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An analysis of soccer referee experiences in France and the Netherlands: Abuse, conflict, and level of support

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ABSTRACT

Referee and match official discontinuation in sport is an issue of relevance to sport managers and administrators. Despite this, it is an often-neglected area of sport management research. In this paper, a critical analysis of the discontinuation of soccer referees across two countries is provided, utilizing an intergroup conflict theoretical construct to frame the analysis, drawing on the concept of conflict resolution to consider solutions to the issues uncovered. The distribution and subsequent analysis of an online survey in both France and the Netherlands facilitated engagement with a total of 4,637 referees, comprising 3,408 from France and 1,229 from the Netherlands. Following the thematic analysis higher order themes related to aggression, abuse and support systems emerged. Referees reported that verbal abuse was a frequent occurrence, and that incidents of physical abuse were also evident, indicating a culture of abuse toward referees in both countries. Referees as an outgroup felt marginalized, as players, coaches and spectators form ingroups with shared objectives. Additional findings suggest that the support structures around the referees require strengthening at both local and national level, to address issues related to discontinuation. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of the research on the match official abuse related literature, as well as identifying suggestions for researchers and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Soccer has a considerable issue regarding the number of referees leaving the game. This is a concern which has drawn the attention of the international governing body for soccer, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Swanson, 2018), and evidenced in England with a reduction of 7,310 referees between 2011 and 2017 from 35,347 to 28,037 (The FA, 2017). Recent work by Ridinger, Warner, Tingle, and Kim (2017) found that 42% of referees were considering discontinuing

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because of abuse, and 20% of referees were contemplating discontinuing as a result of a lack of support from administrative authorities. Moreover, Deal et al. (2018) considered the frequency of disciplinary incidents toward referees in men's amateur soccer, with a lack of knowledge of the laws of the game leading to confrontation between referees, players, and coaches.

Despite these findings, little is known about the reasoning behind soccer referees discontinuing their role. Referees in soccer have faced challenging environments, historically crowd initiated, through the unwanted attention of abusive gamblers during earlier forms of the game, who felt that decisions had gone against their team (Webb, 2016). More recently, and most worryingly, it has been highlighted that abuse is not only apparent at varying levels of the game from the crowd (spectators), but also players, and coaches (Cleland, O'Gorman, & Webb, 2017; Webb, Cleland, & O'Gorman, 2017).

Sports in other countries have also displayed concerning trends with regards to the treatment of sports match officials by stakeholder groups, such as players, and spectators, and the conflict which can occur between these groups. For example, in America and Australia, sports such as basketball, Australian Rules football, as well as baseball and lacrosse, have faced issues concerning match official retention, with research suggesting a requirement to increase match official recruitment, and encourage referees, and umpires to be retained in their chosen sport (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013).

Nonetheless, research has shown that soccer in England in particular has ongoing concerns related to the retention of referees (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017), with conflict in the form of verbal and physical abuse from spectators and players a significant contributing influence (Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2016). Furthermore, research emanating from England has also identified that insufficient consideration of the support, development, and management of referees could lead to further declines in participation numbers, given the support, and mediation required to resolve any form of conflict (Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016; Webb, Rayner, & Thelwell, 2018).

Although research has taken place in England, as well as other countries outside Europe, there is currently very limited research which has considered concepts related to conflict, abuse, and the supporting operational environment of referees in other European countries. Initial evidence emanating from the study of French sports officials identified that the stress stemming from verbal abuse was a contributory factor toward discontinuation (Dosseville, Rioult, & Laborde, 2014). The incidents of referee abuse, which have been established in England, and are suggested in France, appear to contrast with the aims and implementation of the UEFA referee Respect program, which is described as something that is 'a value close to UEFA's heart' (UEFA, 2015). Moreover, the desire of the UEFA referee education program is to 'improve the quality of match officials at all levels of the game in the UEFA member associations', namely European countries and leagues (UEFA, 2006, p. 3).

Despite the progress made in understanding the abuse (e.g., Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017) and the discontinuation of match officials (e.g., Ridinger, 2015; Warner et al., 2013), there remains gaps in our understanding regarding the extent of match official abuse, and the relationships between abuse, support, and discontinuation. Addressing these gaps can advance understanding such as how to retain referees in soccer, and understand better the conflict which exists between referees, players, spectators, and coaches. Therefore, we examine and compare the experiences, and support networks surrounding two national groups of soccer referees in France and the Netherlands, through engagement with 4,637 referees; 3,408 responses from France, and 1,229 responses from the Netherlands.

Further to original research in England (Cleland et al., 2017; Rayner et al., 2016; Webb, 2017; Webb et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2018; Webb & Thelwell, 2015), we aimed to extend our understanding of this under researched area, and address two gaps in the literature. The gaps in the literature allowed us to: (a) provide an analysis of the experiences of referees in France and the Netherlands related to abuse, conflict, and support in soccer, and (b) explore potential management resolutions and initiatives to tackle issues concerning abuse, conflict, and support in soccer. Due to the under researched nature of the subject matter, this novel research was explorative. We developed four primary research questions central to the project:

Research Question 1: What have been the experiences of officiating since referees were initially qualified?

Research Question 2: What has been the frequency, type, and setting of any verbal and physical abuse that referees may have experienced?

Research Question 3: What is the current level and type of support provided by local, regional, and national associations and organizations?

Research Question 4: What are the future directions and recommendations for improving the current experiences of referees in different countries?

2. Literature review

Research has been conducted utilizing basketball referees and Australian Rules football umpire populations to better understand the strategies which might increase match official recruitment, and encourage referee and umpire retention (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013). Findings identified the importance of community and social interaction, administration, and training in retaining match officials. Moreover, Australian Rules football umpires have identified that they routinely received abuse, and that this abuse was a 'normal' part of their role. Such evidence indicates a normalization or acceptance of conflict, but findings also demonstrated that the socialization and interaction of umpires can contribute to the retention of these umpires within Australian Rules football (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007).

