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An Explorative Investigation of Referee Abuse in English Rugby League

Tom Webb
Mike Rayner
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Abstract

This article explored the experiences of 89 rugby league referees in England who undertook a mixed methods online survey from the January 9 to March 31, 2017. The results of the survey produced rich data from the open responses, and the quantitative measures are used to support these open responses. Findings identified an established culture of abuse towards referees, a refereeing workforce requiring greater support, better communication with the governing body and, therefore, revisions to existing policy and training. Conclusions identified specific recommendations and policy implications to improve the operational environment and working conditions and increased support for referees.

Keywords: *Referees, abuse, operational environment, working conditions, rugby league*

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Background and Literature Review

Abuse and violence towards match officials has been examined within academic literature recently with much of the focus directed toward association football in England, where issues regarding referee retention in particular have been highlighted as a consequence of the abuse experienced by referees (Cleland, O’Gorman, & Webb, 2017; Webb, Cleland, & O’Gorman, 2017). Research in alternative sports has also reported strategies with the potential to increase match official recruitment and retention, with characteristics such as the importance of community, and social interaction identified as important (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013). Moreover, work concerning baseball and lacrosse officials considered issues related to increased levels of support in baseball when compared to lacrosse, as well as strategies related to recruitment and retention of match officials (Ridinger, 2015), whereas Schaeperkoetter (2017) conducted an autoethnographic study examining personal experiences as a basketball official, the underrepresentation of female referees in basketball, and the importance of dealing with stress through effective coping mechanisms.

Findings from Australian rules football umpires demonstrated that abuse from spectators, parents, players, and coaches was considered a “normal” part of their role, with match officials also reporting stress in and around their working environment (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). On this point, stress resulting from officiating has also been associated with reduced mental health, match official performance, and dropout intentions (Voight, 2009). Furthermore, research conducted with ice hockey match officials considered the source, and intensity of their experience of stressful events, with verbal and physical abuse and fear of mistakes found to exist across various levels of officiating (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007). Given the abuse and stress which match officials are under, support from governing bodies is essential to recruit and retain match officials, and can be linked to a necessary duty of care for members of staff, including referees and umpires (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

There has been recent work in rugby union in England, suggesting that verbal and physical abuse have increased of late, with referees identifying issues emanating from players, coaches, and spectators (Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016). There is also research specifically focused on English rugby league referees. For example, physiological research has considered the physical demands of elite referees using Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to evaluate the movement and physiological demands of professional rugby league referees (O’Hara et al., 2013). Physiological work has also considered the effect of movement demands on the accuracy of referee penalty decisions during a match (Emmonds et al., 2015). Furthermore, the concept of aggression in rugby league has been linked to the location of the game. Jones, Bray, and Oliver (2007) examined the relationship between aggression and game location by videoing 21 professional matches played in the 2000 Super League season, with trained observers recording the frequency

of aggressive behaviours. Whilst not specifically focusing on referees, they found that away teams tended to engage in substantially more aggressive behaviours in games they lost compared with games they won.

There is a necessity to understand referee experiences related to abuse in other sports in England in order to determine the extent of any wider issues. Research concerning association football, as well as sports in other countries, has identified concerns with the retention of match officials, with abuse described as a contributory factor (Webb et al., 2017). Therefore, the overarching aim of this study was to examine the experiences of referees in rugby league, particularly related to incidents of abuse and the networks that exist to support and retain referees. To that end, this paper provides real-life accounts related to the current working practices and experiences of 22% of the total number of registered rugby league referees across England. These responses were achieved through an online survey with two central research questions, constructed following engagement with previous research in related subject areas, namely (1) the extent of verbal and physical abuse and (2) the training and support offered by referee societies and the Rugby Football League (RFL). Findings and outcomes are intended to inform the RFL, of the current state of the game, with the intention to affect and inform policy in both rugby league, as well as other related sports such as rugby union for example, ultimately aiming to support referees, understand any issues faced and reduce referee discontinuation in the sport.

Method

The online survey was distributed to rugby league referees. The purposive, nonprobability sample (Schutt, 2009) of match officials represented all levels of the game from mass participation to those that officiate in the top divisions domestically such as the Super League. The survey was disseminated through a variety of outlets, including social media and RFL-registered contact email addresses for match officials.

