the outcome of the disciplinary hearing and that this information only came to the surface with subsequent match day experiences. In their own words:

Not at any stage did I get anything, an email to say what was the outcome of the hearing. I had the decency to go to the hearing and then I find out the next time I had that team what the verdict had been. And that was a real let-down. You think: where's your crutch? Who's going to support you?

(Participant 201, Survey)

Education, deployment and assessment: Underpreparedness, underappreciation, frustration and loneliness

The participants also highlighted how their interactions with tutors, mentors, observers and administrators (i.e., league and county officials) influenced their decision to stop officiating. Generally, the participants suggested that interactions with tutors on the Basic Referee Course prepared them well in terms of learning and applying the laws of the game. However, they felt that they were under-prepared to manage relations and conflict with other stakeholders on a match day. For example:

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.

(Participant 134, Survey)

Often, this sense of under-preparedness contributed to participants' feelings of anxiety, fear and incompetence leading up to a match day that were described in the section above.

The participants also reported how impersonal interactions with officials who were responsible for referee appointments made them feel underappreciated and, in some cases, as if they were little more than a resource or commodity to be deployed. In their own words:

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 registered, and I'd probably still be fulfilling fixtures. If there wasn't that feeling about it, then I'd

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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. I very much felt you were just a resource that was 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. 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?

(Participant 34, Interview)

Relatedly, the participants also felt that administrators were often inflexible or asked too much of them as referees. Here, several participants noted how their respective requests for a reduced officiating schedule (e.g., after returning from injury, or for work, family and educational commitments) were largely ignored. This served to intensify feelings of underappreciation. In their own words:

... I can remember sending an email to [name] – I'd come back from a calf injury – and I announced I was back and said my dates would be open... 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 came 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. 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.

(Participant 204, Interview)

For me it was too burdensome. I felt like if I reduced 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.

(Participant 112, Survey)

The participants also noted their access to, or quality of interactions with, referee mentors as a contributing factor in their decision to exit the refereeing role. Here, the participants reported feeling lonely and under supported where no mentoring was received. For example:

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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.

(Participant 198, Survey)

For those participants who did have mentors, the quality and nature of interactions with mentors was often stated to be problematic. As alluded to in earlier sections, this contributed to the participants' sense of devaluation and demotivation to continue in their role:

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, 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 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.

(Participant 68, Interview)

For some participants, their decision to cease officiating was also influenced by a perceived lack of progression or promotion opportunities. Here, these participants referred to a perceived "glass ceiling" that restricted their access to higher levels of officiating:

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 were 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, 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 [is a good mark] and... It's a strange one to bring up but I've always struggled to understand how it's out of 100.

(Participant 179, Interview)

In expanding their thoughts on these issues, the participants also noted that their interactions with observers (assessors) were not suitably reflected in the written report provided post-match. This contributed to participants' feelings of frustration, anger and disillusionment:

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 [from the observer] 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.

(Participant 82, Survey)

Discussion

From our perspective, the participants' respective decisions to discard their refereeing role identity were heavily influenced by the emotional pain that was formed in and through their embodied, dialogical relations with those who comprised their respective social networks (or role set) in grassroots football (Burkitt, 2014; Charmaz et al., 2019; Ebaugh, 1988; Crossley, 2011; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Indeed, in line with Reid and Dallaire's (2020) recent work that illuminated how female referees actively constructed and experienced their sense of self in and through their relations with various stakeholders (e.g., male instructors, players, coaches and fellow referees), our results illustrated how the participants' choice to discard their refereeing role identity was similarly connected to their subjective experiences of the role (i.e., emotionally painful changes in self-image and reflexive sense-making). These, in turn, were influenced by their interactions with the various others that formed their football-specific network (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Scott, 2015; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Importantly, the participants' emotional pain could be understood in relation to the issue of identity (non)verification and, relatedly, the failure to obtain a shared definition of the situation with various stakeholders (Charmaz et al., 2019; Sandstrom et al., 2014; Scott, 2015). In terms of the former, the self-doubt towards role performance expressed by some participants was socially and relationally generated; in this case, through the actual appraisals (i.e., direct feedback from others) and reflected appraisals (i.e., the individuals' perception of how they think others view them) of others (Crossley, 2011; Savage, Stets, Burke, & Sommer, 2017). Here, the disconnect between the disapproving feedback of others and the meanings and expectations attached to

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appropriate refereeing performance led the participants to experience identity non-verification. This proved to be particularly problematic for their self-efficacy, self-esteem and, in some cases, psychological well-being (Burke & Stets, 2009; Savage et al., 2017; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Importantly, these issues were closely connected to, and compounded by, limited opportunities to train and prepare for such challenging (inter)actions in their initial preparation programme and ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) programmes. Indeed, for the participants, there were few or no (informal or formal) mechanisms in place to help alleviate the emotional pain that they experienced (Ward & McMurray, 2016; Webb et al., 2021). Without such resources, it is perhaps unsurprising that their emotional pain ultimately became toxic (Ward & McMurray, 2016).