The incidents of conflict highlighted in the previous paragraph contribute to match officials' experiences of stress in and around their working environment, leading to pressures inside and outside the playing area (Selcuk, 2009). Significantly, stress has been highlighted as a direct consequence of officiating, which has a profound impact on mental health, the performance of match officials, and dropout intentions (Belkacem & Salih, 2018). The principal aspects of officiating, which have been highlighted as scoring highly in terms of stress are 'conflict between officiating, and family demands,' 'making a controversial call,' and 'conflict between officiating, and work demands' (Voight, 2009). Furthermore, research conducted with ice hockey match officials considered the source, and intensity of their experience of stressful events (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007). The three stressors that were consistently evidenced by the match officials were 'making a controversial call,' 'difficulty working with a partner official,' and 'confrontation with coaches'. However, verbal, and physical abuse, and fear of mistakes were also found to exist and differ across levels, with the lowest level of ice hockey officials experiencing less stress, and the stress evident from fear of mistakes greater than that from abusive events. The findings also identified the importance of intervention programs to deal effectively with difficult situations, or conflicts which the match officials might experience (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007). Therefore, referees require clear objectives, effective leadership, and a sufficient support system, irrespective of the level at which they officiate (Mathers & Brodie, 2011).

2.1. Theoretical construct

Intergroup conflict is prevalent within human society (McDonald, Navarrete, & Van Vugt, 2012). It is a concept referred to when describing causes of conflict between countries, and also issues that exist between groups in organizations. Workplace disputes, for example, can lead to confrontations between certain groups stemming from misconceptions, disagreements, intercultural differences, and perceptions of unfairness (Bornstein, 2003). Relatively small-scale conflicts involving competition, antagonism, and aggression among rival sport teams are scenarios to which referees can be exposed when dealing with players, coaches, and spectators, and disputes over decisions made during the course of a match (McDonald et al., 2012).

Groups in society, and in this case within soccer, can be defined as units of two or more people who are connected through social relationships, often accompanied by interrelated goals and outcomes (Böhm, Rusch, & Baron, 2018). If we accept that referees form a distinct 'group' within the game of soccer, and that players, coaches, and spectators do likewise, then the objectives of these different factions as part of the game of soccer can lead to conflict, and an exaggerated negative evaluation of the outgroup, or referees in this context (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Jackson, 2002). The outgroup (referees) can be defined as a group who desire a different outcome to the ingroup (players, coaches, and spectators). Referees are present to guard and uphold the laws of the game, to ensure that the match is conducted according to the laws, and to enforce them wherever necessary. Conversely, players, coaches, and spectators are predominantly concerned with the outcome or the result, and consequently winning is the primary objective.

Therefore, in an intergroup-conflict setting such as this, we can see referees as a distinct group, and players, coaches, and spectators as another group, with contributions to the collective good of one group creating negative externalities for the other group. In terms of referees, this means that players, spectators, and coaches might engage in conflict that results in substantial negative consequences for the outgroup members (Mäs & Dijkstra, 2014). Reducing differences between the ingroup (players, coaches, and spectators), and the outgroup (referees) is essential in order to challenge issues between the groups. Research has shown that positive intergroup contact can be associated with reduced prejudice toward an outgroup, and positive interactions with members of the outgroup contributing to changes in these relationships (Christ et al., 2014).

Any intergroup conflict, such as negative player, coach, or spectator behavior toward referees can exacerbate differences in status and power in competition settings (Jussim, Ashmore, & Wilder, 2001). Indeed, when a group's physical safety is threatened, fear is likely to be stimulated, especially when the group feels powerless (Kamans, Otten, & Gordijn, 2010). Intergroup conflict affects the perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (e.g., discrimination, aggression) of the individuals involved. To understand individual behavior and moral values in intergroup conflict, there should be understanding of the interplay between the different actors' motives, and emotions (Böhm et al., 2018; Halevy, Kreps, Weisel, & Goldenberg, 2015). Individual behavior, and the acceptance of morally appropriate forms of behavior differ from individual to individual (Hadarics & Kende, 2018), and when discussing ingroups and outgroups, these relationships can be categorized by antagonism, conflict, and contempt (Brewer, 2001).

Sport related research in this area is sparse, although Weisel and Böhm (2015) considered the motivations underlying individual participation in intergroup conflict between natural groups, including fans of soccer clubs. Findings demonstrated that better understanding of intergroup conflict is linked to an increased understanding of individuals' motivation for participation in a given conflict, and that any conflict depends on the degree of enmity between the groups involved. Social identity threat, contextualized as soccer fans' responses to their team's success or failure, can also lead to differences in emotional expression, as a function of ingroup identification (Crisp, Heuston, Farr, & Turner, 2007). Research has demonstrated that there were links between emotion and action tendencies, and that these tendencies can be differentiated following match losses, with lower identifiers feeling sad, but not angry, and higher identifiers feeling angry but not sad. The identification with emotion and action tendencies also varied depending on the extent to which people saw the relevant ingroup as being important for their own self-concept (Crisp et al., 2007).

Indeed, Crisp et al. (2007) argued that the sporting world provides many sources for strong social identification, with feelings toward an outgroup summarized as constituting negative affect ('bad feeling'). Group-based emotions, such as

shared fear, sadness, anger, and guilt, arise when a particular intergroup event is weighed up in terms of its implications for the ingroup. We can see evidence of the link between the sporting world and social identification through negative feelings toward referees/match officials as an outgroup, and feelings of anger by players, coaches, and spectators as an ingroup. Work concerning abuse toward match officials has considered the extent (Ridinger, Warner, et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017) of the abuse, potential methods of tackling abuse, and other reasons for discontinuation (Ridinger, Kim, Warner, & Tingle, 2017). However, we need to understand the nature of the conflicts between referees as one group, and players, coaches, and spectators as another group, in order to move toward resolutions to any conflict, and consequentially, an improvement to the abusive situations to which referees in soccer have been exposed over a prolonged period of time (Webb, 2014, 2016).

