CAREER DYNAMICS PROFILE OF ELITE FOOTBALL REFEREES

Examining the Career Dynamics of Elite Football Referees: A Unique Identification Profile

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Abstract

Research into the career dynamics of high-performance level match officials across sports is scarce. The present study analyses the career dynamics of elite football referees from childhood to the elite level, creating a context of life design and a pattern for identifying individuals with potential talent. Twelve international and elite football referees participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews utilising narrative inquiry. Participants were asked to recall all football refereeing-related experiences associated with their life stories from childhood to obtaining their FIFA Elite Referee (FER) position. Data analysis indicated that there were two common discourses (early and later) in an elite football referees' career which helped to shape their job role with increased meaningfulness, providing invaluable insights for reaching the FER position. The interviewees experienced specific on- and off-field, reactions during their career (early and late) in order to prepare themselves to face challenging and conflict-related situations in football refereeing. Based on career stages, types of job crafting, and job characteristic levels, we developed the unique career dynamic identification profile of elite football referees. Accordingly, we argue that a talented individual needs to undertake individual training and career-based goal setting in their early career, whilst later in their career the elite referees should move towards collective training and game-based goal setting. The paper discusses the wider implications of the research findings, including their transferability to other societal groups and populations such as public sportspeople, talented individuals, national football federations, referee departments, and concludes by considering suggestions for future research.

Keywords: sport officials, career stages, job crafting, job characteristics, life stories, goal setting

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In professional team sport especially, football refereeing careers have been associated with increasing levels of stress and anxiety (Webb et al., 2020, b). As a way to offer additional support to decisions made by match officials, tools such as Goal Line Technology (GLT) and Video Assistant Referees (VAR) have been introduced in recent years and have modified elite football (Carlos et al., 2019). However, despite this increased support, Webb et al. (2020, a) identified that football referees experience verbal and physical abuse, leading to increased pressure and stress. Conversely, elite football referees are also affected by uncontrollable external influences, creating complicated inter-relationships between a number of different factors. For example, external factors such as abuse and lack of support from administrative authorities (Webb et al., 2020, a), have led to a decreasing number of football referees in some countries, such as England (The FA, 2017), and Germany (Giel & Breuer, 2020), with match officials requiring a sense of value to ensure they feel supported in any sport (Warner et al., 2013).

The pressures match officials receive at high-performance or elite level are unique. Pressure often manifests itself in different ways, with the phenomenon of decreasing numbers of match officials, observed across sports and countries, one potential outcome (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2020; Webb et al., 2019). Professional games are different to grassroots games, and referees face diverse challenges depending on the level at which they officiate. Consistent with this, research has shown that match officials have found themselves in stressful situations, particularly in lower levels of sport (Webb et al., 2020, a). Despite the differences, match officials in elite sports have shared situations of pressure with match officials who officiate in grassroots sports, although there are also areas of pressure that are unique to the level at which the match official is operating (Webb et al., 2020, b). In order to better understand the life and career experiences of elite football referees, it is important to

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place these experiences into context. To do this we explore the theoretical underpinnings of the Career Dynamics Perspective (CDP) developed by Fried et al. (2007). The CDP provides a framework within which we explore the findings from the elite referees, framing the narrative for the results and discussion section. We therefore seek to explore real life and experienced career stories of elite football referees in order to understand how a potentially talented individual will become an elite referee, who is considered as a unique specialist in the world of football.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical underpinning of CDP: Understanding the concept

2.1.1. Job design: Job characteristics model as the basic approach

Consistent with the history of job design theory, important job design approaches, such as the theory of expectancy (Vroom, 1964), have helped to form the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) developed by Hackman and Oldham (1975). According to this theory, there are task, knowledge, social, physical, and additional characteristics within the jobs which lead to individual attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. The process of job design through job characteristics facilitates critical psychological states, and proactive behaviours (Grant et al., 2010). In spite of some positive evidence supporting JCM (Oldham & Hackman, 2010) there has also been conflicting empirical evidence. Loghmani et al. (2017), for example, have shown that critical psychological states did not predict general satisfaction, and there was a weak relationship between general satisfaction and meaningfulness of the work. However, the core idea of JCM was based on the moderating role of Growth Need Strength (GNS), identifying that employees with high GNS show more favourable responses to the job characteristics than those with lower GNS (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Although job design theory provided some key insights in human resource science, it emphasized only one dimension (designing formal tasks) of job management (Oldham & Fried, 2016).

2.1.2. Job crafting: A revolutionary approach

It is argued that job design is not always related to positive outcomes because employees can creatively re-shape their job with their preferences, motives, and passions and this does not guarantee positive outcomes from the process (Berg et al., 2013). This process referred to as job crafting, captures what employees do to redesign their own jobs in ways that can “foster job satisfaction as well as engagement, resilience, thriving at work” (Berg et al., 2007, p. 1), and “fit their needs, values, skills and abilities” (Oldham & Fried, 2016, p. 27). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) argue that, job crafters undertake: (a) task crafting, by changing the number, scope, and procedure of tasks; (b) relational crafting, through changing the interactions with other people; and (c) cognitive crafting, via thinking about new tasks which have been added to the job.

Job design and job crafting are respectively from top-down and bottom-up approaches, where employees negotiate with their employer about their work conditions or participate in calls for job redesign (Oldham & Fried, 2016). In terms of football referees, the bottom-up approach is most relatable due to the psychological and physical pressures they experience in their careers. Referees require the ability to craft their jobs through the reshaping of formal tasks, relations and cognitions, enabling football referees to make their job more meaningful, providing the ability to continue their careers despite the pressures to which they are exposed (Berg et al., 2013). For example, a referee who is interested in learning how computer programs can enhance match analysis, attempts to reshape his/her job through: (a) studying computer science, using computer programs for analysing high-level performances and exercises (task crafting); (b) communicating with an expert to teach the usage of computer programs in refereeing (relational crafting); and (c) thinking about adding programs into the career as a new skill to improve their refereeing performance (cognitive crafting).

2.1.3. Career stages: Core idea of CDP

Job related research has recently focused on searching new possible moderators of the JCM and job crafting theories, responding to critical gaps mentioned earlier (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). In their review study, Oldham and Fried (2016) identified these gaps included personality, career stages, physical context, other's jobs, uncertainty, and the job demanded-resources framework. Among these moderators, the career stages, presented in the form of the career dynamic perspective (CDP), contains more interesting and complete elements (i.e., time, job characteristics, job crafting, and individual perceptions) than other moderators mentioned above. Additionally, other moderators are not able to present a pattern for investigating the career dynamics of jobholders as they establish one-way relationships with job characteristics at the current stage of an individual's career. The CDP, meanwhile, has been framed around the core idea of career stages, in order to direct future research investigating employees' reactions to job characteristics and job crafting over time and in various career stages (early and later). These reactions are important when investigating how a person thinks and acts in all stages of their career to reach elite-level performance in their job (Fried et al., 2007). The authors have argued that an individual's reactions to their current job characteristics are contingent upon objective and subjective time elements (time), and how individual career dynamics may influence active efforts by employees to craft more stimulating jobs (job crafting). According to this, the career dynamics perspective (CDP) assumes that;

Employees are more likely to respond favourably to a lack of job stimulation at early career stages. In contrast, they are more likely to respond favourably to high task significance and low attitudinal job characteristics of complexity, task variety, and skill variety than at later career stages. Employees are more likely to respond favourably to a lack of job stimulation when they expect to advance imminently,

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when they perceive their jobs as enabling career advancement and when their advancement occurs within typical time frames for their occupations. Moreover, employees are more likely to engage in job crafting to create more stimulating jobs at earlier stages than later stages of their career, and when they perceive their current jobs as instrumental to career advancement (Fried et al., 2007, pp. 915-919).

