

**The distribution of power through a media campaign: The Respect Program,  
referees and abuse in association football**

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The launch of the Respect Program in 2008 was intended to improve the working environment for referees at all levels of the game. However, eight years since the launch, this article has identified significant issues with the organization and management of the campaign and the verbal and physical abuse to which referees are subjected. Findings are concerned with the experiences of 2056 referees across England, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey, who responded to an online questionnaire, and given the emergent themes from the data are linked to a figurational framework through location within Norbert Elias’s Civilizing Process. Findings identify a disenfranchised workforce, an uneven distribution of power and wider issues connected with the very structure of the game itself within England. The article concludes with specific recommendations designed to review and reinvigorate the Respect Program and as a consequence the working conditions for referees.

Keywords: *referees; abuse; association football; civilizing process; figuration*

## **Introduction**

The working practices of match officials and the environments in which referees function are becoming increasingly important to the effective operation and scheduling of matches and fixtures at all levels of sport. Association football in particular has ongoing issues related to the retention of referees, principally due to the amount and level of verbal and physical abuse that referees receive.

Academic research into association football and referees has come from a variety of disciplines. Research on association football and its historical evolution has tended to emanate from England predominantly (Dunning & Sheard, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Taylor, 2008). In addition, there is a body of research that is related to refereeing, although this research has generally either been physiological in approach considering aspects such as the activity profile or aerobic fitness of referees in training and in match situations (Casajús, Matute-Llorente, Herrero, Vicente-Rodríguez, & González-Agüero, 2016; Castillo, Yanci, Casajús, & Cámara, 2016; Weston, Castagna, Impellizzeri, Rampini, & Abt, 2007).

There have also been a number of psychological studies concerning referees, including research on the effect of bias, social pressure on decisions and the influence of crowd noise on decision-making (Buraimo, Forrest, & Simmons, 2007; Dawson & Dobson, 2010; Johnston, 2008), decision making based research (Lane, Nevill, Ahmad, & Balmer, 2006; MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes, & Weston, 2007; Spitz, Put, Wagemans, Williams, & Helsen, 2016) and the influence of home advantage (Nevill, Webb, & Watts, 2013; Webb, Dicks, Thelwell, & Nevill, 2016).

Despite these evolving research fields, there have been relatively few studies from sociological or management related fields and consequently also little academic attention has been paid to referee abuse and the management of this abuse by governing

bodies within any sport. However, within association football itself the national governing body, the Football Association (FA), recognised that there were management issues concerning the abuse of match officials and in light of this knowledge, the FA were compelled to intervene in an attempt to prevent further instances of abuse and reduce the number of referees leaving the game.

Therefore, the present study seeks to understand the current issues faced by association football referees across all levels of the game. Initiatives have been launched to tackle the verbal and physical abuse of referees and this paper considers the success of these interventions, with particular reference to the management of the Respect Program in England. Referees are leaving the game, and matches occur without referees every weekend due to shortages across England. In order to understand, challenge and affect change these trends, concerning referee retention, require further understanding, something which this paper seeks to resolve.

### **The Respect Program**

In 2008 the FA saw the necessity to introduce a Respect Program (The FA, 2008). Administered by the FA, and implemented by the County FAs, the Respect Program was designed to be employed across association football in England, at all levels of the game with particular emphasis at improving working conditions for referees due to the increasing number of match officials leaving association football, due, at least in part to the on-field and off-pitch actions of players, coaches, spectators and parents. However, crucially the English Premier League, the foremost professional league in English association football, did not implement the Respect Program and instead opted to implement their 'Get On With The Game' campaign, which was a response to the FA Respect Program (Fifield, 2008).

The Respect Program itself can be described as a ‘policy instrument’ in the form of a public information campaign. The program has been delivered as a ‘top down’ initiative, starting with policy decisions by those in managerial or strategic employment positions, which are then disseminated to a wider workforce or audience for compliance (Sabatier, 1986). The Respect Program began by initially identifying grassroots or mass participation football as the setting for change, utilising online videos, codes of conduct and barriers for parents and spectators to remain behind during matches. The program adopted the characteristics of a public information campaign, aimed at a large targeted population, aspiring to alter behaviour through the dissemination of knowledge to the targeted population, in this case players, coaches, spectators and parents (Cleland, O’Gorman & Webb, 2017). The overarching aim of the Respect Program is to increase the recruitment and retention of referees, and to achieve improved behavior towards match officials (Cleland, O’Gorman, & Bond 2015).