In terms of the failure to obtain a shared definition of the situation (i.e., an agreement with others about what is “going on” in a given situation and how actions are to be coordinated to realise goals), the participants outlined a variety of situations in which they believed that their emotional pain stemmed from the failure of others to engage in appropriate role performance and, relatedly, respect the interdependency of relationships in this network of interaction (Crossley, 2011; Sandstrom et al., 2014). Among other examples, these included the abusive and unappreciative behaviour of some players, coaches, and spectators, and the perceived lack of empathy, advocacy, honesty, and support provided by some administrators, observers, and mentors. Importantly, the participants considered others’ failure to engage in appropriate or desirable actions to represent a betrayal of the social contract that existed between them (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Ward & McMurray, 2016). This was a source of considerable frustration, confusion, and discomfort for the participants (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Sandstrom et al., 2014; Ward & McMurray, 2016). Indeed, the perceived contravening of social expectations by others really mattered to the participants; it ultimately proved to have a significant impact on their willingness to continue to invest in their role identity as a referee and, consequently, contribute to the continued functioning of this network (Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2015; Ward & McMurray, 2016). This finding is certainly in keeping with related work highlighting the sport specific issues that underpin match official attrition

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in other nations and settings (e.g., Forbes, & Livingston, 2013; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2021).

In a related vein, the findings also illustrate how the participants believed their respective sense of dignity was frequently violated by the acts of rudeness, indifference, bullying, condemnation, exclusion, and diminishment expressed towards them by others (Jacobson, 2009). In this case, the participants recalled how, in addition to receiving sometimes vitriolic and one-sided criticisms of their in-role performances and decision making, they could also be the subject of homophobic, racist, and sexist abuse from individual, as well as groups of, players, coaches, and spectators. On one level, the participants experiences reflect the traditionally masculine, negative, and aggressive features of player, coach, and spectator behaviour that have historically permeated English grassroots football (Cleland, O’Gorman & Bond, 2015; Jeanes & Magee, 2011; Webb et al., 2021). On another level, they also reflect research addressing mobbing behaviour towards sports officials (i.e., Hacicaferoglu & Gundogdu, 2014). Indeed, our data highlighted how many participants considered themselves to be the target of persistent and collective acts of intimidation (i.e., systematic, hostile and unethical interactions) from players, coaches, spectators, and club officials, which caused both immediate and long-term emotional pain. Combined, these findings potentially represent a sad and problematic situation for policy makers. Specifically, that, while racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-social behaviour are regarded as inappropriate at all levels of English football, the current structural and cultural arrangements support a reality where such comments and behaviours still remain a largely ‘normalised’ feature of participation in grassroots football (Brackenridge, Pitchford & Wilson, 2011; Cleland, O’Gorman & Webb, 2017; Farquharson, Spaaij, Gorman, Jeanes, Lusher & Magee, 2019; Webb et al., 2020). While the concept of dignity has received little explicit attention in the sociology of sport literature, we believe developing a rich understanding of the ways in which this form of respect and worth are understood, violated, conveyed, and promoted through individual and collective behaviour is a fertile ground for scholars and policy makers in sport alike (Jacobson, 2009).

Finally, alongside causing feelings of anxiety, frustration, shame and disappointment, we believe the constraining and unpleasant aspects of these relationships with others led the participants to experience both social and emotional loneliness. Here, the former refers to a “perceived lack of peer social networks or others who share common values”, while the latter is concerned with a “perceived lack of attachment or bond with significant others” within a community (Qualter et al., 2009, p. 1462). Ultimately, this sense of loneliness contributed to the participants’ perception that their situation could not be meaningfully changed (i.e., it had and would continue to be emotionally toxic) and that the only way to cope with the emotional pain was to choose “to be free of” (Scott, 2015, p. 167) their refereeing role identity (Crossley, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988; Ward & McMurray, 2016). This finding provides further evidence in support of national and international calls (e.g., Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Webb et al., 2021) to prioritise the development of sporting communities in which match officials actively ‘feel’ that they are empathetically treated and valued by players, coaches, spectators, club officials, and regional and national sporting administrators alike.