Containing the overarching principles of the career stages, job characteristics, and job crafting, the main discussion of the CDP is about individuals at the early and late stages (10 + years) of their careers who would be unresponsive to core job characteristics (Oldham & Fried, 2016). The CDP therefore illustrates the employees' reactions (through job crafting) to perceptions of job characteristic levels (lower and higher in challengeability) at the two stages (early and later). For this reason, it is expected that employees increase their job crafting behaviours in their early career as they perceive lower levels of challengeability in job characteristics, while later in their career they prefer to manage/control the heightened levels of job characteristics that exist (Fried et al., 2007). Recently, empirical evidence has emerged regarding the CDP, which is related to a significant association between a higher span of control with better-selected managers, higher wages, higher probability to be promoted, and higher turn-over at early career stages (Nikolowa, 2015). Albrecht et al. (2018) have also shown that high-skilled workers exhibit greater mobility early in their careers because of perceiving low autonomy, task identity, and skill variety. Thus, the core idea of CDP (career stages) has expanded our understanding of a jobholder's proactive behaviours, enabling future research to identify these behaviours in various jobs. Hence, it is important to understand how elite football referees re-shape their job characteristics over time, and in each stage of their career, in order to better understand what is required and will be required for both current referees and young referees (potentially talented individuals) who are progressing through referee development pathways.

2.2. Football refereeing careers in the theoretical and practical framework

Like many other jobs in sport, football refereeing has been considered a professional career because it contains core job characteristics of skill variety, task significance, specialization, and task identity (Loghmani et al., 2017). The job which football referees do is very specific, with their job performance potentially impacting match results, requiring them to make decisive calls (Webb et al., 2020, b). For these reasons, referees undertake tasks that no one can do because the job requires appropriate experiences, deep knowledge of the laws of the game, physical fitness, mental ability, management of the players and coaches, communication with colleagues, quick decisions, and the ability to cope with stress. Previous research shows that some of these skills, such as communication with colleagues and dealing with stress, can be contributory factors to match officials discontinuing from their chosen sport (Ridinger et al., 2017). For example, the experiences and attrition rates of 15 former basketball referees who also had some involvement in officiating other sports such as baseball, soccer, and volleyball have been considered (Warner et al., 2013). Warner and colleagues have shown that the most important causes of eventual departure from officiating were experienced during the retentions phase (i.e., problematic social interaction, training/monitoring, and lack of a referee community) and at the advancing stage (e.g., lack of administrator consideration, administrator decision making, and sport policies). If the management strategies are not effective (e.g., requisite attention on their career), it may be that sport officials give up their jobs due to negative attitudes held about them, reflected in a lack of administrative support, the absence of a peer group or a mentoring system (Min-Chul & Eunah, 2016), mental health issues including anxiety and depression, sleep disturbance, eating disorders, adverse alcohol consumption (Gouttebarga et al., 2017), abuse, and perceptions of poor levels of support (Webb et al., 2020, a). This evidence demonstrates that

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sport officiating is extremely complex and difficult to undertake, and therefore should be considered as a challenging and investigable career among sports jobs.

In spite of existing studies revealing how referees organise their tasks before, during, and after the match, the knowledge gap remains concerning their perceptions and experiences for reaching the FER position. According to job theories and the CDP, referees can creatively re-shape their job characteristics by using various mechanisms. It may have emerged in their decision-making by attempting to meet the expectations of players, spectators, coaches and fellow referees regarding *how the game should be played*. In their qualitative research on nine national-level association football referees, Russell et al. (2019) discussed that referees co-construct the game with players and also that referee decision making is an emergent process of performer-environment relationship nested within task goals. This process has focused on an important part of the CDP where jobholders (football referees) craft their tasks (decision making process) and relations (co-constructing the game with players) whilst officiating a match. These findings were observed among national-level football referees, so substantial differences might exist between these and elite international referees in terms of the type and kind of job crafting and stages of career.

In addition to decision making, home advantage and referee bias can be considered as a way of job crafting among potential referees whilst in their CDP. Goumas (2014), for example, analysed the data from 322 teams representing 53 countries and showed that there was a home team bias used by referees under the higher crowd densities during the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League ($n = 426$) and Europa League matches ($n = 958$). It seems that the European referees used this process to reduce temporary pressures, which refers to a kind of job crafting. According to the CDP, jobholder uses their own technique to craft the job. However, it is unclear whether other referees use this technique. Hence, this study will investigate how referees experience the bias and shape their

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career by using these elements of the CDP. Therefore, it is important to understand the operational environment and career dynamics of elite football referees. As relatively few numbers of referees succeed in achieving FER positions, it can be inferred that the individuals who do achieve FER positions have special talents and are skilled in many aspects of their work and may have been influenced by life outside refereeing, including family history, personal characteristics, life experiences, and professional work. Moreover, previous research containing 267 full text articles, indicates that there are seven general themes for the development and progression of elite football referees. These include physical performance, technical performance, psychology, organisation, injuries, physiology, and development models (Aragão e Pina et al., 2018). All of these themes encompass three distinct dimensions: individual preparation, game preparation and game management (Aragão e Pina et al., 2019), about which little is known in terms of how international referees reach the FER position in their career.

2.3. Rationale and research questions

As discussed, the career dynamics perspective (CDP) focuses on employee's reactions to stimulating jobs, with their efforts to craft more stimulating jobs often dependent on temporal aspects (early and later) of their career aspirations and expectations (Fried et al., 2007). For this reason, we aimed to explore the early and later career stages of elite football referees in ways that can profile an appropriate pattern of career dynamics in this profession. Addressing this aim helps to identify the most important job characteristics in each stage of career and job crafting techniques used by elite referees to facilitate meaningfulness for the work they undertake (Oldham & Fried, 2016; Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Accordingly, we developed two primary research question (RQ) that were central to this project:

RQ 1: What steps have elite football referees taken from choosing refereeing to continuing and committing to the development process at early career level?

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RQ 2: What steps have elite football referees taken during elite pathways from reaching FER position to remain at later career level?