Nevertheless, referees have identified that a significant issue with the Respect Program, and one of the primary reasons that referees are still subjected to excessive levels of abuse, is that although the Respect Program is designed as a ‘top down’ campaign, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of campaigns of this nature (Cleland et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness among deliverers who have direct contact with the target group; in the case of the Respect Program, the referees, players, spectators and coaches (Elliott & Drummond, 2014; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010). Wider issue across the game were that referees were leaving and they were not being retained or recruited in enough numbers, the FA recognized that poor behavior was having a deleterious effect on the game at every level (The FA, 2008), evidenced with a loss of 17% or just under 5,000 active referees from the 2007-

08 to 2008-09 season due, at least in part, to abuse from players and spectators (Brackenridge, Pitchford, & Wilson, 2011).

These issues were not recent developments in football, in fact referees had been targeted by supporters and the media as figures of interest worthy of discussion long before the introduction of the Respect Program (Nevill et al., 2013; Webb, 2014; Webb & Thelwell, 2015), with this scrutiny intensifying during the period of Respect. The situation was deteriorating and therefore a campaign to assist referees in their match-to-match operation and performance was deemed necessary. Referees had reported increased incidents of both verbal and physical abuse when officiating, and it was believed that this was a significant contributory factor behind the number of referees that were leaving the game (Cleland et al., 2015).

Abuse directed towards referees is not a recent occurrence and has transpired prior to and preceding the codification of Association Football in 1863 (Nevill et al., 2013). Early and crude forms of mob and folk football had regional rules and variations, with verbal and physical violence often evident and directed towards referees (Green, 1960; Taylor, 2008; Vamplew, 1980). More recently this abuse has forced the FA to act, and therefore the Respect Program was launched as an attempt by the FA to minimize or eradicate the exposure to abuse (both physically and verbally) for referees by appealing to the sensitivities of all stakeholders involved in the game, and as a consequence aiming to positively influence historically and culturally entrenched attitudes.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Figurational Theory and Referee Abuse***

Figurational or process sociology originates from the work of Norbert Elias and it has become a well-established, well regarded and influential theoretical framework within the sociology of sport (Bloyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008). Figurational sociology provides a theoretical grounded analysis of changing patterns within sport, enabling the evaluation of individuals and the societies they form in an interrelated manner by viewing social structures and individual affect developmentally, ensuring that the processes evident within them both past and present can be observed (Maguire, 1986).

This, in turn, enables a focus on the role that sport plays in the transformation and change associated with culture and class, also demonstrating diverse power balances within figurations such as workplaces and civic formations for example (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994; Horne & Jary, 1985). These figurations can be considered as independent relations, viewing societies as figurations of people, knitted together through webs of independence creating a relational theory which encompasses a broad ranges of social forces, developments and trends interconnected by shared interests that connect groups or individuals (Giulianotti, 2004; Murphy, Sheard, & Waddington, 2000).

Figurational theory has been utilized extensively when considering the interaction and wider relationship between sport and society (Elias, 1978, 1986; Gruneau, 1999; Maguire, 1986; Giulianotti, 2005) and it has also been employed in Association Football when considering concepts such as hooliganism, and globalization (Murphy, Sheard, & Waddington, 2000), with figurational sociologists seeking to

explain power balance between groups, and the stage of development in wider society (Dunning, 1994, p. 336).

Referee abuse has occurred prior to and preceding the codification of association football in 1863 (Nevill et al., 2013). The early and crude forms of mob and folk football had regional rules and variations which the authorities often wanted removed from the streets due to the disturbances caused and the violence that was often evident (Holt, 1989; Taylor, 2008; Tranter, 1998). It is unsurprising that there were differences in rules and violence evident in the early forms of football given that rules were often handed down through oral tradition with players agreeing on localized rules (Dunning & Sheard, 2005; Green, 1960).

The attendance of an umpire or referee in early football was infrequent at best and also relatively undocumented. There is evidence of umpires at matches even outside of the public schools (Harvey, 2001), but although the games were regulated and controlled by referees they varied greatly in the level of violence they provoked (Harvey, 2005). The primary growth in organized, regional fixtures, as opposed to folk football (Goulstone, 2000) was due to the increased gambling on sporting fixtures, which necessitated an arbitrator to apply the laws that had been developed, although in the 1890s referees were being assaulted as a type of retribution by these gamblers who had wagered unsuccessfully on the outcome of a match (Vamplew, 1980; Vamplew, 2007), with referees subjected to forms of abuse at most levels of the game from 1900 to 1910 (Inglis, 1988; Taylor, 2008; Vamplew, 1988).

### ***The Civilizing Process in Association Football***

Individuals, from one generation to the next, experience their own ‘civilizing process’, directly impacting upon the evolution of social standards and the behavior of

individuals within particular societies (Maguire, 1991). Sports such as association football ‘...form an enclave for the socially approved arousal of moderate excitement behavior in public’ (Elias & Dunning, 1986, p. 65), considered further in this article through the treatment of referees in football.