All of the aforementioned work is important for advancing our understanding of the recruitment and retention of sports match officials. However, the review of the existing literature suggests that although previous work has explored the recruitment and retention of sports match officials more widely, there is a lack of comparative referee or match official research conducted across two countries, and therefore clearly, more empirical work is needed to understand the abuse, management, and experiences of referees in soccer.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

An online survey was sent to active and non-active referees across France and the Netherlands by the federations in both countries, the French Football Federation (FFF), and the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB). Potential respondents represented all levels from mass participation to those that officiate in the top divisions domestically such as Ligue 1 (France), and the Eredivisie (the Netherlands). We employed an adaptive approach, a method successfully employed in previous sports-related research (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017). The data were collected in this way due to the extensive geographical area in which the respondents were located, with the wide physical reach of web-based surveys enabling the possibility of creating a representative sample of referees as a snapshot of a national picture (Toepoel, 2016).

The analysis employed within this study can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, and is compatible with essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A constructionist approach provides a way to disentangle complex organizational processes, elucidate meaning implicit in the everyday practice, and experiences of referees, and contribute to the deconstruction of policy initiatives (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000). The study adopted a constructionist stance to report upon referee experiences as an active process of interpretation, as actors who are themselves involved in complex interactions, and policy processes.

3.2. Procedures and instrumentation

Prior to the construction of any survey questions, previous research and findings relevant to the subject area were consulted (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017), in order to establish a form of content validity (Mitchell & Jolley, 2012). Content validity, was utilized to inform the design of the survey at various stages prior to dissemination, involving analysis of how appropriate the questions and structure of the survey were to the target sample population (Litwin, 1995). In addressing validity and reliability, pilot surveys were sent via email to referees and members of the governing bodies in both France and the Netherlands, facilitating a triangulated member checking process between the researchers and referees as members of their two respective governing bodies. The member checking process enabled the verification and validation of the survey instrument prior to dissemination in both France and the Netherlands (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Thomas, 2017).

Comments received following the pilot survey completion, were collated and the survey design was amended as a result of this feedback. In order to address the reliability of the survey the same structure and ordering of questions was implemented in both France and the Netherlands. The only differences in the surveys distributed in France and the Netherlands were due to the language in the respective countries, or the specific infrastructure of soccer and officiating in the two countries.

The online survey was open for one month, and disseminated to the target populations in both countries in January 2018, through the distribution lists of both federations (the FFF and KNVB had approximately 26,000, and 4,000 referees on their respective databases). The target referee group for this research was a nonprobability, purposive or subjective sample. The sample of referees was selected due to the characteristics they held in both France and the Netherlands, directly related to the objectives of the overarching research questions (Schutt, 2009).

The survey itself included detailed guidelines to enable respondents to answer from an informed perspective. Following previous research concerning the experiences, support, and abuse toward sports match officials, the online survey asked questions in related subject areas, taking into account cultural and organizational differences in both France and the Netherlands (Ridinger, 2015; Warner et al., 2013, 2017). Therefore, questions concerned the experience of the referees, their training, development opportunities, barriers to their continued participation in soccer (if any), and the nature of those barriers.

In total, 8 demographic questions, and a further 20 questions were constructed, giving a total of 28 questions. Of these 20 questions nine were devised with a Likert scale, five questions required a closed yes or no response, five were open question,

and one had a multiple answer option. Likert scale questions provided a five-point choice for respondents. The scale for the training, development opportunities, and promotion pathways ranged from 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*very good*). While exceptions to this wording were used to clarify items, a five-point Likert scale was provided 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 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*)” with a neutral choice given for each question.

Five open questions were developed and included in the survey instrument to give a greater understanding of respondents’ experiences than purely quantitative data would provide. Open questions can be utilized to establish the validity of closed questions, and provide an alternative to small numbers of qualitative interviews (Schuman & Presser, 1977; Singer & Couper, 2017). Once the research questions are constructed, the value and depth of the qualitative responses can be optimized during survey design. The ultimate intention of qualitative responses, such as these, can be to generate ‘stories’ from defined groups, such as referees in this case (Couper, 2008; O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004). Therefore, the open questions within the survey afforded the referees the opportunity to comment on their experiences, and the chance to address the research questions of the study:

- 1) How would you describe your experiences in refereeing since you qualified?
- 2) Would you like additional training opportunities? If so, which training opportunities are the most beneficial?
- 3) If you have been the victim of a verbal or physical abuse, what was the response when you reported it to the institution (football association, leagues or districts) or to another association?
- 4) How well were you supported by the organization to whom you reported the abuse?
- 5) What development opportunities would you like to see introduced into refereeing to help you more effectively in your role, and in your personal development?

3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data generated through the open response questions was inductively analyzed – following translation by the research team, including native French and Dutch speakers, after input from the governing bodies to ensure accuracy – utilizing thematic analysis, which can provide analysis of experiences in relation to specific issues (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Thematic analysis was therefore appropriate because it enabled referees’ experiences to be examined and understood, and influential factors to be identified. The open answer responses were transferred to separate documents, and subsequently read several times by the first author to facilitate immersion with the data. The next step involved the generation of codes from the data, in order to label key features or interesting aspects of the open responses. Subsequently, the generated codes were then clustered into themes, with each theme having a central organizing concept (Braun et al., 2016). The clustered themes were then reviewed against the coded data and the entire dataset and, where necessary, revised to ensure accurate reflection and representation of the data when related back to the four research questions.

At this point in the analysis process, 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). Following discussions, the themes were finalized, and the authors inductively placed the themes into general dimensions (see Fig. 1).