Survey Design and Measures

The survey included a total of eight demographic or organisational characteristics questions, and a further 18 questions to be answered, giving a total of 26 questions. Of these 18 questions, nine were Likert scale, five questions required a yes/no response, three were open questions, and one question was a multiple answer option. Questions asked concerned the experience of match officials related to their training, development opportunities, and promotion pathways, any barriers to their continued participation in their sport, and the nature and extent of those barriers.

Likert scale questions provided a 5-point choice for respondents. The scale for the training, development opportunities and promotion pathways ranged from, *very poor* (= 1) to *very good* (= 5). While exceptions to this wording were used to

clarify particular items, a 5-point Likert scale was provided throughout with “1” representing least and “5” representing most. An example sample question from the barrier to continued participation aspect of the survey was, “Episodes of abuse make you question whether or not to continue refereeing.” The responses ranged from, *Strongly disagree* (= 1), to *Strongly agree* (= 5) with a *neutral* choice given for each question.

Three open-ended questions were also added to the survey instrument to obtain qualitative comments concerning:

1. Additional training or development requirements
2. If applicable whether verbal abuse was reported to the authorities by the match official
3. Any further changes or adaptations to their role which would support and develop them more effectively

Open or free text format questions were included to give a greater understanding of respondents’ experiences than could be provided by purely quantitative data (Silverman, 2013). The prominence of qualitative data within the survey provided the match officials opportunities to comment on their experiences, as well as the chance to address the research questions identified earlier.

Data Analysis

The qualitative survey data was inductively analysed utilising thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is often adopted due to the flexibility it provides, and the assistance it permits in the identification, analysis and reporting of themes emergent from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can also be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches and is compatible with essentialist and constructionist paradigms. The present study adopted a constructionist stance to report upon referee experiences as an active process of interpretation. Therefore, a constructionist approach provides a way to disentangle complex organisational processes, elucidate meaning implicit in the everyday practice and experiences of referees, and contribute to the deconstruction of policy initiatives (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000). The importance of reflexivity and interaction with the data led to the authors ensuring that they worked as critical friends, as themes were disseminated for peer review (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

The final stages of data analysis involved the authors inductively allocating themes into general dimensions evident from the raw data. These general dimensions were constructed prior to involvement from the third author to ensure that appropriate reflection had taken place between the first and second authors. This use of open-coding phases and transparency identified patterns, commonalities and difference in the data. Moreover, cross checking themes and interpretation of data by the researchers acting independently, permitted the

acknowledgment of epistemological preferences, and collaboration to neutralise biases (Barbour, 2001). This approach also enabled the researchers to reduce the data effectively by sharpening, focusing, discarding, and organising data in such a way that ‘final’ conclusions could be drawn and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The thematic analysis led to the construction of final themes and a general dimension (Organisational Structure and Governance), which has provided the structure for the forthcoming Results and Discussion section (see Figure 1).