Societies with high civilizing standards are protected and maintained by effective state control of physical violence, personal tensions and conflicts resulting from conflicts between people. Although it is also worth noting that most societies appear to develop countermeasures against any tensions that have been generated (Elias, 1986). The civilizing process argues that more contemporary leisure activities or sports have survived over time, mostly due to adaptations, some of which are put in place due to a moral revulsion against injuries being inflicted upon the participants (Elias, 1986). When related to violence and the development of societies in particular, Elias and Dunning argue that ‘...within many of these societies the general level of overt violence has diminished over the ages’ (Elias and Dunning, 1986, p. 394). The civilizing process is central in this arrangement and identifies conceptions of fair play and violence-controls that are potentially ‘civilizing’, although these controls can be broken (Dunning, 1994).

Research conducted on abuse or violence in football from a figurational perspective has tended to focus historically on the concept of violence at matches perpetrated by the crowds, or hooliganism. This is unsurprising given that both Elias and Dunning identified football spectating as a social problem which reinforced perceptions of existing powerful groups (Dunning, 1986). Nevertheless, it has been identified that spectator disorder usually took three main forms, verbal misconduct and barracking of players and officials, physical assaults and missile throwing directed at players and officials and pitch invasions (Maguire, 1986; Giulianotti, 2005). It is the



verbal misconduct and physical assaults of referees, in particular, which are of interest in this article. This was analyzed through the use of an online survey with the following three research questions central to the construction of the survey: (1) how frequently have referees experienced verbal and physical abuse; (2) the positive impact of the Respect Program on reducing referee abuse; and (3) future directions for improving the effectiveness of the Respect Program.

## **Method**

An online questionnaire was sent via email to active and non-active referees in 51 county FAs, representing the ten categories of referee level (Level 10, the lowest level of inactive referee, up to the Select Group referees who officiate predominantly in the Premier League). The questionnaire was disseminated through a variety of outlets including the Referees' Association, County FAs and the national FA via referees' registered contact email addresses.

The online questionnaire has been an increasingly successful methodological tool within sport related research (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014, 2016). In this case the questionnaire included multiple-choice, Likert scale and 'open' or free text format questions. The inclusion of 'open' or free text format questions was designed to give a greater understanding of respondents' experiences than could be provided by purely quantitative data (Silverman, 1999). The emphasis of qualitative data within the questionnaire design enabled more opportunity for the referees to comment on the type (if any) of abuse to which they had been subjected, as well as the opportunity to address the research questions described earlier by reflecting on their experiences in refereeing since 2008.

A total of 2056 responses were received, of which 96.5% (n=1970) were male and 3.5% (n=72) were female. The majority of respondents (23.4% and 24%) fell within the 46-55 and 56+ age bracket. The under 17 age bracket accounted for 18.4% of responses, the 26-35 age range was 10.1% of responses and the 36-45 age group totaled 11.8%. The 18-21 (8.2%) and 22-25 (4.1%) age groups were the least represented.

The questionnaire data was inductively analyzed utilizing thematic analysis to examine the participants' experience of abuse within Association Football, principally due to the vast quantity of data and the range of emergent themes. This use of open-coding phases and transparency identified patterns, commonalities and difference and allowed the researchers to acknowledge their role as an instrument in the data collection and analysis processes, as well as cross checking themes and interpretation of data by the researchers acting independently, acknowledging epistemological preferences and collaborating for the entire study in order to neutralize biases (Barbour, 2001; Bryman, 2012; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

Following this process, the authors collaborated in order to interpret and verify the themes. This results in a number of consistent themes related to each research question. This approach also enabled the researchers to reduce the data effectively by sharpening, focusing, discarding and organizing data in such a way that 'final' conclusions could be drawn and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The pertinent findings from the closed (quantitative) responses are reported initially in order to obtain demographic information on the respondents who completed the survey. Following this the open questions and inductive themes which emerged from the data are discussed with particular reference to the concepts related to figurational theory and the civilizing process framed in the introductory section of this

paper, as well as a concerted focus on the implications of the findings for policy makers and the wider governance of the game.

Following the analysis of the data from the online questionnaire a number of themes emerged from the ‘open’ responses, alongside the quantitative data which presented a number of specific and coherent areas around which to focus the results and discussion. Therefore, it is useful initially to explain experiences of the referee respondents before exploring the ‘open’ responses.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to provide a detailed and comprehensive national analysis of the experience of referees since the implementation of the Respect Program in 2008. As such three research questions were constructed, namely (1) how frequently have referees experienced verbal and physical abuse; (2) the impact of the Respect Program on reducing referee abuse; and (3) future directions for improving the effectiveness of the Respect Program. These research inform the subsequent section although the inductive nature of the research process has led to the emergence of particular issues from the data collected and as such the section is organised around these emergent themes. Our findings raise interesting insight into attempts by individuals and organizations such as the FA to centrally regulate abuse and control. As such, our findings have implications for, and can be located within, Elias’s Civilizing Process.