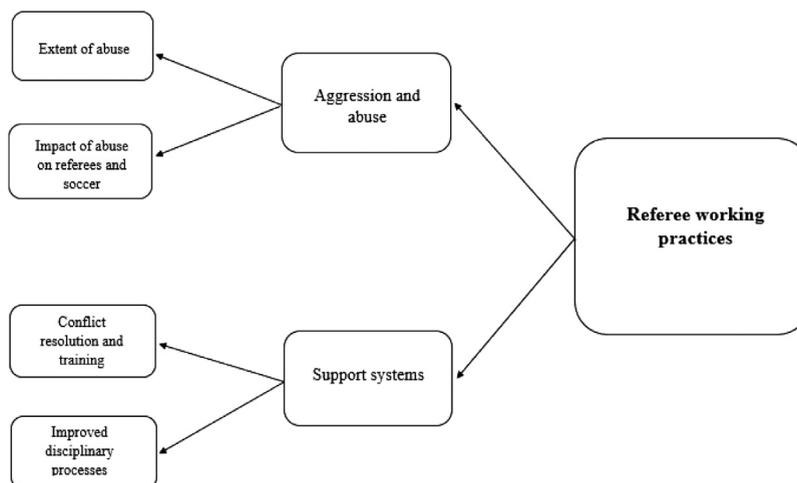


Fig. 1. Tree diagram displaying higher and lower order themes from the survey data.

This use of open-coding phases, and transparency identified patterns, commonalities, and difference permitting the researchers to acknowledge their role as an instrument in the data collection and analysis processes (Barbour, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The final stage in the analysis process involved writing the report of the findings (Braun et al., 2016). To enable this to take place, existing analytical writing was developed, and edited into the subsequent Section 4, to portray the story emerging from the qualitative data. In order to facilitate reader interpretation, the findings are illustrated by quotes.

Quantitative responses were utilized to support the open responses, facilitating the inductive approach, similar to the approach adopted by Cleland et al. (2017). Online surveys lend themselves to the integration of both thematic, and numerical data in the data analysis process, and this approach was adopted for this research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). The survey involved the construction of categories, divided into distinct groups, and related to referee experiences, working practices, and support networks. The quantitative responses provided headline information prior to the construction of categories, and the subsequent interpretation of the raw data in the thematic phase of the data analysis process (Thomas, 2006). The analysis presented below addresses each of the four research questions by focusing on the descriptive statistical data, and particularly the open-ended narrative provided by the referees, given the richness, and quality of these responses.

The findings demonstrated a number of common themes and general dimension. These themes encompass a wide range of different issues, and those central to the research questions have been categorized into higher and lower order themes outlined in Fig. 1. The results are presented and discussed in relation to the two higher order themes displayed in Fig. 1: (a) aggression and abuse; and (b) support systems. In presenting these findings we include demographic details of the referees, with their level and the years of officiating included to provide a context and setting to their experiences.

4. Results and discussion

The demographic information has been organized into three tables (see Tables 1–3) in support of the qualitative quotes to provide further context to the findings. We received a total of 4,637 responses (3,408 responses from France, and 1,229 from the Netherlands), with age ranges categorized following dialog with the governing bodies (see Table 1). The respondents from both countries were predominantly male (96.4%, $n = 3,284$ from France, and 98.8%, $n = 1,214$ from the Netherlands). The categorization of referees depended on the development and promotion pathway employed by the two governing bodies, and a breakdown of these respondents by level of operation, experience and abuse received is outlined in Tables 2 and 3.

4.1. Aggression and abuse

The descriptive results from the study demonstrate that there is a high-level of abuse being experienced by referees. When asked whether they had experienced any form of verbal abuse during their refereeing career, 68.1% of French referees reported to have been a victim of some form of verbal abuse, a larger percentage of referees than in the Netherlands (51%). In addition to referees experiencing verbal abuse, 16% of referees in France, and 14.6% of referees in the Netherlands reported that they had been physically abused at some stage in their career, comparable to previous findings from England (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017).

4.1.1. Extent of abuse

The results from France provided examples of both physical, and verbal abuse being directed toward referees. There were also issues associated with the subsequent reporting of abuse, where referees felt that abuse is so common that it is not worthwhile to report it to the relevant organizations:

Verbal aggression is common, whether it is players or club members or spectators. Physical aggression in particular scared me. I reported this to my designator who filed a report which was not followed up, because I was asked if I knew the name of the individual (spectator coming towards me with a knife in their hands at the end of a match!!) I was not going to ask him his name!!! (France, male aged between 55–64 with 16–20 years' experience refereeing at district league level)

Yes, "verbal" attacks are commonplace for many referees. Personally, I suffered during a league game in an U19 league . . . someone spitting on my back after the match. (France, male aged between 18–24 with 11–15 years' experience refereeing at regional league level)

Table 1
France and the Netherlands referee age ranges.

Age ranges	France referees count	France referees %	The Netherlands referee count	The Netherlands referee %
Under 18	360	10.6	64	5.2
18–24	716	21	179	14.6
25–34	750	22	130	10.6
35–44	791	23.2	108	8.8
45–54	582	17.1	288	23.4
55–64	193	5.7	276	22.5
65+	16	0.5	184	15

Table 2
Demographic data of referees from France.

Referees (level of officiating)	Count	Sex ratio %		Years officiating (M)	Victim of verbal abuse %		Victim of physical abuse %	
		Male	Female		Yes	No	Yes	No
Professional (Ligue 1 or 2)	16	93.8	6.2	21+ years	88	12	18.8	82.2
Professional (Ligue 1 or 2)	41	97.6	2.4	11–15 years	95	5	22	78
Female leagues 1 and 2	12	33.3	66.7	11–15 years	91.7	8.3	25	75
Youth championships (U19 and U17)	61	96.7	3.3	3–5 years	70.5	29.5	18	82
Regional league	1015	96.5	3.5	6–10 years	74.2	26.8	20	80
District league	2238	96.7	3.3	Less than 2 years	64.8	36.2	14.3	85.7
Auxiliary referee	25	88	3	3–5 years	52	48	12	88

Table 3
Demographic data of referees from The Netherlands.