This paper therefore focuses on identifying how elite football referees think, and their experience and reaction about their jobs in early and later stages of their career. This research also expands our understanding of the life stories of successful elite-level football referees, enabling: (a) the creation of patterns of life design for young referees; (b) the context and parameters for identifying potentially talented referees; (c) determination of job crafting processes the elite football referees have taken.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

To address the research questions, participants were asked to recount their career through their life stories and elite refereeing experiences. A narrative inquiry has been adopted to enable referees' life trajectories to be constructed through elite officiating. Narrative inquiry is described as "an overarching term that encompasses the activities involved in generating, analysing and re-presenting stories of life experiences" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 10). In their study, Stride et al. (2017) stated that the researcher can ask people to share their life experiences through interviews in order to reach the 'living' and the 'telling'. Therefore, an in-depth interview protocol suggested by Ryba et al. (2015) was designed to achieve these aspects of narrative inquiry. We have therefore analysed career stories of referees at a similar refereeing level (International Degree and Elite Level).

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were male Iranian elite and international football referees and assistant referees operating at the highest national and international level at the time of interview. According to the Refereeing International Lists published in 2019 by FIFA, there were seven male Iranian international football referees and nine assistants (FIFA,

2019). Six referees and six assistants agreed to an in-depth interview. The most important descriptive results, presented in Table 1, show that the mean age of participants is 38.5 years, noting the mean age of referees ($M_{age}= 36.17$) is lower than assistants ($M_{age}= 40.84$).

[Table 1 about here]

3.3. Data collection and procedure

The study used an inductive approach which allows authors to generate meanings from the data set collected in order to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory (Saunders et al., 2015). As the inductive reasoning is based on learning from experience, the data were collected based on in-depth narrative interviews from the life story perspective (Clandinin, 2013) and assumptions of the career dynamics perspective (CDP) (Fried et al., 2007). The interviews were conducted, and tape recorded in the Persian language. Responses to each question were transcribed verbatim and then translated by four separate individuals who were very familiar with both the Persian and English languages, into English to evaluate the appropriateness of the initial Persian translation. No noteworthy mistakes were observed. Data saturation was achieved after the tenth interview, as stories of the eleventh and twelfth participants were similar to the previous interviews. The interviews lasted from 55 minutes to three hours (average time: 95 minutes), with a semi-structured interview guide developed to provide a framework for the interviews. At the beginning of the session, interviewees were asked to recall their general life experiences and develop their preferred order. In the next stage of the interview, the participants were asked to locate more details of major events.

In order to address the RQs, two common periods of career (early, later) were designed, based on the career stages displayed in the CDP (Fried et al., 2007). The early career contains childhood, education periods, and development process, while the later career stage includes elite pathways. Addressing the first RQ, participants were asked to recall their experiences in childhood (i.e., *What was the first memory of your childhood related to your*

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current refereeing practices?), education periods (i.e., *How did you become interested in football refereeing? Why?*), and development process (i.e., *When did you feel that you should do refereeing professionally?*). To address the second RQ questions were included concerning the elite pathways, to extract the referees' reflections on their job characteristics and job crafting behaviours in the later stages of their career. This period included one key question, *what steps have you taken during your career to improve your performance, qualifications, and experience as an elite referee?*, to extract the most important steps elite referees have taken to reach FER position and remain at this level. The ethical requirements were reviewed by the local University Human Research Ethics Committee and the study was granted full institutional ethical approved.

3.4. Data analysis

Initial analysis of the participants' stories commenced during the beginning of the interview by listening to interviewees' recounts and making notes of the important events in the narratives. In accordance with Ryba et al. (2015), we transcribed the interviews verbatim and subsequently read and re-read the interviews several times. We then conducted a thematic analysis based on common comments and codes. The extracted initial codes and comments were systematically developed into broader themes as we were able to make tentative connections across themes and small narrative segments. A small case report was also created to capture the central themes of each interviewee's narrative. This stage has been performed by narrative analysis of form to ensure that the overall organisation of narratives was in line with core meanings/structures, coherence and continuity in the story (Riessman, 2008). As a result, common discourses emerged from the life stories of elite football referees.

3.5. Trustworthiness and rigor

To enhance validity and reliability, and reduce potential bias, the criteria of trustworthiness was integrated into the research process, with peer review through external

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checks introduced and undertaken by five experts, in accordance with Jacobs et al. (2020), In consonance with Merriam and Tisdell (2016), two external peer reviewers with experience in football refereeing research confirmed that the findings were plausible, whilst the dependability was confirmed by independent reviewing and data coding by two coders. Credibility was also established by member checking as participants were given an opportunity to review their own transcripts and confirm authentic quotations and data accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We then reflected detailed descriptions of elite football referees' stories to place readers of this paper in a position to make decisions about the degree to which research quotations and findings were applicable to their settings. Finally, as the primary investigator in this study had previous football refereeing experience, meeting the definition of researcher insider (Hays & Singh, 2012), confirmability was achieved by bracketing during the data collection and analysis process, in order to reduce researcher bias, eliminate preconceptions, and reflect data without prejudgments.

4. Findings and Discussion

Following data analysis, two common discourses of early career and later career progression were inductively extracted from the life stories of the elite football referees, with the early and later career stages containing seven and eight initial themes respectively. Early career refers to those referees who have mentally and physically navigated their experienced life events and refereeing-based development, before reaching FER position; whereas later career indicates a series of activities during the elite pathways and FER position. In order to develop greater understanding of these two extracted discourses, more details are provided in Table 2. Finally, we have developed a unique career dynamics profile of elite football referees by summing up the real-life stories of elite football referees.

[Table 2 about here]

4.1. Early career

4.1.1. Childhood related to football and family background

Almost all interviewees recognised the importance of their childhood related to football and family background. The elite referees experienced football games in their childhood as they had family members who were interested in playing and/or refereeing football. Ref 9, for example, stated that, "...my childhood was very happy, playing football with my little brother in the street and avenue." Ref 3 also said that, "the most memorable childhood memories I remember are related to playing football and refereeing." These personal life stories experienced by elite football referees showed that the beginning point of refereeing is based on an individual's interests in their chosen sport, in the majority of cases this sport was football. As illustrated by Ref 5, "...when I was playing at our city football team, my coach had been locating me in the field as referee. After this experience, I found myself as a talented referee, so decided to begin the career as a professional." Similar stories were identified among other referees. For example, Ref 10 recalled their childhood, "I lived in a regional area in childhood and I can remember that the only game I used to play with peers, was football." Furthermore, Ref 11 stated that, "when I was young, I called all peers in our area to play football. I really enjoyed playing football with my peers." Also, the participating interviewees believed that family background had a significant influence on their evolving refereeing attitudes. Ref 6, for example, recounted his memory, "...when I was seeing the respect of my father as a referee...I was feeling a sense of pride. Maybe this sense has led me to this profession!" In terms of family, it seems that Iranian boys are influenced by their fathers as, "the Iranian child looked to his father with respect and obedience mingled with fear, but he also found security and strength in this relationship" (Arasteh & Arasteh, 1964, p. 22). In corroboration with this statement, Ref 7 identified;

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I started the football refereeing career from my father's feedback because absolutely, I did not like to be a football referee. As a player, I've been seeing the high tensions in football refereeing, so I thought this career is always involved with high tensions.

However, my father conducted me to the career of football refereeing.