Conclusion

Among the first to provide a voice to those individuals who have made the decision to cease participation in grassroots football refereeing, this study reflects the positioning of match-officials as an often poorly treated, outsider group in the social world of football (e.g., Dell et al., 2016; Forbes, Edwards, & Fleming, 2015; Reid & Dallaire, 2019; Webb et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020). Crucially, our findings illustrated how the participants’ emotional pain (i.e., fear, anger, shame, anxiety, and loneliness) and subsequent decision to exit their officiating role was tied to their understandings of the intentions (e.g., purposefully harmful acts), insensitivity (e.g., a lack of compassion, empathy, and appreciation), and infidelity of others (e.g., an erosion of trust and a sense of being, infidelity of others). Indeed, rather than being “internal to an individual and his or her biological constitution” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 127), the participants’ emotional pain was generated, experienced, and expressed through their interdependent relations with others (Ward & McMurray, 2016). Here, the participants’

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evaluations of the “actions, looks, gestures and intonations” of others were pivotal (Burkitt, 2014, p.111). For example, the participants’ experiences of anger and frustration reflected their view that others (e.g., abusive players, unsupportive administrators) had purposefully or unintentionally (e.g., through negligence, carelessness, or oversight) wronged them or failed to uphold their part of the social bargain (Turner & Stets, 2005). Equally, the participants’ strong feelings of fear and anxiety reflected their belief that others had and would continue to seek out opportunities to embarrass or humiliate them, be purposefully difficult and uncooperative, or indeed, physically harm them (Turner & Stets, 2005). Finally, the sense of shame (i.e., feelings of unworthiness, and not being good enough) that some participants associated with their refereeing performances, was grounded in their perceived failure to live up to what they considered to be the rightful expectations and demands of others (e.g., players, coaches, observers and spectators) (Turner & Stets, 2005). Exiting their role as a grassroots referee became, then, both an indicator of, and method for, dealing with the emotionally charged predicaments that they faced (Ward & McMurray, 2016).

While our findings cannot be unproblematically assumed to apply to the wider population of grassroots sports, they do arguably provide a valuable source of critical reflection for those policy makers and managers responsible for the recruitment, deployment and development of match officials (Smith, 2018; Webb et al., 2021). Indeed, we believe that the insights provided in this paper have some naturalistic (i.e., insight generated through reflecting on the issues described in this study) and analytical (i.e., the conceptual explanation of referee attrition provided this paper) generalisability (Smith, 2018). Based on the insights provided in this paper and the wider related literature (e.g., Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Kellet & Shillbury, 2007; Kellet & Warner, 2011; Webb et al., 2021), sporting associations and organisations may benefit from considering how match officials could be made to feel (more) connected, supported and valued as members of the sporting community. In the context of English grassroots football at least, our findings highlight the need for national policy makers to critically reflect on and, where necessary, amend, refine and radically

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change the day-to-day ways in which grassroots officials are recruited, prepared for, and supported in their roles (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Webb et al., 2021).

Finally, in response to Webb's (2020) recent call for a greater sociological examination of referees' social worlds, we believe that interactionist, dramaturgical, and relational theorising has much to offer in this regard. For us, these lines of social thought can help draw attention to the largely ignored micropolitical, and emotional realities of officiating in sport (Jones et al., 2011). Fertile lines of inquiry could include examining how experienced or expert referees seek to control the impression they give to various stakeholders, deal with faux-pas and performance disruptions, work with other officials as members of a cohesively functioning performance team (Goffman, 1959), and engage in the intra and interpersonal management of emotions (Charmaz et al., 2019; Schulman, 2017). Such work could also include the adoption of an intersectional perspective to highlight how, for example, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality combine to influence a) the emotional experiences of match officials in different sports and levels of competition and b) the impression management strategies that they utilise to proactively and reactively influence others (Schulman, 2017). In addition to advancing our theoretical and empirical knowledge of sports officiating, such inquiry could usefully contribute to the development of reality grounded and evidence-based preparation and development schemes that reflect the phenomenological essence of the activity (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, & Evans, 2019; Webb, in press).

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