Dutch Referees (level of officiating)	Count	Sex ratio %		Years officiating (M)	Victim of verbal abuse %		Victim of physical abuse %	
		Male	Female		Yes	No	Yes	No
Senior	166	100	0	3–5 years	38.6	62.4	12	88
Junior	61	96.7	3.3	3–5 years	37.7	63.3	13.1	86.9
Masterclass	5	100	0	6–10 years	80	20	0	100
Talented Beta Football	6	83.3	16.7	6–10 years	66.7	33.3	16.7	83.3
Amateur national	107	97.2	2.8	6–10 years	54.2	45.8	18.7	81.3
Amateur regional	258	99.6	0.4	21+ years	57	43	17.8	82.2
Referee development	34	100	0	6–10 years	58.8	41.2	3	97
Amateur football	296	98.9	1.1	21+ years	52	48	18.2	81.8
Youth rural	68	95.6	4.4	21+ years	54.4	45.6	16.2	83.8
Youth regional	187	99.5	0.5	3–5 years	46	54	7	93
Juvenile development referee	8	100	0	3–5 years	75	25	0	100
Association referee	33	97	3	21+ years	72.7	27.3	15	85

The responses are comparable with work conducted in England (see Webb et al., 2017), where many coaches and spectators had stated that both verbal and physical abuse is still an issue, and referees in England expect to receive abuse, and consequently accept that it is part of the game. Further to previous findings, the results from the current study also demonstrate that referees are not being supported adequately when they do report the abuse, leading to issues of non-reporting.

In the Netherlands, the thematic analysis revealed concerns with the aggression and abuse to which referees are exposed, and that referees received abuse at different levels of the game regardless of age or experience. Referees reported receiving abuse before matches had even started, and in some cases, from the parents of players at youth soccer level:

I was just walking over to the pitch, and a group of around ten people began to gesture towards me, and were stood in an aggressive manner. Throughout the duration of the game they would aggressively dispute every decision that went against their team, with many derogatory comments aimed in my direction. (The Netherlands, male, aged between 18–24 with 3–5 years' experience refereeing at amateur regional level)

When I was still a youth referee, a father with raised fists approached me after a match. The father was still spitting on the floor in my direction after the altercation had occurred, and had to be escorted away by the coaches on the side lines. (The Netherlands, male, aged between 18–24 with 6–10 years' experience refereeing at amateur regional level)

Previous findings in England have found that nearly two thirds of referees experienced some form of verbal abuse (Webb et al., 2017). However, this research did not identify whether this abuse was prior to the match or from the parents of youth players. We can see evidence of spectators as part of the ingroup in these examples, and the exacerbation in status and power within a competition setting (Jussim et al., 2001). It is also possible to further examine the nature of the ingroup behavior toward referees as the outgroup. Firstly, this behavior is likely to leave the referee feeling powerless and vulnerable as a marginalized member of the outgroup (Kamans et al., 2010). Secondly, it is possible that the behavior of the spectators and the players, as part of the ingroup, toward the referee could be exacerbated due to the spectator being socially related as a family member or a friend to a player with shared and interrelated goals, and outcomes (Böhm et al., 2018).

The results from the present study have emphasized common trends with previous research into soccer referee experiences, working practices, and abuse conducted in England. For example, comparable to the results of Cleland et al. (2017) who highlighted that 18.9% of referees reported that they had received some form of physical abuse throughout their refereeing career in England, we found that 16% of referees in France, and 14.6% of referees in the Netherlands had been subjected to physical abuse. Further, the current results provide new understanding on the associations between abuse and aggression with intergroup conflict. Conflicts concerning competition and aggression among sport teams, and those that play competitive sport, can be settings in which referees are exposed when dealing with players, coaches, and spectators, and

disputes over decisions (McDonald et al., 2012). Moreover, the apparent acceptance and normalization of verbal and physical abuse toward referees as a distinct group within soccer by players, coaches, and spectators, is categorized by antagonism and contempt given the experiences and incidents expressed by referees in both France and the Netherlands (Brewer, 2001; Hadarics & Kende, 2018). As argued by Cleland et al. (2017), the normalization of this abuse within soccer does not make this behavior acceptable to referees as a group. The fact that the collective good of the ingroup, players, coaches, and spectators, is creating conflict and having negative consequences on referees as an outgroup, can be evidenced by the cessation of these referees (Mäs & Dijkstra, 2014; Ridinger, Warner, et al., 2017).

Despite incidents of abuse toward referees, there are distinct differences in the frequency of abuse between France and the Netherlands (see Tables 2 and 3). Whilst the regularity of the abuse differs between the levels of referees in France and the Netherlands, it still occurs regularly to a proportion of referees during a season, as outlined by this referee from France; “we have means of sanction, and then reports, for my part, I find that there are more and more files of this kind. It is necessary to act, and act very, very quickly” (France, male aged between 45–54 with more than 21 years’ experience, refereeing at district league level). It is the scale and level of abuse in France, particularly from supporters, which has been identified as an issue by referees, “. . . the physical aggression went into discipline, and the player was sanctioned, verbal attacks are almost weekly, mainly from supporters” (France, male aged between 25–34 with 6–10 years’ experience, refereeing at regional league level). The behavior of spectators as part of the ingroup, is clearly a concern for referees, and referees identified the level of soccer as being a factor in the scale of abuse they received.

4.1.2. Impact of abuse on referees and soccer

Referees in both France and the Netherlands believed that they are more susceptible to forms of abuse if they officiate at the lower levels of the game. In France, 65.8% of referees strongly agreed or agreed that abuse is more prevalent at lower levels of football, and in the Netherlands, 66.8% either strongly agreed or agreed. This creates issues given that the majority of referees in both France and the Netherlands operate at a mass participation level of the game (see Tables 2 and 3).