### ***The Frequency of Referee Abuse***

The results identify a number of issues with the implementation and management of the Respect Program, and deals with these issues systematically.

However, the section begins with an overview of the referees who completed the survey.

A significant proportion of referees who completed the questionnaire have been refereeing for under five years, and therefore are relatively new to refereeing (42% of the total number of respondents). When this is considered alongside the fact that the number of referees that receive verbal abuse at least every couple of games (60%), and those referees that have experienced physical abuse of some kind (19%), a number of relatively new referees could be exposed to either verbal or physical abuse. When comparing the years that a referee has been officiating with the frequency of verbal abuse that they receive, the results show that referees who have been officiating for less time (0-5 years) are subjected to more verbal abuse than those more experienced officials (officiating for over 21 years).

Table 1 near here

The results of the comparison demonstrate that referees who have been officiating for either two or less years or three to five years, are among the most likely to receive abuse every match (two or less years 3.45%; three to five years 3.99% from a total percentage of 21.79% which equates to 34.1% of the total responses to these two questions), every couple of games (two or less years 7.98%; three to five years 8.32% from a total percentage of 37.11% which equates to 43.92% of the total percentage of responses to these two questions) or a couple of times a season (two or less years 6.66%; three to five years 5.93% from a total percentage of 29.96% which equates to 42.02% of the total percentage of responses to these two questions).

Table 2 near here

If this is considered further, we can also analyze the level of the referee compared to the frequency of abuse that they are receiving. For example, the levels of

abuse on their own are high, with 21.79% of referees reporting that they receive verbal abuse every match, 37.11% of referees reporting that they receive verbal abuse every couple of games and 29.96% of referees reporting that they receive verbal abuse a couple of times a season. When these figures are broken down further and the level of referee examined more closely, the number of young and inexperienced officials receiving verbal abuse is comparatively high.

When referees enter junior football (Level 7) from youth football (Level 8), for example, the level of verbal abuse every match rises dramatically from 0.54% to 5.30%, from 1.90% to 12.94% who receive verbal abuse every couple of games and from 2.29% to 10.94% of referees who receive verbal abuse a couple of times a season. These increased levels are reduced at level 6 but then rise again at level 5. In addition, 18.9% of all respondents reported that they had been subjected to physical abuse at some point in their refereeing career.

The quantitative responses give an interesting set of headline data, however, it is the open or qualitative responses which provide further depth to these initial findings. Therefore, the following sections consider the open responses from referees.

### ***'Top Down' Media Campaigns and 'Power' Relationships***

Elias (1978) argued that there is a direct relationship between external constraints and individual behavior. As such, and as a direct consequence, individuals have become increasingly responsible for placing constraints on their aggressive tendencies, with civilization in part defined as a long-term transformation of external constraints into internal constraints (Korte, 2001), as acts of abuse and cruelty became less necessary and, over time, were regarded as distasteful (Linklater, 2004).

Furthermore, Elias (1996) has also identified and emphasized the coexistence of civilizing and decivilizing processes. Elias was concerned with how humans became pulled into certain relations and pushed into forms of refined behavior by the constraints that were imposed on them, stressing how the external restraints, maintained by authorities, were supplemented by internal restraints and patterns of self-regulation that had the quality of 'second nature' or 'habitus' (Linklater & Mennell, 2010, p. 397-398; Mennell, 2008). This raised the question of how far modern constraints on violence can resist efforts to weaken them (Linklater, 2004), something which Goudsblom has called 'the paradox of pacification' (Goudsblom, 2001, cited in Linklater & Mennell, 2010, p. 391) and can be linked to officiating in this scenario.

In terms of the Respect Program, the relationship between the campaign (the external constraint in this case) and the individual behavior and repression of aggressive tendencies of players, coaches and spectators are linked inextricably. The question is how far the Respect Program can assist the efforts to control abuse and aggressive tendencies towards referees. This resistance to some forms of abuse towards referees, by governing bodies such as the FA, could point towards evidence of an increased sensitivity against decivilizing trends, with issues related to power interlinked with the connection between external constraints and self-restraints (Bührmann & Ernst, 2010).

In order to be successful a 'top down' campaign has to identify the mind-set of the target population and identify how their behavior might be altered (Peterson, Abraham, & Waterfield, 2005). The 'top-down' organization of the Respect Program has utilized existing networks within football, such as the national FA and the County FAs, as well as local associations and clubs to disseminate the information and the message. Despite this organizational framework, referees argue that this omits crucial partners, such as the Premier League and the Football League.