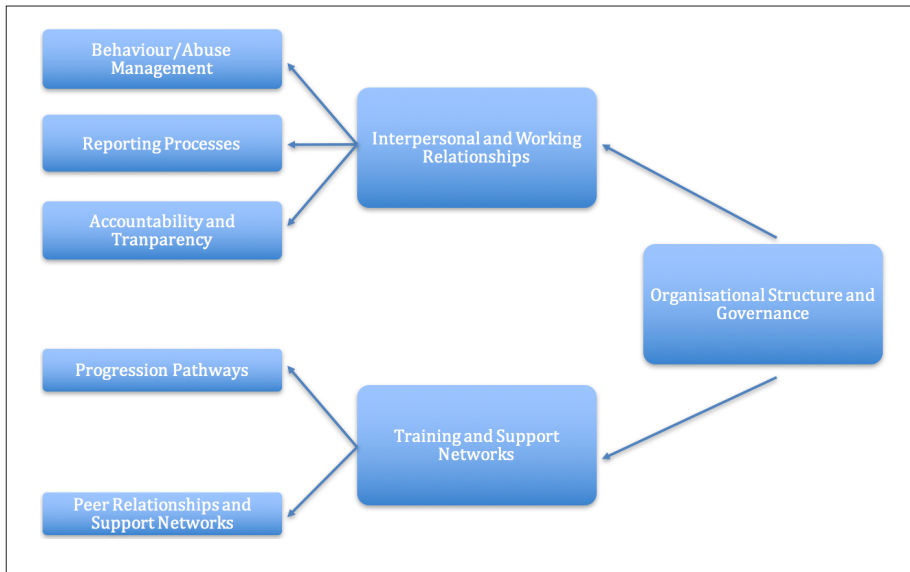


Figure 1. General dimension following thematic analysis

A total of 89 responses were received, from a match official pool of 400 equating to a response rate of approximately 22%. The findings presented below address each of the research questions by focusing on the descriptive statistical data and open-ended narrative provided by the match officials. The presentation of this data includes demographic details of each referee, with their level, years of experience as a match official, referee society they represent and age range included in order to provide a context and setting to their experiences.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this explorative research was to provide a national analysis of the experiences of referees in rugby league. As such two research questions were constructed based on previous research findings outlined in the introduction, namely (1) the extent of verbal and physical abuse and (2) the training and

support offered by referee societies, and the RFL. The exploration of these research questions has led to findings associated with abuse/behaviour and referee support networks. These outcomes are ultimately intended to influence policy, with the intention to support referees, understand any issues faced, and reduce any referee discontinuation.

The responses were predominantly male (96.6%, $n=86$) with 3.4% ($n=3$) from female referees, with the majority of the respondents (24.7% and 23.6%) falling within the under 18 and 18–24 age bracket (see Figure 2). A breakdown of pertinent demographic information is presented in Table 1, including the number of years refereeing, and current level of refereeing.

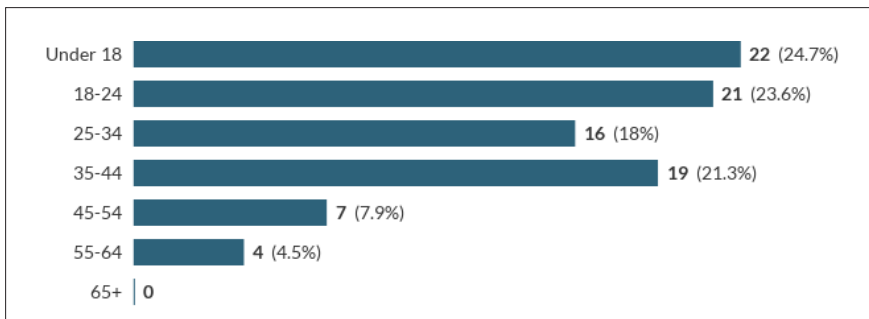


Figure 2. Age categories of rugby league referees

Table 1

Demographic Information of Referee Respondents

Number of years refereeing		Current level of refereeing	
2 or less	23.6% (21)	Elite	9% (8)
3-5 years	29.2% (26)	Grade 1	6.7% (6)
6-10 years	20.2% (18)	Grade 2	7.9% (7)
11-15 years	13.5% (12)	Grade 3	39.3% (35)
16-20 years	4.5% (4)	Grade 4	31.5% (28)
21+ years	9% (8)	Foundation	5.6% (5)

In total 85.4% of referees reported that they had been subjected to verbal abuse whilst officiating, while 16.9% of referees also reported that they had received some form of physical abuse. In addition, when referees were asked how often the abuse occurred, 20.2% of referees said every match, 36% said every couple of games, 28.1% of referees replied a couple of times a season, whereas 7.9% of referees stated that they received abuse every few years, and 7.9% of referees also believe that they

never receive abuse. Moreover, 44.9% of referees believe that abuse has increased in recent times, whereas 28.1% of referees do not believe abuse has increased, and 27% are not sure if abuse has increased. The quantitative responses present an informative set of headline data, however, it is the qualitative open responses that provide further depth to these findings. Therefore, the following sections consider the open responses from referees and are organised under the Interpersonal and Working Relationships and Training and Support Networks higher order themes presented in Figure 1.