The perception of referees at these lower levels, in particular, as a distinct ‘group’, appears to produce negative evaluations of referees by players, coaches, and spectators, which in turn causes conflict toward referees (Böhm et al., 2018; Jackson, 2002). Reasons for the increase of abusive incidents at lower levels of soccer could include an unrealistic expectation of referee performances from spectators, coaches, and players as well as the knowledge of the laws of the game the lower level coaches possess. The crowd size, the proximity to the playing area, as well as the access to the playing area could also be influential elements. At higher levels of soccer the crowd is larger, and therefore verbal abuse is more difficult to detect amongst other noise, in addition spectators are further away from the playing area, with security staff and physical barriers preventing access to the playing area. The setting is very different, and it can be argued that outgroup victimization of referees at lower levels is somewhat disproportionate to that at higher levels of soccer (Sampson, 1984).

The retention of match officials across sports is an issue which many sports have found challenging. It is known that effective support networks are perceived as essential to the retention of match officials (Kelllett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017), and it is also known that the underlying issue of abuse is a contributory factor when considering why match officials are considering leaving the game (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2018). Support from governing bodies and referee associations/societies is essential in order to assist referees when they receive abuse. However, referees indicated that these networks require further consideration, due to a lack of engagement and communication, “. . . there was a lack of contact from the disciplinary Committee of the League (at the time NPDC), Youth District or AFAF. Only AFAF contacted me, there was a deafening silence on the part of the authorities” (France, male aged between 18–24 with 3–5 years’ experience, refereeing at district league level).

Related to this issue, and an area which requires urgent attention by both governing bodies, is the fact that a proportion of referees were considering leaving within the next twelve months (21.6% of French referees, and 11.7% of referees from the Netherlands):

The behavior of the players is unacceptable towards the referee (hand of a player in the face of an assistant, and all that without any sanction !!!). At our level what can we do next . . . leave is the next action. (France, male, aged between 45–54 with over 21 years’ experience, refereeing at district league level).

The loss of a significant quantity of referees could have a substantial impact upon the football systems in either country. A shortage of referees could mean that fixtures cannot be completed, with the quantity and quality of referees of paramount importance for the successful operation and organization of football systems around the world. At the majority of levels of soccer referees can be viewed as facilitators of physical activity. They provide the general public with the opportunity to play soccer as a form of physical activity. If referees discontinue, this will result in less people being physically active due to the cancelation of matches. This could, conceivably, have a related effect on the health and well-being of the general population of people that play soccer, placing greater strain on the healthcare systems in both France and The Netherlands over time.

To avoid an increased number of referees discontinuing in both France and the Netherlands, conflicts between referees and other groups, such as players, coaches, and spectators require swifter resolution to prevent any further exacerbation of the issues identified (Crisp et al., 2007). The more pronounced and prolonged these abusive incidents become, the greater the tension between referees and other groups within soccer will become, and the more difficult these issues will be to resolve (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Jackson, 2002). If intergroup conflict in soccer between referees and other groups, increases, as could be inferred from the current results, this would present challenges for the governing bodies of soccer in

both countries, as these are matters that are particularly difficult to resolve (Cleland et al., 2017; Ridinger, 2015; Webb et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2013).

4.2. Support systems

4.2.1. Improved disciplinary processes

The support that referees receive throughout their career has been seen as a fundamental factor in ensuring that referees are successful, and achieve their potential (Nevill, Webb, & Watts, 2013). Previously, Ridinger, Warner, et al. (2017) found that 20% of match officials were considering discontinuing as a result of a lack of support from administrative authorities. Our findings show a mixed response toward the level of support from governing bodies that referees are receiving. In the Netherlands, some referees reported the abuse they had received to the KNVB, and their individual case had been reviewed satisfactorily, with the players involved receiving retrospective bans as punishment. In contrast, findings also demonstrated that a number of referees were unhappy with the way that the KNVB handled the reported abuse. Referees felt that even if they wanted to report abuse, it would either be dealt with ineffectively or even ignored completely. Indeed, referees believed that they did not receive enough guidance or support, in contrast to that which the players receive:

You learn that you are alone, and the union/KNVB is not really there for you as a referee, and the daily routine has priority, and you as a referee have no shelter, guidance, no feedback, and the players concerned walk around happily at their clubs to play. (The Netherlands, male, aged between 55 and 64 and has over 21 years' experience, refereeing at amateur national level)

Another referee stated that, "I reported the abuse, and after that nothing was heard; only a lot of comments after a newspaper interview" (The Netherlands, male, aged between 55 and 64 with 21 years' experience, refereeing at amateur regional level). These quotes illustrate that referees perceived there to be a lack of support, even after a newspaper highlighted the incident, there were still no repercussions for the offender. In France, there were also concerns around the support from the FFF, meaning that referee reports are being reversed:

I reported it through an incident report. I am not supported by anyone and worse, during the disciplinary commission for the punishment of the culprits, the notion of aggression disappeared, and I was the accused! (France, male aged between 35–44 with 11–15 years' experience, refereeing at district league level)

There were also issues reported when referees had supported fellow referees, "we have very little support from the federation, and when a league official has supported me, he has himself been suspended, as well as the aggressor" (France, male aged 18–24 with 6–10 years' experience, refereeing at regional league level). Results show that when a referee has reported the abuse, and it is brought to a disciplinary committee, the punishments that the offenders have received have not been considered effective enough, "... the physical and verbal attacks were handled by the Disciplinary Committee ... the sanctions were not dissuasive [to the offenders] and weak" (France, male aged 55–64 with 6–10 years' experience, refereeing at district league level). This finding is particularly concerning given that effective support, and interaction with governing bodies is considered imperative to retain referees in sport (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013). Indeed, the fact that the referees perceive that little support is provided by the regulatory football authorities may further increase the possibility that referees see themselves as the outgroup in such instances of conflict.