Referees believe that the campaign should begin with the Premier League and filter down the league network in England. One referee (Level 4) stated that *'The FA are not interested in Respect. I went to Birmingham City v Reading this season. The referee was abused at the end of the game for giving a penalty in the last minute.'*

Another referee (Level 3) agreed that the influence the professional game has over the rest of football in England is significant. This has contributed to the fact that there has been no obvious change in behavior related to the Respect Program, *'there has been no change. They [the players] copy what they see on TV. Referees on TV do not deal with problems as they should, and are intimidated by players and managers. This sets a bad example.'*

The issues with power, who controls the game and who is ultimately responsible for the abuse directed towards match officials, requires greater consideration and organization, mostly due to the effect that the actions of the elite players on television have over the behavior of players lower down the league structure;

*If referees clamp down more in the Premier League and apply the letter of the law, discipline would filter down. But, in my opinion, the money at the top end means games are influenced by advertisers, who want to see the big names playing. Bookmakers also have a vested interest. Call it cynical, but it is what every referee I know is thinking.*

(Referee – Level 5)

The observations and opinions of the referees regarding the influence of those referees, players and clubs at the elite end of the game signify an understanding that the current 'top-down' approach of the Respect Program is not delivering results that would have been expected. However, the 'power' in this relationship and within the campaign, appears to be with those at the elite end of the game in the Premier League and Football

League. The behavior of these individuals at the top of the game has a direct impact on referees at every level of the refereeing spectrum, and referees believe that this is a significant issue with the way the campaign is structured.

The notion of ‘power’ can also be considered in the form of an action or sanction available to the referee, designed to act as a deterrent, when players, spectators or coaches are deemed to have verbally or physically harmed them. The Respect Program offers mechanisms for any indiscretions to be reported, through match reports sent to the County FA who have the jurisdiction to impose bans and fines on players, spectators, coaches and clubs. Elias (1986) contends that players generally keep violence or abuse within bounds, mostly due to the threat and extent of the sanctions and penalties that can be levied against them. The discussion focuses upon professional football, although the sentiment remains the same, namely that the punishment must be a significant deterrent for any individual who is considering any infringement.

Despite the possibility of sanctions through the national FA and County FAs, referees argue that although the sentiment is correct, the reality is that the punishments do not offer enough of a deterrent to players, spectators or coaches. Although players, spectators and coaches are aware of the campaign there is, in effect, a lack of power and support behind the possible sanctions, *‘the campaign has made people more aware of their behavior. In my experience the County FA haven't always backed up the campaign as strongly as they might, thus reducing its value’* (Referee – Level 5). Other referees believe that the current fine structure is not enough of a preventive measure and therefore abuse persists:

*There needs to be more severe deterrents in place for players and clubs who do not respect the match officials. A two-match ban for*



*being sent off for offensive, insulting or abusive language towards a match official is no deterrent (Referee – Level 2).*

*Harsher punishments. A £10 fine for a yellow card is no deterrent at all for a player showing dissent (Referee – Level 5).*

This presents a difficult balance in terms of governance. Elias (1986) argues that societies with high civilizing standards protect and maintain these standards through effective state control of violence, and the development of countermeasures within society against any tensions generated. However, the propensity for individuals to control their own emotions and behavior, thus refraining from resorting to physical and verbal abuse towards referees, and the perceived requirements by regulatory bodies such as the FA and County FAs to control these individuals through punitive measures including the imposition of financial losses, clearly presents an imbalance in the view of referees.

Aside from verbal and physical abuse, there are other types of coercion such as, amongst other things, the threat of economic sanctions and the assertion of authority, through agent's persuasive powers. Crucially, regarding match officials, power can be exercised with or without the resistance and knowledge of power subjects or referees (Hargreaves, 1986). A review and revision of the verbal and physical abuse to which referees are still subjected, and therefore a review of the Respect Program more specifically, would address some of the issues associated with power imbalance, although referees argue that if they apply the Laws of the Game more rigorously in an attempt to discourage abuse, they will suffer personally:

*I think the level of abuse we take is beyond disgraceful. Friends of mine who play rugby cannot believe the level of abuse we deal with on a game-to-game basis. And the biggest issue of all is we are near*

*powerless to deal with it. If we start yellow carding players and red carding players for what is in the laws of the game we get poor club marks and WILL NOT be promoted...it is not acceptable.*

(Referee – Level 4)

Elias's views indicate how policy outcomes can demonstrate unequal power relations between groups of people whose interests and perceptions are likely to diverge (Bloyce et al., 2008). The results suggest that referees, and those referees at lower league level in particular, are the least powerful in these relationships. They are reliant on others to act before their situation improves. This can be through the management and strategy associated with the 'top-down' Respect Program, the impact of elite footballers who are governed by their clubs, the Premier League and the Football League, or through the promotion process for referees overseen by the County FAs locally and the effect that referees strictly adhering to the Laws of the Game in an attempt to discourage abuse, might have on their career. In any scenario, referees at lower league level are subservient in these relationships and beholden to others to affect change in their role so that abuse may decrease.