Interpersonal and Working Relationships

Behaviour and abuse management. One of the themes to emerge from the open responses from referees in rugby league was the fact that abuse is an ingrained and accepted aspect of the game. Referees are used to the aggressive behaviour from players, spectators, and coaches, and as such, abuse has become routine in their understanding and acceptance of norms within the game itself. One referee believes that abuse is “part of the role ... water off a duck’s back” (Grade 2, 3-5 years’ experience, male, 35-44). This referee has not been officiating for a long period of time and yet already abuse is something that is accepted. Another referee with 6-10 years of experience confirms that abuse is not only accepted but expected, “The culture of referees is that verbal abuse is expected, including homophobic abuse” (Grade 2, 6-10 years’ experience, male, 18-24). The personalised and homophobic nature of the abuse that is explained here is a concern for the RFL as the governing body for rugby league in England, a trend that has also been identified in other sports (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007).

With 85.4% of referees responding to the online survey stated that they have experienced some form of verbal abuse, it is evident that there is a specific issue with abuse toward match officials in rugby league. An associated effect of this abuse could be that the retention of referees decreases as they are subjected to an unsafe, unenjoyable environment, and negative experiences. However, given that referees have reported abuse as “part of the role,” and also that “you just take the vile insults as part of the game” (Grade 2, 11-15 years’ experience, Warrington, male, 35-44), there is potentially a further issue related to the 14.6% of referees who claimed not to have received verbal abuse. Given the existing literature regarding the behaviour of players, coaches, and parents in other sports (Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009), it could be that these referees “expect” abuse and therefore believe that it is just part of the game, and so as a result, do not report incidents.

Accountability, transparency, and reporting processes. A consistent theme to emerge from the open responses was the perceived importance of verbal support or communication that referees receive following the reporting of an incident of abuse, as well as transparency surrounding the reporting process, a factor also highlighted in association football in England (Webb et al., 2017). Referees want to know the outcome of the report that they submit, and any consequences for

the individuals who have committed the offence. Referee experiences in terms of the communication from the RFL are mixed; for example, a grade 4 referee had reported verbal abuse but had not been advised of the outcome of the report, "... only reported verbal abuse by players and reported it to the RFL on dismissal reports. I assume the offenders were dealt with but never heard anything after filing the report" (Grade 4 regional & society, 6-10 years' experience, male, 35-44).

One coach was promoted even after he had been reported for a form of abuse toward a match official. An under-18 referee with 3-5 years of experience outlined that he was involved in the communication process until a certain point when he was not updated on the outcomes of the report: "I did report it, it was dealt with quite poorly, and I wasn't kept in the circle until the end of the case, where in fact the assistant coach was promoted" (Grade 3, 3-5 years' experience, male, Under 18). Other referees believed that the disciplinary process was an area that required attention, asking for more "feedback from disciplinaries" (Grade 4 regional & society, 6-10 years' experience, male, 25-34). This lack of support for referees in the disciplinary process has been identified in other sports and can provide a reason for referees considering leaving their sport (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017).

Abuse, in any form, can at least be minimised to some extent through support networks, and guidance offered to referees once the abuse has taken place. However, one grade 4 referee highlighted a lack of support and a disenchantment with the game: "I reported the abuse to the league, but there was no support given. This will be my last season because of the feeling of not being safe on the pitch" (Grade 4 regional & society, 6-10 years' experience, male, 25-34). The fact that referees are not only subjected to forms of abuse but also do not feel safe when officiating matches demonstrates a potentially deteriorating situation, and a setting that requires some form of change and intervention in order to implement change.

Training and Support Networks

Peer relationships and support networks. The experiences of referees in terms of the support they receive from both the referee societies and the RFL as the governing body are mixed. Some referees have reported that they have received a good level of support from stakeholders involved in the disciplinary process, including the police:

I reported the physical abuse to both the leagues and the police and they were dealt with accordingly by both. Our society always do everything that is possible to stand by an official who has been victim of any abuse verbal or physical, and ensures a satisfactory outcome from the disciplinary panel. (Foundation level, 6-10 years' experience, male, 18-24)

Follow-up support is essential if abuse is to be dealt with effectively, ensuring that referees feel supported and valued (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013). The experiences of referees can differ dependent on the referee society to which they belong, and therefore the level of support contrasts dependent on the

location of the referee: "I reported the abuse, but got no support when I was a member of another society" (Grade 3, 6-10 years' experience, male, 18-24). The effectiveness of the referee societies is not the only variable that can affect the support that referees receive. One referee who reported the verbal abuse to which he was subjected identified that it was the RFL that was not as involved as it could have been: "I have reported verbal abuse before. My society have supported me with everything I have ever needed. With regards to the RFL, they are virtually irrelevant" (Grade 3, 6-10 years' experience, male, 18-24). Another referee also reported physical abuse after being assaulted during matches, questioning the support received: "I have not been supported on any occasion by the RFL following assaults" (Grade 4 regional & society, 21+ years' experience, male, 45-54).