Ref 3 also argued that, "...because my father was a football referee in the past, I placed myself in this career unconsciously." Another interesting story supporting the influence of the father on a teenage referee's attitudes pertains to Ref 4, "...the day which we had physical education class in school, I used to put my father's whistle (my father was a referee) in my backpack to be a referee in football games during physical education class." It seems that there has been a feeling of high GNS among football referees based on attitudes which were constructed by parental, and specifically fathers' feedback, at the beginning of the career. In fact, high levels of GNS and parental feedback are combined to shape attitudes of progression and success among referees (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). In accordance with GNS, some employees may continue their work for a prolonged period of time, but the other type of employees will expect promotion and more challenges in their job over a specific timeframe (Fried et al., 2007). This phenomenon can be related to elite football referees by facilitating the role of the father, as identified by Ref 9 "... my father registered me to a refereeing course for the first time. As I had struggled with static sports, I tried many sports and finally, based on my father's suggestion; I selected football refereeing because of its challenges." Surprisingly, similar stories of the father's feedback were identified by the life experiences of Ref 4 and Ref 6. In addition to this evidence, Ref 11 recounted that his father dreamed to see his son in the referee's uniform on the TV. The process was facilitated by feedback from the referee's father (as shown in Ref 7, Ref 9, and Ref 11's stories) or by the father's background of football refereeing (as shown in Ref 3's story).

4.1.2. Personal Education

The importance of education was identified by eight of the 12 elite football referees, as Ref 3 narrated, “I studied the English language due to my need as I had just entered onto the International Match Officials List (FIFA Referees List). The study has also made me better... and continue my career.” As sport can play a fundamental role in promoting contemporary human rights education and human dignity (Isidori & Benetton, 2015), it is evident that education, as well, plays an important role in the professional career of elite football referees. When the AFC launched its Asia Vision Project within the referee’s department, Ref 1, Ref 5, and Ref 6 were selected for future talent development from Iran. In particular, Ref 5 stated that “I improved myself through study in the field of sports sciences, so I have got the master's degree, and this helped me to a better understanding of sport, especially football, psychologically and physically.” It seems that the process of educational development is invaluable to reach international and elite level because all the referees are considered elite referees and are officiating the most important matches in Iran and Asia.

4.1.3. Family and peer support

Although football and family background in childhood have been considered as potential factors for choosing a football career, eight of 12 participating elite football referees experienced significant family and peer support after starting football refereeing at the early career. For example Ref 4 narrated that, “...because the income of refereeing was very low, my brother helped financially for me to continue this career.” Family and peer support refer to patronage perceived by individuals in both their personal and professional life. Ref 3 also identified the importance of family in his career progression; “...my family members were referees and played their supportive role in my success by paying attention and following my career, and giving suggestions before and feedback after the game I was officiating about my job results.” This process makes people happier to continue their jobs as many studies have

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shown that social support leads individuals to feel enjoyment and satisfaction in a career (Brown et al., 2018). In the life stories of Refs 4, 9, and 12 we can see the role of family and peer support as Ref 2 stated that, “family and peers caused me to progress in my career by encouragement, competitive atmospheres, and lessons. This kept me to be always active in my career.” This social support acts as a significant moderator in the relationship between organisational stressors and subjective performance in high-level sport (Arnold et al., 2018). In other words, elite football referees perceived this support as instrumental to advancement in their career, due to the necessity of coping with the stressors related to match officiating and the relief that family life and support can provide in this career advancement.

4.1.4. Goal setting and effort at the beginning of careers

The research participants (11 of the 12 referees) commonly outlined an overarching goal to become an elite referee in their early careers. For example, Ref 6 said, “...as a new football referee, I was always seeing what big goals there are and how I do my best to reach them in this career.” Ref 8 also stated that, “...before starting football refereeing, one of my sweet dreams was being an elite football referee, so I planned to reach the aim in this career through effort everyday.” Followers of goal-setting theory believe that if the employees select more difficult goals, they will produce more effort in order to achieve these specific goals (Locke & Latham, 1991). This situation was prominent in the professional experiences of Ref 3, Ref 6, and Ref 8's life stories. Their narrations stated that goal setting has been important as their career has evolved; “I have tried to step in my career through goal setting and more effort, from the beginning of my career until now. ...more difficult goal better improvement. ...the available goals, not the illusive goals that cannot be reached,” said Ref 3. However, the process can be facilitated by self-management (Lio et al., 2019) and leadership development (Xu et al., 2019) as elite football referees have experienced this mechanism in their career, as illustrated by Ref 5, “...when I started this career (football referee), I told myself: I have to

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become the one Iranian International football referee! And surprisingly I am now, because I was trying to follow it up!” His life story illustrated the importance of goal-orientation early in the career of elite referees. According to these stories, the elite football referees identified difficult career paths through systematic aims, and the referees also broke down these career paths into the separate goals (self-management). This mechanism experienced at early career helped them follow and own their smaller and simpler goals in each stage of their career as a result. The process also provides an opportunity for the elite football referees to re-shape their tasks, relations and cognitions to make their job more meaningful (leadership development).

4.1.5. Enjoyment and instability in refereeing

One of the most important feelings that seven of the 12 elite football referees experienced earlier in their career was related to enjoyment and instability in the refereeing profession. This feeling refers to a state of passion as Ref 12 experienced, “when I started the refereeing career, I was always asking the head of the referee department to appoint me as a referee for more football games.” Enjoyment has several definitions in different jobs, but most behavioural authors believe that job exhaustion can occur if there are no enjoyable opportunities in progress routes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Therefore, the sense of enjoyment from progress prevents job exhaustion as Ref 10 recalled, “I had a notebook and was writing each appointment I had. I really enjoyed reading my previous and current appointments. I guess I was having a look at the notebook four or five times a day.” Moreover, Ref 3 believed that this focus on his career has led to achievement and enjoyment due to his achievements; “I was insatiable... I have been officiating Iranian football matches in Division 2, then Division 1. Enjoyment from my career progress encouraged me to do my best earlier. In fact, goal achievement has been enjoyable regarding all difficult routes.” It can thus be concluded that the mechanisms of goal setting have been drawn by elite football referees in a way that will not be easily visible, as they choose the general aims according to their abilities. These

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abilities can identify, monitor and evaluate their career progress or enjoyment from reaching their smaller goals. The feeling of enjoyment has been considered as a strong job stimulation for referees and their intention to continue the career (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013).

4.1.6. Individual practice

Seven of the 12 interviewees stated that they practiced, although this practice was individual rather than group based. Ref 9 elaborated and explained the level of training that is required, “each of us does many different exercises every day individually, but for international games, we are asked to do special practice by and under the supervision of FIFA. I have individually done these practices.” Ref 5 also stated that, “I do special exercise related to football refereeing individually, because I have not got any peers in my home region who do such special training.” Furthermore, Ref 8 believed that individual practice played an important role in his progression, “...in the early career, I did individual physical training as I was able to arrange my own sport and exercise. I needed special training...” Despite the authors of job crafting and the CDP stating that job crafting can occur collectively in western cultures (Fried et al., 2007), this study has revealed that job crafting in the form of practising occurred and was experienced individually by referees in the early career. This individual crafting has been seen before the game, especially during physical exercise, whilst there are some job crafting methods that referees undertake during a football match (such as communications with each other by eye contact, radio connections, and pregame coordination) to make the job more meaningful (see 4.2.6).