A 'top down' campaign such as Respect requires the complete support and conviction of all stakeholders. There have been calls for greater understanding and interpretation of 'civilizing offenses' in order to move beyond the narrower idea of powerful groups attempting to change the behaviors of less powerful groups. An increased understanding of 'civilizing offenses', such as those related to abusive behavior, consequently should ensure that 'internal' campaigns support and complement top-down civilizing campaigns (van Ginkel, 1996, cited in Powell, 2013).

### ***The Respect Program - A Cultural Shift***

In order for positive change to occur and an associated reduction in the levels of verbal and physical abuse that referees are suffering, there has to be a cultural shift in football and arguably society more widely. The civilizing process points towards behavior becoming more civilized over time and moral revulsion for acts of behavior that are no longer considered tolerable becomes more evident (Elias, 1986), although this is not a linear process and the case of football referees appears to confirm this sentiment. However, referees are reporting that changes are not occurring, certainly as quickly as required, and in fact that, ‘...*respect shown to referees deteriorates continually year on year*’ (Referee – Level 3). Another referee, who is also a police officer, believes that the issues are also evident in society, but that referees are subjected to a level of abuse, both verbal and physical, that is unacceptable:

*The abuse remains from the majority of players and coaching staff. I had to abandon a game last season because of threats made by a spectator. This wasn't something that was a snap decision for me - I am a police officer and deal with abuse on a daily basis. The difference here was that I referee to enjoy football and no one has the right to put my safety at risk when I expect to go home to my children. Players, coaches and spectators appear to believe that it is a right to abuse the referee rather than an exception...in my opinion the Respect campaign is a categorical failure and will fail to achieve its aim in its current state.*

(Referee – Level 5)

These comments concerning abuse in society, also directed towards referees, illustrate issues which cannot be resolved easily. Abuse has a number of manifestations

and often point, at least implicitly, towards wider societal issues (Ray, 2013). In different types of abusive behavior, such as verbal and physical abuse experienced by referees, issues are identified related to power and dominance, but also powerlessness of individuals that are affected by this behavior (Ray, 2013). Human beings have a natural disposition to learn to regulate their behavior, but they also have to learn to regulate themselves according to the social habitus (Maguire, 1991). If this is the case we must question why the evidence suggests that players, at lower levels of league football especially, do not appear to adhere to this regulation of behavior.

Perhaps because there are a lower number of ties, in a figurational sense, across power matrices there are also, therefore, less social ties across a number of different and related figurations. This means that regulating the expected behaviors and attitudes towards abuse within the guidelines of the Respect Program is more difficult because the behaviors of these lower league players and coaches are less noticeable and obvious to a wider audience, in contrast to the globalized and widely televised world of professional football.

Another possible reason for this lack of regulation of behavior could be the emotion associated with Association Football. For example, one referee commented that, *'...in a 'high conflict' situation, e.g. a disputed goal, a tackle considered unfair, a disputed decision, a winning goal after a perceived foul, Respect goes out of the window'* (Referee – Level 6). It is argued that in football motion and emotion are intimately linked to each other in the case of players. Although Elias also states that football includes *'...a phase of decision and release from battle-tension either in triumph and victory or in disappointment and defeat'* (Elias, 1986, p. 50). It appears that this 'release' and 'disappointment' concerning a particular decision given by a referee or a defeat in the match itself is in excess of these descriptions.

Other possible explanations could be, as previously discussed, that the sanctions are not strong enough, or perhaps, as another referee believes, that football is merely reflecting wider socio-cultural attitudes and therefore manifesting itself on the football pitch as sport mirrors society, '*Social attitudes have got worse and this is reflected in player behavior and language towards other players and match officials*' (Referee – Level 4). Simply, it could be that, in contrast to beliefs associated with the civilizing process, and associated with the apparent irreversibility and irrefutability, that there has been a reversal of attitudes and behavior over time, or at the very least no noticeable improvements in attitudes or behavior (Horne & Jary, 1985).

### ***Erosion of Respect in Association Football?***

From a figurational perspective, with particular emphasis focused towards the civilizing process, this apparent lack of improved behavior and level of abuse directed towards match officials can, in part, be explained through reference to civilizing spurts. Dunning (1990, p. 67) recognizes that there can be issues when attempting to describe modern society as civilized when abusive behavior exists. The answer to this conundrum is that in civilized societies violence or abuse as well as civility can exist independently, they are mutually exclusive. In order to explain the continued existence of abuse, when discussing referees, we are directed towards the concept of 'counter civilizing' and 'de-civilizing spurts' with the development of society not considered linear (Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1988). Moreover, Elias (1986, p. 46) argues that '...the civilizing process, like other social sequences of change in a particular direction, can go into reverse gear. A civilizing process may be followed, may even be accompanied by spurts in the opposite direction, by de-civilizing processes.'