Progression pathways. There are several policy areas and recommendations that referees identify as important in order for levels of abuse to decrease and that would assist in the promotion, progression, and retention of referees (Ridinger, Kim, Warner, & Tingle, 2017). One referee believed that rugby league is improving support for player welfare and depression, linked to mental health which is a concern in other sports, and for match officials (Coyle, Gorczynski, & Gibson, 2017), but that referees are perhaps being neglected or left behind as a result of these changes:

I feel that rugby league in general is taking big steps regarding player welfare and depression. However, the referee side needs looking into, especially with the amount of abuse and criticism referees come under from spectators and coaches. This has improved a little ... but improvement is still needed. (Grade 3, 6-10 years' experience, male, 18-24)

A proportion of referees recognised that training and support are improving; 28.1% believed that the training products offered to societies by the RFL are either very good or good; although 37.1% of referees also classified the training products as either poor or very poor. There is a necessity for them to be given effective real-life skills training to adequately prepare for any occurrences they are likely to experience and to assist them in their continuous professional development. Further consideration should be given to training associated with confrontation, and situations on and off the field of play in all referee courses and qualifications. Referees have asked for greater communication and feedback related to their performances and development, and instances of abuse will persist unless communication is improved and the training is as effective as it can be:

I would like more feedback. I asked continuously last year for good or bad feedback and nothing came of it. It's hard to improve when you don't know whether what you are doing is right or wrong (I was not graded last year). (Grade 3, 2 years or less experience, male, 45-54)

A further innovation or extension of a program already in operation in at least one society could be the use of more experienced mentors to guide and

support younger referees, associated meetings to add structure to any scheme, as well as a support networks and social interaction (Kellett & Warner, 2011), “at our society, we independently provide each match official with a mentor and are regularly watched and assessed on their performances. As well as monthly development meetings” (Foundation Level, 6-10 years’ experience, male, 18-24). To adopt a process such as this, further support for the societies is required, and therefore further management personnel could be added to increase this support network. “I want a community referees manager within the RFL to work closely in developing referees, and supporting the societies, especially in developing areas like the North East, and the Midlands” (Grade 4 regional & society, 3-5 years’ experience, male, 35-44).

The RFL has tried to address the growing issue of referee abuse in rugby league, and as a result touchline managers were introduced to try to maintain control of the spectators and coaches while the game was in progress. However, the impact of these individuals, and the initiative more widely has been questioned, “the RFL tried to introduce touch line managers to patrol the touch line and keep it all in check. They very rarely do the job that they are supposed to” (Grade 4 regional & society, 3-5 years’ experience, male, 18-24). Evidently the initiative did not operate as successfully as the RFL would have liked, and this may be the result of a hierarchical or organisational structure, which is not as efficient as is required for an initiative such as this to succeed.

Conclusion

Despite evidence of interventions within rugby league aimed at improving mental health and well-being since 2011 by the State of Mind charity (State of Mind, n.d.), there are clearly persistent concerns, and there is, therefore, a need for engagement with referees, players, parents, and coaches to improve the operational and working environment for all stakeholders, particularly referees. The results of this research illustrated issues related to a culture of abuse toward match officials, communication, support networks, and the disciplinary process. The dilemma facing the RFL, as well as other governing bodies of sport in England (Rayner et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2017) concerns the recruitment and retention of match officials, and the “drop out” of referees every season due, at least in part, to the abuse to which they are subjected. A coherent strategy and related policy are required in order to address the issue of referee abuse within rugby league, which would also be applicable to other sports exhibiting similar issues in the recruitment and retention of match officials.

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