4.1.7. Self-sacrificing in refereeing

Missing some personal and family engagements because of a football refereeing career was the other common experiences of nine of the 12 participants when referring to self-sacrificing. Some examples of missing engagements included “...lack of time for being with my mother who was alone,” (Ref 1), missing the most important “family events,” (Ref

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4) and “cultural ceremonies such as Nowroz – Iranian New Year,” (Ref 8). Moreover, Ref 11 stated that, “I was not able to continue my study at the level of Ph.D., because I was really involved in the career (football refereeing) and I did not have any availability to go to university.” Self-sacrificing depends on a person's interests, everybody has their own goals and personal efforts to achieve them (Robert et al., 2019). Sometimes it may be that individuals miss certain goals in order to achieve other specific goals, with the particular mechanism referred to as self-sacrificing in refereeing. It seems that this facet is evident amongst elite football referees (especially in stories of Refs 1, 4, 8 and 11) as Ref 5 narrated: “at the beginning of the career, I knew the issues related to refereeing. I missed the high-income job opportunities and other personal life points to keep my refereeing career safe.” Referees had to miss important family days (i.e., birthday ceremony of a family member) and well-paid jobs. In corroboration with this sentiment, Ref 7 narrated that family life and the life of a referee can become intertwined:

A learnable incident occurred in my career. I was informed I would officiate a game in Tehran, where I had an appointment in the province of Guilan as an assistant referee. The new appointment overlapped with my daughter's birthday and the game's time was the same as the time I had set up with my family for capturing the photos. I had to leave my family members and go to the stadium for refereeing. This led to me committing my biggest mistake in my refereeing career.

This extract demonstrates that self-sacrificing is necessary to achieve mental deliverance, and thereby this phenomenon is a key element for undertaking a refereeing job. Psychologically, job holders' behaviour in a workplace is related to whatever they received and perceived from their job characteristics, and other features such as family situations as the key job characteristics of social support and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). It seems that Ref 7's biggest mistake in refereeing occurred based on his reaction to perceptions

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of family situations. Thus, mental deliverance for judgement achieved by self-sacrificing is a worthwhile source of correct decision making among football referees, and potential referees should ignore other interfering factors in this career as football refereeing for jobholders is a career that can be considered a *war* that requires self-sacrifice (Robert et al., 2019).

4.2. Later career

4.2.1. Importance of skill development

Ten of the 12 interviewees stated that a referee should have a number of abilities to reach the elite level in refereeing. These abilities include cognition and understanding of football, exercise, study, physical training, concentration, English language skill (for non-native English speakers), chance, and experience, as illustrated by Ref 2 “...during a match, I always think about what skills I have learnt from studies. This self-thinking helps me to use the best skills I have – especially cognition and understanding of football – for making a good and quick decision.” In his professional life story, Ref 3 identified the areas of training where he believed he needed to focus;

As a referee, I had to have high quality in physical, mental and technical preparation.

So, I hired the physical fitness coach to train me...many of them have obtained this over time. I have also various plans in each period of the games to better deal with challenging situations. This helps me to stay calm and cool under pressure.

Further to the above, a referee should use a series of special skills (physical, psychological, management, anticipating next ball position, good distance-viewing, and good angle-viewing) for better judgment psychologically and physically. In this regard, Ref 9 said, “in my football refereeing career, I have been improving my refereeing skills because I was not able to reach an elite referee.” Ref 5 also stated that although physical fitness is important, other skills are also essential if they want to advance their careers;

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It's wrong if I say that only physical fitness is enough for football refereeing because a good runner, due to his/her high physical fitness, will be able to run in the football field but maybe won't be able to make a correct decision. So, I tried to improve all required skills in my career.

Despite the recent technology-based training tools (e.g., Video Assistant Referees [VAR]) developed to assist referee decision making (Carlos et al., 2019), there are also concerns among elite football referees about improving their human skills to reach the psychological states of meaningfulness (Loghmani et al., 2017). The career makes the referees craft their tasks by considering the required skills in their job descriptions (such as physical fitness program, psychological issues required for referees, management lessons), communication with other persons (physical fitness coaches, psychologists, management experts), and cognition by becoming an expert in the skills they acquired during their career (physical fitness coach, refereeing psychologist, management expert related to refereeing). Elite football referees (as shown in Ref 3's story) also experienced goal setting during the game, such as planning for travel to a match venue, communicating with colleagues during the game, and strategies of dealing with players and coaches. Therefore, it seems that the process of goal setting is not limited to the beginning of the career, but it is also necessary during a game and especially in the middle of a career.

In all likelihood there are more differences between goal setting at the beginning and in the middle of a career in terms of a goal's contents and timing. Football referees choose the appropriate and unique strategy for officiating each match. For example, it seems that the refereeing strategies of a football match between team A and team B are different to another football match between team C and team D. Therefore, “*career-based goal setting*”, raised by elite football referees, occurs at the beginning of their career and includes all stages of their career, whereas “*game-based goal setting*” occurs in the middle of the elite football referees'

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career for a specific football match and a specific time (90 or 120 minutes). Analysis of the interviewees' life stories has shown that career-based goal setting makes referees experience enjoyment throughout their career, thereby reaching meaningfulness at work. Whereas, game-based goal setting helps referees to perform under pressure during a match and make better decisions. Both career and game based goal setting can be considered as ways of job crafting among elite football referees, and a good pattern for young referees to follow.

4.2.2. Psychological states

Self-esteem and self-confidence were key psychological states experienced by seven of the 12 elite football referees, who obtained these states through previous experiences in their career. For example, Ref 3 stated that, "with the experiences I gained, unconsciously, my self-confidence increased and helped me to officiate many high-quality matches all around the world." In this case, Ref 5 and Ref 1, based on their refereeing experiences, commonly experienced self-confidence through experiences on the football pitch when dealing with players and coaches; "when I officiate more football matches and communicate with players and coaches, I feel internally self-confidence, because I told myself others experienced my judgement and knew my behaviours," (Ref 1). Furthermore, Ref 5 narrated, "...sometimes I see intangibly the reactions of coaches and players immediately after my decision. Although these reactions do not affect my future decisions, I have to admit that I can receive positive or negative psychological states." Consistent with Pietraszewski et al. (2014), the level of abilities among elite football referees influenced the number and correctness of decisions made during a game in a way that the process can be facilitated by cognitive instruments, such as self-confidence, self-belief, integrity, and a good sense of humour. As shown in Ref 3's story, these psychological states have been obtained over time and based on the stories of Ref 1 and Ref 5, these states have been reached through the familiarity of players and coaches with referee's behaviours and judgement types. In other

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words, Ref 3 needed time to experience positive psychological states, because he adapted himself within the environment of football matches, while Ref 1 and Ref 5 needed players and coaches to accept and understand their judgement type. Thus, adaptability in football matches and behaviour acceptance led to referees gaining more experiences and subsequently positive psychological states.