A sporting example of this argument is cricket, believed to be undergoing a de-civilizing spurt (Malcolm, 2001). The argument is presented that the process of social development cannot be even but is reflected in different aspects of all social relations, of which sport is one, because ‘no sport can be insulated from the wider society in which it is played’ (Dunning & Sheard, 2005, p. 150). Nevertheless, there are arguments against civilizing and de-civilizing spurts stating that not only are they difficult to follow but that they are also contradictory (Mennell, 2009).

Referees have identified that despite the introduction of the Respect Program, behavior has not improved and has actually deteriorated:

*... it is my view that the lack of respect shown for match officials is both disgraceful and disgusting. During the 90 minutes dissent is rife from both players and coaches. Not only this, but there is often a lack of respect shown to officials before and after matches. It is no wonder that retention of referees is so poor. If the Respect Campaign is having a positive effect on the experience of referees because respect shown for match officials has improved, then I dread to think of how bad respect for referees was 10 years ago.*

(Referee – Level 4)

The Respect Program has clearly not had the effect that many would have hoped, although there may be some wider social issues evident here. For example, the concept of wider societal issues such as antisocial behavior, can and do manifest themselves in sporting environments, with association football merely a reflective lens with which to view these issues. In short, it is conceivable that referees and their treatment, are representative of wider problems in society. Moreover, the data presented here raises some pertinent questions regarding why and how abuse towards referees is

apparent. This, in turn, warrants further empirical investigation which may use as its central frame of reference, the civilizing process. Therefore, given the abuse to which referees are evidently subjected, particularly at the lower levels of the game, it is prudent in the concluding section of this paper to consider possible changes, adaptations and policy innovation that would support and assist referees.

### ***Implementing Policy Change***

The quantitative findings clearly indicate that verbal and physical abuse are an ongoing concern. Perhaps more significantly the ‘open’ or qualitative responses are even more illustrative of the experiences of referees. The findings have identified a number of areas that require further thought and attention for the FA and those concerned with referee welfare as well as the Respect Program.

The concept of power, for example, has been identified as an issue, particularly with the implementation of a ‘top down’ campaign such as Respect. It is therefore recommended that the power involved in refereeing is redistributed so that those at the grassroots level are empowered. Without this redistribution of power, the very dynamic of relational networks means that referees at lower levels will retain misgivings and opposed to the policies being proposed (Bloyce et al., 2008). One example of this unequal distribution of power that has manifested itself through workload, is the fact that referees have to attend Respect training, whereas coaches, players and spectators have no such requirement, *‘I was very disappointed to find that as a referee I had to undertake a 3-hour session on Respect prior to being allowed to referee, although players, managers and club officials have not had to attend any sessions’* (Referee – Level 6). This does not give the impression of an equal input and effort from all stakeholders.

The level of control and influence that the Premier League has over what happens at the lower echelons of the game (whether implicit or explicit) and the associated impact that this has on referees at these levels, with players, spectators and coaches imitating behavior that is seen on the television, is a particular concern. In order to better control the environment that the majority of referees operate within (Level 7, level 6 and level 5 especially) referees believe that more games should be attended randomly so that the FA and County FAs can observe how referees are treated, and also to ensure that the reporting and tribunal process is more efficient and fair:

*... more effort needs to be made for anonymous officials to attend random games in each county, kind of like a mystery shopper, they would see first-hand how clubs and spectators are behaving and be able to better report this back. At the moment if any kind of official attends a game the club always knows beforehand and can warn people that someone will be present.*

(Referee – Level 5)

The randomized nature of these visits would potentially lead to more clubs adhering to guidelines. Presently the lack of sanctions and the severity once they are applied is evidently not enough of a deterrent to reduce referee abuse. To that end referees advocate increased communication throughout the disciplinary process and an increase in the punishment for abuse related offences, in effect changing and altering current policy:

*They should let the referees know what action they have taken so the referee feels supported...players (under 18) given a yellow card for dissent should receive a match ban. The fine doesn't mean anything to them because they never even see it as their parents pay. Most don't*



*discipline their child and the child does the exact same next week to a different referee. Coaches should face severe punishments for abuse...any parents who give abuse should be banned.*

(Referee – Level 6)

Referees believe that the levy clubs and players are required to pay if they are reported and found guilty of an offence, such as abuse towards a referee, are not enough punishment. Referees need to feel supported as a group, and as such one suggestion is to increase financial investiture, so clubs and players have more to lose. One method that this can be achieved is through deposits, *‘Insist clubs deposit (a bond) a significant sum of money at the start of the season this would be forfeited if the clubs had poor behavior’* (Referee – Level 5). Issues related to centrally imposed ‘top down’ campaigns, such as Respect, can mean that actors (referees in this case) can find themselves engaged in processes that operate ‘behind their backs’ and are rarely understood (Linklater, & Mennell, 2010). In this case it seems that there is a lack of communication regarding the Respect Program, leading to a perceived lack of support for referees.