Further concern is highlighted by the finding that these experiences are also evident when considering young, inexperienced referees. One referee stated that he did not report the amount of abuse he received, and as a consequence also had some self-doubt about his performances, whilst others explained the abuse further, and also the support that is available to referees:

Not reported ... I did not know how to react. Thinking I did something wrong ... that I get insulted because I was not good. At first we doubt, and without support it is difficult to separate things. (France, male aged between 25–34 with 3–5 years' experience, refereeing at district league level)

I am a member of the UNAF Association, which protects the referees in case of problems ... it is very common for a referee to be insulted in the stands or to be threatened at the end of a match. We learn to be deaf, and if the words go too far or are offensive, we report it to the appropriate committee. It is also possible to ask the local team officials to maintain order in their stands at the risk of reporting against the club. (France, female aged between 25–34 with 11–15 years' experience, refereeing in the female divisions 1 and 2)

There are differences between the support that referees receive relevant to the level at which they are officiating. The referee, who is refereeing at a higher level in France, felt like she was well supported by the relevant organizations, although those refereeing at district and regional level believed that they required a greater level of support, and that the punishments needed to be stricter, and more regularly enforced in order to make an impact. As suggested previously, the issues become exacerbated at lower league levels, as feelings toward referees as an outgroup constitute negative effects, or bad feelings toward them from the ingroup of players, coaches, and spectators (Crisp et al., 2007). Similar to previous research, the findings here suggest that increased support structures are required for referees that have experienced abuse in France and the Netherlands, in order to prevent them considering leaving the game (Cleland et al., 2017; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2013).

Given the abuse which we have outlined here, and the perceived requirements for increased support structures, the need to deal with, and resolve any intergroup conflict becomes even more important. One of the most difficult aspects of any conflict is to know how to alleviate the issues and achieve ongoing and sustainable relations between conflicting groups, and although there is some research concerned with interpersonal conflicts, little is known about mediation in intergroup conflicts (Gutenbruner & Wagner, 2016). Initial de-escalation of conflict begins with the attempted elimination of the perceived incompatibility between the opposing groups (Bar-Tal, 2002). This can be achieved by ongoing negotiations between identified and designated representatives in a conflict resolution process. This may involve a change in the conflictive ethos evident, particularly with respect to the beliefs about the goals of any given group (Bar-Tal, 2002).

The issues which have been identified, particularly related to the lack of reporting of incidents because of the reduced trust in the support systems, means that any conflict is problematic to resolve. The perceived lack of support through the disciplinary processes in both France and the Netherlands, the lenience of some of the sanctions, and the notion that in this scenario referees are becoming overpowered by other groups, such as players, spectators, coaches, and even administrators, means that a cooperative approach to conflict resolution appears difficult to transpire (Reykowski & Cislak, 2011). There should be some form of consensus or unanimity between groups in order to achieve reductions in conflict, with political structures, as well as economic input, required to increase and support quality and equity among the different groups, as well as individuals (Fisher, 2014).

Fisher (1994) identified three types of potential resolution to intergroup conflict, involving the win-lose approach, the lose-lose strategy, and the win-win strategy. The win-win approach is the strategy and related outcome which is most beneficial to all parties with collaborative problem solving initiated, mutually agreeable solutions, and an emphasis on the long terms relationships between the groups with a desired outcome increasing the trust, and acceptance between the groups in question. Further to this, Deutsch (1994) advocated the importance of third parties as mediators in the resolution process. The regional football authorities in both France and the Netherlands could assume this role, although this does require key skills to enable constructive conflict resolution. For example, football authorities would be required to initiate and maintain an effective working relationship between the groups involved, they would also be required to establish a cooperative problem-solving outlook amongst the different groups, such as referees, players, coaches, and spectators. Something which would require delicate and skilled negotiation. Implementation and maintenance of a resolution to intergroup conflict would also require creativity in the proposed and then agreed initiatives, aimed at reducing the conflict and, in particular, the abuse toward referees. Finally, regional football authorities would require an explicit knowledge of the history and development of the conflict between groups, assisting in assessing proposed solutions as realistically as possible (Deutsch, 1994). The de-escalation of conflict through negotiations between the different groups, all with the principle aim of reducing aggression and abuse toward referees in both France and the Netherlands, should be a primary objective.

4.2.2. Conflict resolution and training

However, this de-escalation of conflict is dependent upon strong relationships between referees, and their governing bodies. Unfortunately, referees stated that there have been some barriers created between them as a workforce, as an outgroup (Jackson, 2002), and the KNVB, reporting that more could be done to bring together the relevant organizations, “collaboration with other governing bodies and partners must be improved. The distance between the KNVB and referees is becoming too big.” (The Netherlands, male aged between 25–34, with 11–15 years’ experience, amateur football level). Another referee also identified that this support network requires further consideration:

Better connectivity between different groups, more reports, having referees assess themselves in practice, making contact with the referee to learn from it, allowing KNVB to be a real listener, KNVB and COVS should be partners and strengthen each other. (The Netherlands, male aged between 45–54, with 11–15 years’ experience, amateur regional level).

There are similar examples evident in France. Referees in France felt that there were also aspects of the training which require improvement, particularly related to dealing with intergroup conflict, “. . . issues that need to be more carefully considered are, conflict management, collaboration with assistants, positioning in the field to make better decisions and physical preparation” (Male aged between 45–54 with 11–15 years’ experience, refereeing at district league level). Another referee identified that more support and training was required given the issues that referees face when dealing with player and supporter behavior particularly:

I would like in the medium term to reconcile the two and propose personal training for aspects such as stress management and decision making. We are by no means helped on this subject. The only bases we are taught are the importance of the physiological aspects of the game but nothing about behavior. (France, male aged between 25–34, with 6–10 years’ experience, refereeing at regional league level)

These quotes demonstrate a disconnect between referees and those that manage and govern them, further developing the concept of referees as an outgroup. Referees want to improve and advance through engagement with the FFF, although they believed that the opportunities could be more regular, and that there was a gap between the FFF and the refereeing community. A lack of opportunities, poor communication, and associated issues with the progression and development of young referees in both France and the Netherlands has led to an increasing apathy toward their respective governing bodies.