4.2.3. Media management, football margins and mental deliverance

All interviewees particularly Refs 6, 9, 10, 11 and 12 stated that a lack of engagement with the televised and print media was one of the key elements in their elite career. Ref 12, for example, said that, “because I was an assistant referee, I had no relation with the media. I am happy about this situation as this helped me to be relaxed before and after the games.” The professional story of Ref 6 illustrates that engagement with the televised media has distracted referees because they have to address issues other than football officiating. A similar story has been narrated by Ref 10, as he noted negative experiences (i.e., response to other interviews which was not important) with engagement with the print media. Ref 3 also stated, “Whenever I was kept away from the media, I had a more relaxed and better situation for refereeing. This helped me to a pure focus on my job.” Although the majority of previous studies have shown the positive effect of social media, the climate of enjoyment, and the intention to continue in sports (Gardner et al., 2016), there is some research which has revealed a difficult relationship between referees and the media. Webb (2018), for example, illustrated that referees' performances have been something that the media has increasingly focused on as part of the changing nature of televised football.

Despite the research, elite football referees perceived this as a negative point, but there is also the acceptance that referees can make mistakes. Webb's (2018) research findings were extracted from twenty-live Premier League matches in the 2013-2014 seasons in England, illustrating substantial differences between Asian and European media functions in

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term of the nature of the role, and referees' perceptions in multiple cultures. However, all referees have similarly perceived the negative role of the media on their career, especially as the research participants intentionally kept away from the media because they found this to be the best way to better judgment and performance.

4.2.4. Learning from experienced mistakes

Those who intend to remain active and progress in their own professions have faced barriers and issues. Successful individuals were able to build on these issues, constructing a bridge that they needed to cross to obtain these achievements. Nine of the 12 elite football referees have experienced this. For example, Ref 7 said, "I tried to see me and my colleagues' mistakes and errors and not repeat those." Ref 3 also illustrated the importance of learning from mistakes, "I always analyse myself and try to learn from my own mistakes and use them for my progress." Ref 1 who is currently training young and new referees narrated that, "I use the football matches I officiated to investigate my performance with new referees to teach them how you need to correctly make a decision. I also encourage these young referees to analyse my performance with free discussion." Ref 4 also stated, "...my brother watches all football games I am officiating, and provides his feedback as a specialist, because he is a football referee as well." The referees are referring to the job characteristic of feedback, in which it is very important to reach the psychological state of knowledge of results in the work, and attitudinal and behavioural outcomes including internal work motivation, growth satisfaction, efficiency, well-being, and commitment (Hackman & Oldham, 1975).

4.2.5. Ability to stay calm in matches

It has been specified by six of the 12 interviewees that referees experience more relaxation in international rather than domestic matches, concurring with Webb et al. (2020, b). In his professional life story, Ref 3 stated that international matches are more relaxing due to the conditions that surround referees in international football, "when I officiate an

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international game, I have more relaxation. Because there is more control, supervision, and culture of respect to referee in those games.” This objective behaviour experienced at later career stages can be discussed through cultural reasoning. The Iranian referees felt that there were more unresolved violent contexts within eastern cultures. In addition, Ref 5 articulated the level of relaxation experienced in international football, “when I became an international referee and appointed by AFC for first time, I experienced a different situation in my career. I was more relaxed during match time and happy to communicate with others inside or outside of the football pitch.” Ref 1 also narrated “I would be very happy once I received an international match appointment because of real enjoyment and respect among all players, coaches, spectators, and referees!” These challengeable contexts had not affected the achievement of referees, but due to cultural differences there may have been some non-obvious mental and psychological issues, such as anxiety, stress, and exhaustion, among Iranian elite referees.

4.2.6. Support networks in competition and collaboration among colleagues

According to the findings, particularly in the life stories of Ref 1, Ref 2, and Ref 11, potential elite referees helped each other to develop in their careers by creating support networks amongst the elite referee group. Almost all interviewees used the mechanism, “I always am seeking my colleague's stories and asking them to guide me in how my performance can be improved,” (Ref 1), or “...firstly we are friends and then competitors because we try to help each other to reach higher degrees in our career. We did this by noticing our mistakes and defects,” (Ref 2). As an assistant referee, Ref 11 recalled, “I created a special group for assistants to share the specific knowledge related to this position. We are receiving and sharing our invaluable experiences and knowledge which is amazing.” It seems that this approach is very important for referees because they are re-shaping their job by helping each other. This kind of job crafting refers to relational crafting in the workplace

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and makes referees achieve the psychological state of meaningfulness of their work, as Berg et al. (2013) articulated that there is positive relationship between relational job crafting and meaningfulness of the work. This reference to the sense of community, involving the building of support networks, can potentially lead to increased referee retention (Ridinger et al., 2017), as lack of referee community, referring to lack of support and feeling of community between referees, is associated with eventual departure from the career (Warner et al., 2013).

Even though the interviewees reported more individual experiences during their physical practices, they tried to craft their jobs collectively by creating a positive feeling of competition with each other. Thus, it seems that elite football referees individually craft their jobs before the game and in competitive sessions in terms of physical practices, whereas they collectively craft their jobs during and after football matches. During the game referees practice this crafting through communication in pre-game coordination meetings, eye contact, radio connections, and post-game conversations. They also craft their jobs after match and competition sessions, by communication in study courses, annual seminars and conferences, other public and personal meetings related to football referees and laws of the game.

4.2.7. Similar performance towards home or away teams

All interviewees stated that there are no differences in terms of their behaviour and attention towards the home or away team. However, the referees are reliant on enforcing the laws of the game on the field of play and are not concerned by the teams. Ref 3 explained that focusing on the laws of the game, rather than any players or teams has helped his career;

There are no differences between home and away teams for me because the team that host the game will be the away team for the next match. As a referee, I must enforce the laws of the game on the field and I must have stability on my officiating all around the world. Adhering to this principle has made me progress well; otherwise, I will be removed from refereeing with any instability.

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Another research participant (Ref 5) agreed, “When I am running onto the pitch and I want to decide as a referee, I cannot really think about which team is home or away.” There is evidence showing referee bias towards the home team (Goumas, 2014) among national-level referees, but the elite football referees experienced no such experiences in their professional career. This could be because they have utilised the career- (earlier) and game- (later) based goal setting, as they were able to experience enjoyment and staying calm under pressures.

4.2.8. Positive interaction with coaches and players

In accordance with ten of 12 elite football referees' stories, positive interactions with coaches and players can be considered a social support process because of the power for solving various issues in officiating before, during, and after a match. For instance, Ref 9 identified that, “although there is a culture of protest in Iranian football...there has been a mutual respect between me and other players and coaches; this helped me to officiate easier than in the past.” Ref 6 also stated that, “...In the Iranian culture it is not common to call players and coaches by first names, but I try to do this to create a closer relationship with them and I can see positive feedback.” The relationship between players and coaches is evidently important, and is recognised as such by referees. Ref 3 identified that their communication and relationships with players and coaches improved as their career progressed:

My relationship with players and coaches are the defined relation. At the beginning of my career, I was asked to respond to why there is not a good relationship between me, players and coaches, but the mechanism has been facilitated by stable performances in my officiating over time. The mechanism led me to have a closer relationship with players and coaches and made it easier to officiate the football games.