Referees also argue that respect ratings for leagues, teams and players should be published. Referees could award marks for respect, as would the anonymous officials at the game if they happened to be in attendance at that particular fixture. Furthermore, specific information regarding the severity of punishment if an offence is committed, should be made public. It is argued that this would reduce abusive behavior and could also be used for sanctions where appropriate:

*... County FAs to publish a league table of respect ratings which players, officials and referees would submit after each match. Referees should be asked to report on all aspects of respect and clubs be fined if*

*appropriate – such reporting should be a matter of conduct for all refs who want promotion or prestige appointments (cup finals etc).*

(Referee – Level 4)

In addition to the proposed league tables charting adherence to the Respect Program, referees believe that an increased understanding of the role of the match official, and the conditions that they operate within, would be better understood if it were to be included as part of the FA coaching awards. Furthermore, this could be made a requirement for any coaches that operate within a Charter Standard football club, with Charter Standard status removed if these aspects are not followed:

*The FA must implement an understanding of the Laws of Association Football into its Level 1 entry level to coaching. I would even go so far as to say they should insist on a basic refereeing qualification before granting a Level 1 Coaching certificate. The Charter Standard status should also incorporate this.*

(Referee – Level 5)

## **Conclusions and Future Directions**

This paper has explored the experiences, views and perceptions of referees across various levels of the football continuum. Clearly from a figurational perspective referee abuse in Association Football is an ongoing concern. The power relationships that are involved, related to refereeing at all levels of the game are unbalanced, leading to issues in implementation of the Respect Program and a disenfranchised refereeing workforce.

In order that working conditions for referees are improved there should be a sea change in the approach that has been taken both historically and more recently by those

in positions of governance, such as the FA and the County FAs. Referees have identified significant issues in the way that the game is run which has consequently affected the way in which they are treated by those in governance roles and also players and coaches. The Respect Program was launched in order to tackle the historic abuse that referees have experienced, with this abuse inevitably leading to high dropout rates and issues related to the lack of referees, particularly at lower league level. Given the responses from referees at all levels of the game as part of this research, the Respect Program has not produced the changes and evolution that referees were expecting, with referees identifying a lack of support from those in positions of governance.

Therefore, a number of possible areas of work and solutions for the issues that have been considered throughout this paper have been identified, with the five most pertinent identified here:

- A thorough and comprehensive review of the entire Respect Program since the launch in 2008
- A review of the current role of the FA, County FAs and local leagues in the Respect Program and refereeing structures more widely
- A review of the disciplinary procedure linked to the Respect Program and the support of referees during this process to address a disenfranchised referee workforce
- A redistribution of power linked to the Respect Program. If the Respect Program is to remain as a ‘top down’ media based initiative, there should be more involvement from the Premier League and Football League
- The introduction of the laws of the game and the role of the referee into the coaching awards administered by the FA

In terms of those that govern and manage referees and the Respect Program on a local and national basis, there are specific management related implications which should lead to a greater understanding of the administration of a program such as Respect. In particular managers require further comprehension of the challenges faced by referees at different levels of the game, as these challenges vary dependent on the level of football in which the referee operates. Furthermore, managers should learn lessons from the findings following the launch and ongoing operation of the Respect Program and ensure that referees at all levels are empowered as and when the program is refreshed or relaunched, or risk further alienation of the referee workforce.

The feeling persists that as a body or a group of people that perform a role within society, referees require greater support and a renewed determination from the national FA, County FA and other potential stakeholders such as the Premier League and Football League, to reignite or relaunch the Respect Program. If this does not occur there is a very real risk that the 42% of referees that have been officiating for under 5 years, and have seen levels of abuse at least sustain, and possibly increase will, like their predecessors, walk away from the game.

The strengths and limitations of the research are that it is a national snapshot and as such it is problematic to make inferences related to specific incidents of abuse in more localized or regionalized locals within England. Further research could examine this more closely and consider any relationships between the different locations within England and the level of verbal and physical abuse to which referees are subjected. Moreover, this could also be examined by considering the different levels of referees and the type and frequency of abuse within these levels. This research considers the abuse issue on a national scale, however with additional numbers of respondents it is plausible that these concepts could be investigated on a more regional basis.

Moreover, the research could be extended to a more mixed method approach. Interviews or focus groups could be conducted with referees from all levels of the game in order to get an in-depth understanding of the challenges that they face, as well as further elaboration on some of their experiences. The mixed methods would provide a detailed set of information in order to explore further the issues identified here. Furthermore, other sports could also be incorporated in the research process in order to ascertain whether there are similar issues that exist in sports in England, the UK and other countries across the world.

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