Abuse in the Workplace? Analysing Soccer Referee Experiences and Abuse through a Longitudinal Lens

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In 2008 the English Football Association (FA) saw the necessity to introduce a Respect Programme designed to improve the working conditions for match officials in soccer (The FA, 2008). Referees were leaving the game and they were not being retained or recruited in enough numbers, and the FA recognised that poor behaviour 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 soccer. 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). Referees had been targeted by supporters and the media as figures of interest worthy of discussion long before the introduction of the Respect Programme (Nevill, Webb, & Watts, 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.

The Respect Programme itself can be described as a ‘policy instrument’ in the form of a ‘top down’ public information campaign. In order to be successful a ‘top down’ campaign has to identify the mind-set of the target population and identify how their behaviour might be altered (Peterson, Abraham, & Waterfield, 2005). The Respect Programme is designed to increase the recruitment and retention of referees, and to achieve improved behaviour towards match officials (Cleland, O’Gorman & Bond, 2015). Nevertheless, in more localised studies a significant issue with the Respect Programme, is that although designed as a ‘top down’ campaign, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of this type of campaign, as well as a lack of awareness among deliverers who have direct contact with referees, players, spectators and coaches (Elliott & Drummond, 2014; Lusted & O’Gorman, 2010).

This research examines the experiences, working conditions and management of referees with particular emphasis on abuse and the implementation and impact of the Respect Programme at a national level in England over a ten-year period. In order to achieve this an online survey with soccer referees at all levels of the game was conducted in 2005, achieving a total of 2618 responses and in 2015, achieving 2056 responses. The survey 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). Therefore, a comparative analysis was utilized between the two questionnaires and content analysis was employed with the qualitative survey responses.

Findings demonstrate issues in the levels of verbal and physical abuse directed towards referees across a significant period of time. In addition, the impact of the Respect Programme, and the associated reduction in levels of referee abuse, has not been as prominent as was hoped. For example, 52% of referees described their experiences as ‘satisfactory’ and 40% described their experiences as ‘better than satisfactory’ in 2005, whereas following the implementation of the Respect Programme in 2015, over 28% of referees identified the programme as either ‘somewhat unsuccessful’ or ‘very unsuccessful’, evidencing a significant level of dissatisfaction.

Perhaps more concerning for the Football Association and the County Football Associations in England, is the decrease of referee satisfaction with them and their services since the launch of the Respect Programme. In 2005 62% of referees rated their treatment by County FA as either ‘good’ or ‘very good’ and 59% of referees rated their treatment by the national FA itself as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. However, in 2015 only 49% of referees agreed or
strongly agreed that the support from their County FA was adequate, and only just over 32% of referees strongly agreed or agreed that the support offered by the national FA was adequate. Both measurements indicate a sizeable reduction in satisfaction rates.

This paper considers these results further, analyses the changes in levels of abuse to which referees are subjected and considers the implications of these longitudinal findings with reference to potential policy recommendations aimed at the development and improvement of referee working conditions.