The above stories that participants recounted demonstrate that elite football referees socially craft their career through stable behaviour to cope with abuse from coaches and

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players. Although the coaches do not try to act abusively during the game, they believed that strong relationship with referees included potential opportunities to reduce abusive behaviours (Jacobs et al., 2020). As the support system for referees does not always protect them from abusive behaviours (Webb et al., 2020, a), the elite football referees individually construct specific behaviours in officiating by creating relational job crafting (Berg et al., 2013) to cope with negative perceptions (e.g., abuse and conflict), thereby remaining at the FER position. Ref 3 did this through exhibiting stable behaviour in his officiating performances, and Ref 9 did this through achieving respect over time.

4.3. Summing up the stories: Developing a career dynamics profile

Mixing the career dynamics perspective (CDP) principles (job characteristics, job crafting, and career stages, Fried et al., 2007) and research findings (elite football referees at the early and later careers), enabled the development of the unique career dynamics profile of elite football referees (Figure 1). This profile contains job characteristic levels (low, high), unique types of job crafting (goal setting-based, training-based) and career stages (early, later), expanding our understanding of how potential referees individually think at the beginning of their career, enabling them to choose and develop themselves in the profession of football refereeing (addressing RQ1), and then collectively continue the career pathway to reach and remain at the elite level (addressing RQ2). As displayed in the unique career dynamics of elite football referees developed in this study, the interviewed referees have crafted their jobs early in their career by undertaking the career-based goal setting (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the left-bottom to the x-axis on the left-bottom) and individual training job crafting (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the right-bottom to the x-axis on the left-bottom) when they were young and new referees. They undertook this process by individual crafting, recognition of real ability, following high quality of refereeing, self-sacrificing, and enjoyment and instability. Referees' experiences, childhood

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related to football and family background, personal education, and family and peer support facilitate the individual crafting at the early career stage. For this reason, these periods are considered as off-field experiences. In order to reach a higher level of football, the research participants who have become experienced referees later in their career stage, crafted their jobs based on collective training (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the right-up to the x-axis on the right-bottom) and game-based goal setting (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the left-up to the x-axis on the right). Their stories showed that they have crafted their job at this stage of their career by media management, non-bias to home or away team, lessons of mistakes, collective crafting, and mixed skills and abilities. At this stage, referees' stories have illustrated that there are both on- (positive interactions with coaches and players) and off-field (building support networks in competition among colleagues, referee community) experiences which may facilitate the main job crafting tasks of game-based goal setting.

The findings have also revealed that career-based goal setting has to be undertaken via individual training, due to different levels of GNS (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the left-bottom to the y-axis on the right-bottom), while game-based goal setting needs collective training (Figure 1, relationship between the y-axis on the left-up to the y-axis on the right-up), by sharing colleagues' experiences and knowledge related to football refereeing careers. Furthermore, the developed profile indicates that the football refereeing career starts by setting general goals experienced off-field and continues by undertaking specific goals experienced both on- and off-field (Figure 1, the z-axis). In fact, the z-axis illustrates the career boundaries of early (new and young referees) and later (experienced and elite referees) career.

Finally, the referees perceived that the lower levels of job characteristics earlier in their career (Figure 1, relationship between the x-axis on the left-up to the x-axis on the left-

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bottom), meant that they tended to learn and improve the required skills and use them in the near future. A later career is different from an early career because of its achievement, and since the referees practically experienced life events, the later career is more visible as referees have become elite. For this reason, the elite football referees face high levels of job characteristics later in their career (Figure 1, relationship between the x-axis on the right-up to the x-axis on the right-bottom), during their elite pathways and reaching FER position. As a consequence, the research findings demonstrate that new and young referees individually craft their work via career-based goal setting, associated with general goals, as they perceived lower levels of job characteristics at the earlier career stage (Figure 1, relationship between the x-axis on the left-bottom, x-axis on the left-up, the y-axis on the left-bottom, and the y-axis on the right-bottom). In contrast, elite football referees collectively craft their work via game-based goal setting, related to specific goals, as they perceived higher levels of job characteristics at the later career stage (Figure 1, relationship between the x-axis on the right-bottom, x-axis on the right-up, the y-axis on the left-up, and the y-axis on the right-up).

[Figure 1 about here]

5. Conclusion

5.1. How CDP works in elite football referees' framework: Towards a new pathway

The core content of the career dynamics perspective (CDP) is based on the reality that each employee needs to craft his or her job in the workplace to stimulate job characteristics over time (Fried et al., 2007). This study extends our knowledge of job crafting of elite football referees by introducing a new stream entitled goal setting- and training-based job crafting. The process referees navigated complies with goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1991), but the most important instrument which facilitated the career-based goal setting was related to off-field experiences including family background, childhood related to football, and personal education. The unique function of the CDP for elite football referees

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demonstrates that fathers can be the most important person for potential individuals to start the profession of football refereeing, and thereby shape their real and measurable career-based goal setting. The facilitators of career-based goal setting observed in the referee recruitment phase (Warner et al., 2013) are associated with positive off-field experiences leading to referee retention in the early career (Ridinger et al., 2017). According to the CDP posed by Fried et al. (2007), the above mechanism occurred because the new referees perceive lower levels of challengeability in job characteristics at the earlier stage of career.

In contrast, later in the career of elite football referees they undertake game-based goal setting through both positive on- and off-field experiences. As the later career used in this study – based on the CDP – consists with referee retention and advancement phases (Warner et al., 2013), we conclude that both on- and off-field experiences could be considered as an instrument for reaching and remaining at elite football officiating level. Based on previous research, some interesting mechanisms have been developed to identify the process of referee reactions in their later careers which may lead to them being able to reach and remain at the FER position. For example, positive relationships inside the football field help coaches to reduce their abusive behaviours towards referees (Jacobs et al., 2020); building support networks in competition among colleagues refers to a referee community, an important factor of referee retention (Warner et al., 2013); mixed skills and abilities, and lessons of mistakes indicate the social, task, and knowledge of job characteristics (Grant et al., 2010) in ways that foster attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Oldham & Fried, 2016; Loghmani et al., 2017); and non-bias towards home or away teams is related to stable behaviour and better decision making (Goumas, 2014). Thus, the unique function of the CDP is linked to the importance of off-field experiences for undertaking career-based goal setting job crafting (due to low perceptions of job characteristics levels), and the influence of both on- and off-field experiences of elite football

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referees for undertaking game-based goal setting job crafting (due to high perceptions of job characteristics levels).

5.2. Recommendations for referee career development

Before starting and especially at the beginning of their careers, participating referees experienced childhood related to football and perceived that family members' background for choosing football refereeing as a career was important. These perceptions are significant for talent identification and fostering processes, as practitioners and managers will be able to identify individuals who have had a refereeing-related family background, a childhood related to football and utilise this information accordingly. Referee managers can also design specific plans for families to support referees in the middle of their careers, as elite football referees ideally need to perceive family support in order to progress. Additionally, we encourage Iranian early football referees to continue their education, especially in physical education and English language courses as this education has been considered an important factor for understanding football officiating and thereby referee retention. Football referees have also been encouraged to undertake career-based goal setting at the beginning of their career. To do this, managers can use psychologists to direct new and young referees towards career-based goal setting, according to their individual abilities and expectations. The research findings seem to indicate that this mechanism can prevent failure, and lead to more enjoyment from long and difficult progress pathways throughout referees' careers. Additionally, young referees should understand the importance of goal setting at the beginning of their career in order to shape what they want to do in their career. This helps referees to know where they are now and where they need to go in the next stage of their career, in order to reach the FER position.