4.3. Limitations and further research

Our sample contained responses primarily from male referees in both countries. Although the survey was sent to all active and non-active referees in France and the Netherlands, and therefore female referees were also asked to complete the survey, responses from female referees were far less than their male counterparts. Therefore, further research should target female referees and ascertain their experiences specifically, particularly related to any differences that might exist in terms of intergroup conflict, and whether this differs between males and females. Future research could also examine whether female referees, relatively speaking, are already an outgroup in soccer, due to soccer being a male dominated sport historically. This could be undertaken with a similar survey based method, with surveys sent only to female referees, or detailed work with a smaller sample could be conducted through the use of focus groups or interviews. There is a growing body of research in this area (see for example, [Kim & Hong, 2016](#); [Schaeperkoetter, 2016](#); [Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014](#)), and further exploration of the experiences of female match official would provide additional depth to this important subject. Additional to the qualitative approach adopted in the current study, future research would also benefit from examining the data set using a quantitative paradigm. This would permit further consideration of the relationships between referee gender, experience, qualification, and age, and would allow increased understanding of the predictors concerning why referees are considering leaving their role.

A further limitation with this research is that it is a national snapshot, taken at a particular point in time. Despite the high level of responses, and engagement with the research and methodological approach employed, we must be careful of shifting attitudes and opinions concerning referee experiences, which can change over time. Generalizability is possible and worthwhile ([Smith, 2018](#)), but would also benefit from additional research to further develop the knowledge base in this area. Follow up work could be conducted with referee populations in both France and the Netherlands to further explore the themes which have been identified as part of this research. Any work could focus on quantifying any changes in attitudes to better understand and capture longitudinal changes in abuse, as well as associated challenges concerning retention. Furthermore, this research has considered referee experiences from both France and the Netherlands, however to obtain further information regarding the extent of referee abuse and conflict in Europe, as well as development and training requirements, additional research in other countries would be advantageous, also supporting greater generalizability to refereeing populations ([Smith, 2018](#)). Regions and countries involved in this process could be from areas of Europe with different cultural characteristics, particularly in sport, and refereeing ([Webb & Thelwell, 2015](#)), such as Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and outside of Europe, South America, and Africa. Given the success of the survey method employed here, this could be replicated in other European countries, initially, and subsequently countries outside Europe, in order to map referee experiences depending on the country in which they officiate.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research extends our knowledge on referee and match official abuse and support, structures in sport through engagement with a large number of referees across two countries. We provide a nuanced and novel perspective on the settings for verbal and physical abuse toward referees in sport, utilizing intergroup conflict literature to examine abuse, and support. Furthermore, we identify the need for conflict resolution between the ingroup and outgroup in order to improve the current environment for match officials in both France and the Netherlands.

Our findings advance understanding in an underdeveloped area of sports management literature. We support the findings concerning abuse toward match officials of [Ridinger, Warner, et al. \(2017\)](#), who found that abuse was one of the principal reasons for referee discontinuation, and [Cleland et al. \(2017\)](#) who identified a culture of abuse toward referees in soccer. However, we extend the literature through the theoretical application of intergroup conflict, and the nuances evident as referees strive for support and understanding as an outgroup, against the shared values and goals of players, coaches and spectators as the ingroup. We also consider solutions for this issue, and examine potential policy change through the lens of conflict resolution theory, with reference to the ingroup and outgroup identified through engagement with the intergroup conflict literature. In order to move toward resolutions in this conflict, or changes in the status quo, our results provide a platform for further investigation, and interrogation of the issues identified in this paper.

5.2. Managerial implications

Beyond the theoretical implications of this study, the findings provide practical insight for managers employed by the governing bodies of soccer in both France and the Netherlands, and other national governing bodies, as well as for UEFA and FIFA. As abuse toward referees continues to be an issue in soccer, this study offers an important contribution to the literature, providing data on some of the subtle cultural differences between European countries, as well as extensive data on the abuse experienced by individual referees. Recommendations and policy implications following this research are aimed at governing bodies of soccer in both France (FFF), and the Netherlands (KNVB), as well as UEFA, and FIFA.

Clearly, there is a requirement for conflict directed toward referees to be managed more effectively, and educational material developed, as well as the amendment of policy, to ensure that abusive situations are minimized ([Cleland et al., 2017](#);

Webb et al., 2017). In order to achieve this, support networks more widely, and in particular for referees when reporting abusive incidents, should be improved (Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017; Kellett & Warner, 2011). Currently, this is an issue in both France and the Netherlands, and referees perceive there to be a lack of support, and communication during reporting processes.

To tackle issues concerning conflict resolution between referees, players, spectators, and coaches, there should be increased correspondence between the groups, with the governing bodies acting as mediators to improve the situation, especially when any abusive or aggressive incidents occur (Bar-Tal, 2002; Reykowski & Cislak, 2011). For referees, it is important that appropriate training and educational material is provided and disseminated regarding abuse, and coping adequately with incidents of abuse, something which is not currently occurring, with abusive situations potentially leading to negative mental health implications, and affecting the well-being of those involved (Coyle, Gorczynski, & Gibson, 2017). Therefore, interventions from governing bodies could be delivered through both country specific schemes, and through coordinated, Europe wide, whole game strategies reducing abuse, increasing recruitment, and improving retention rates (Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that failure to consider these matters lead to a more disenfranchised workforce, and increased dropout rates (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Warner et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2017).

This research has uncovered some areas of strength for the governing bodies, such as satisfaction with training events, and lower frequencies of abuse, particularly in the Netherlands, although abusive situations and exposure to abuse exist, proving that work and mediation from governing bodies is required in the form of conflict resolution. We do not know the associated implications of abuse on the individual referee, as well as the players, coaches, and spectators, and therefore underlying mental health issues may exist (Coyle et al., 2017). There are also concerns about the number and scale of referees that are considering leaving the game in both countries, and the perception that referees are an outgroup within football. Better understanding of the causal issues is required in order to tackle challenges in this area, and subsequently provide educational material and interventions, prevent abuse, increase support networks, and provide a safer environment for soccer referees.

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