According to game-based goal setting, moreover, managers should inform referees with potential about match team information. Such information might include team positions

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in the ranking table, the kind and type of football match to expect, level of competition, cultural contexts and other implementations (Ridinger et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2013), which may be used by referees for game-based goal setting and better planning for their judgments. We suggest young and new football referees use game-based goal setting to stay calm during the game and make correct decisions, as the process helps them to control and manage the players, coaches, and overall game. The method used by elite football referees in this study was based on pre-game coordination meetings with colleagues, eye contact, and communication during the game, and post-game feedback. In terms of various types of job crafting, we suggest managers hold more conferences and meetings with referees, so they can share related experiences and feedback from their job results and probable mistakes in past competitions. This job characteristic of autonomy directs the referees towards more experienced responsibility and meaningfulness of the work, and finally attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Loghmani et al., 2017). This process helps referees to make better decisions in future games, learn from past mistakes, and achieve positive job outcomes. Consistent with the football referees' (present study) and colligate rugby coaches' (Jacobs et al., 2020) perspectives, we suggest young referees communicate with players and coaches over time through utilising the same behaviour in their job performances, overall respect and developing personality in their career. These practical implementations assist referees with the navigation of long and difficult progress in their career; although of course, they need to know when, where and how to use these practical implementations throughout their career.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study was based on the career dynamics perspective (CDP) and narrative inquiry methodology. Future studies should consider other career perspectives for exploring different discourses of elite football referees' life stories, in order to facilitate comparisons with this

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study. It would also be helpful in future research to investigate amateur football referees, to determine exact points of difference between elite and amateur football referees' progression pathways. In spite of previous research regarding the home advantage and referee bias in professional contexts (Goumas, 2014), referees in our study experienced no home advantage bias. It is possible that previous research has not considered elite football referees, or referee perceptions of their attitudes towards home bias. We encourage future research to consider longitudinal study design to focus on elite football referees' home bias through a focus on any differentiation between referee perceptions of performances and the actual performances themselves. There are differences in terms of bias among professional and elite football referees, and between middle and the end of the career stages (Russell et al., 2019). In fact, using bias or similar performance against home and away teams are the substantial instruments for referees to craft their job (the most important element of CDP). Hence, future research might be able to expand our understanding of why and how the CDP and job crafting techniques (in terms of bias and home advantage) work differently among professional and elite football referees in various stages of their career. This investigation would also eliminate the present research gap in this field and help us to better understand referee bias mechanisms in football matches.

It would be important to identify how the mechanisms of family background and support have helped to shape elite football referees' personality and perceptions, in terms of choice, start, and intention to continue their careers. In order to achieve more evidence-based suggestions about a third stream of job crafting practices for elite football referees (goal setting- and training-based job crafting), it would be helpful if future research experimentally and longitudinally investigated individual and collective job crafting practices. Regarding individual job crafting practices, researchers are expected to use individual plans for referee physical training and practices before the game, and competition sessions for designing their

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studies and then calculate these effects on the meaningfulness of the work (one of the most important psychological states). Researchers can also estimate the effects of creating the right climate of competition among elite referees during the game and after the competition sessions, as a way of collective job crafting practice. Furthermore, it is advised that future research analyses the effect of each kind of goal setting mentioned throughout the paper (career and game-based goal setting) on elite football referees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. As the research sample was the Iranian population of elite male referees, it will be expected that future research includes the female referees among other cultures and nationalities to obtain more representative findings.

To conclude, this study has shown that maintaining individual enjoyment, whilst navigating a variety of development routes to reach the FER position and prepare for impending challenging situations in their football refereeing career is essential. Consistent with the most important findings, an elite football referee is an expert who is complete in terms of their personal psychological and physical aspects. Hence, the development of referees, their career objectives, influences upon their careers and how this impact upon their career dynamics facilitates and improves our understanding of this diverse group of elite performers. If we are to enhance the development and promotion of referees to reach the FER level, interpreting the challenges and significant influences upon their careers is imperative.

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Table 1

Participant experience and background information

Participants	Age at time of interview	Beginning of refereeing career (since)	International degree (since)	Educational level	Refereeing position
Ref 1	35	2001	2013	Master	Referee
Ref 2	34	2002	2013	Master	Referee
Ref 3	41	1994	2008	PhD	Referee
Ref 4	39	1999	2015	Physician	Referee
Ref 5	36	2001	2018	Master	Referee
Ref 6	32	2004	2015	Master	Referee
Ref 7	42	1995	2009	Bachelor	Assistant Referee
Ref 8	43	1998	2010	Bachelor	Assistant Referee
Ref 9	41	1998	2012	PhD	Assistant Referee
Ref 10	40	2000	2016	Master	Assistant Referee
Ref 11	39	2002	2014	Master	Assistant Referee
Ref 12	40	2000	2015	Bachelor	Assistant Referee

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Table 2

Initial themes leading to substantive themes with illustrative quotations from interviews

Substantive Themes	Initial Themes	Representative Quotations
Early career	Childhood related to football and family background	“the most memorable childhood memories I remember are related to playing football and refereeing”
	Personal education	“...my father registered me to a refereeing course for the first time. As I had struggled with static sports, I tried many kinds of sports and then finally, based on my father’s suggestion, I selected football refereeing because of its challenges”.
	Goal setting and effort at the beginning of the career	“I have tried to step in my career by goal setting and more effort, from the beginning of my career until now. I think every person who has had a more difficult goal is subject to better improvement. Of course, I should say the goals which are available, not the illusive goals that cannot be reached”.
	Enjoyment and insatiability in refereeing	
	Individual practice	
	Self-sacrificing in refereeing	
Later career	Family and peer support	
	Special complex of mixed skills	“it's wrong if I say that only physical fitness is enough for football refereeing because a good runner, due to his/her high physical fitness, will be able to run in the football field but maybe won't be able to make a correct decision. So, I tried to improve all required skills in my career”.
	Psychological states	
	Media management, football margins and mental deliverance	
	Learning from experienced mistakes	“...there are no differences between home and away teams for me because the team that host the game will be the away team for the next match. As a referee, I must enforce the laws of the game on the field and I have to have stability on my officiating all around the world. Adhering to this principle has made me progress well; otherwise, I will be removed from refereeing with any instability”.
	More relaxation in international matches	
	Support networks in competition among colleagues	
	Similar performance towards home and away teams	“...firstly we are friends and then competitors because we try to help each other to reach higher degrees in our career. We did this by notice of our mistakes and defects”
	Positive interaction with coaches and players	

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Figure 1.

The unique career dynamics profile of elite football referees.