Child Abuse Review

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Coping With Abuse—Child Referees in Football: Is It All Just Part of the Job?

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ABSTRACT

Following identification of child abuse embedded in sports, there has been a significant increase in research exploring the culture of sport and how this might be challenged to enable children's voices and support safeguarding. This has, however, focused largely on the experience of youth players with the place of youth officials significantly neglected in this context. This paper explores the experiences of youth referees through three English county FA case studies utilising a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of interviews with U18 officials, adults working with them (Referee Development Officers, Referee Mentors, Youth Representative, Allocation Officer and parents). Findings showed that youth officials routinely experience abuse (physical/verbal) when fulfilling their role. The nature of this abuse is both physical and verbal, direct and proximal and largely normalised. Youth officials are actively prepared to anticipate and manage abusive situations. Despite wearing symbols indicating their status as children, youth officials are still subject to being targeted by both parents and managers. Abusive situations are rationalised as being the responsibility of the referee and due to the culture of football and wider society. Without cultural change, the continuation of abuse of referees is foreseen as an inevitability. Focusing on education, challenging a facilitating culture, and creating a discourse that cultivates the positive treatment of referees is crucial to addressing concerns to protect children's rights in refereeing football.

1 | Introduction

Following identification of child abuse embedded in sports, there has been a significant increase in research exploring the culture of sport and how this might be challenged to enable children's voices and support safeguarding (Author 2022). We have arguably seen what has been a distinct shift from the ideologically presumptive concept that sport is inherently 'good' towards an acknowledgement that the nuanced power cultures in sport can be highly problematic vis a vis the welfare of players (Brackenridge 2003; Fasting et al. 2018; McMahon et al. 2018a). Very specifically, expressions of power by coaches over their young charges have been seen as particularly problematic (Hartill 2013; Lang and Hartill 2016) combined with the space that this also leaves for other predators to present as an ally but seriously exploit the connections that are made with athletes. This was evident in high profile cases such as that of US gymnastics team doctor Larry Nasser (Taylor 2018).

Additionally, neo-liberal attitudes of some parents as they seek vicarious status through their child's sporting achievements have proved hugely problematic in the objectification of children as vehicles of exploitation in sport, often leaving evident abusive behaviours unchallenged (McMahon et al. 2018). In particular, sports of concern have included football where the Sheldon Report into Historic Child Sex Abuse called for the centralisation of children's voices in the sport and the creation of a child centred culture to improve experiences of players (Sheldon 2021).

This is all clearly crucial in supporting children's engagement in sport. However, such approaches focus very specifically on the experiences of young players, and the place of youth officials

Summary

- Child football officials develop significant interpersonal skills through their involvement in refereeing.
- Child football officials experience abuse when completing their role on a regular basis.
- Adults involved in the training of referees put into place actions to mitigate against abuse.
- Abuse of child officials is discursively constructed to be justified within the cultural characteristics of football.

is largely, if not wholly, omitted. Certainly, there is a clear absence of research specifically with respect to the experiences of officials aged U18yrs in any sport. Indeed, despite forming part of the common consciousness of abuse in sport (Dawson et al. 2022), the experiences of referees have demanded scant attention and that of football referees even less so.

With respect to the treatment of referees more broadly, despite some claims that there has been a 'surge' in academic enquiry into match official abuse (Mojtahedi et al. 2024), there is still arguably a need for further research to explore the subjective experiences of referees generally, football specifically (Cleland et al. 2018) and very specifically, children in this role (Radziszewski et al. 2024).

As the majority of research that does focus on the experiences of officials in football highlights serious concerns with the way they experience their role (Brackenridge et al. 2007), it is particularly concerning that, for a sport that allows a refereeing career to begin at the age of 14 years, there is a lack of exploration regarding experiences of children in this capacity.

In overview, research exploring referee abuse has largely categorised concerns into impact on mental health and wellbeing (Lishman et al. 2024) and the consequent attrition of officiating workforces (Dawson et al. 2022; Dell et al. 2016). In football, it also focuses largely on the men's game (Deal et al. 2018). Where studies do exist, they identify that young, less experienced referees are more likely to be subject to abuse (Folkesson et al. 2002) although such work does not specify a particular age group.

This creates multiple levels of concern, the first being the traumas experienced by officials of any age, the fact that child participants in sport are significantly under-researched within the context of officiating and that there appears to be no specific guidance framing how young officials might be supported in the context of their legal status as minors. The motivation behind this research was to understand and ultimately prevent trauma for the sake of the child—not the sake of retention. This study, therefore, considers the specific experiences of child officials refereeing both male and female games within grassroots football.

2 | Methodology

This paper explores the experiences of youth referees through three English county Football Association (FA) case studies utilising a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Foucault 1980; Willig and Rogers 2017) of interviews with U18yr old officials ($n = 8$) adults working with them in their role ($n = 7$) and parents ($n = 8$) (NB all participants had a parent rather than guardian/carer working with them). A case study strategy was developed in order to explore and understand how youth referees and their trainers and supporters constitute a 'social' unit that determines how abuse in this role is experienced (Priya 2021). The purpose of this study was to create a picture of the complexities of influence that constitute what it means to be a child official in football and how concepts of abuse are constructed, experienced and rationalised. The unit of analysis in case study terms is therefore a socially defined phenomenon.

In order to garner perspectives of participants, an online interview approach was taken. For some time, the concept of remote interviewing has been viewed as secondary in preference to face interviewing with this approach seen as an inferior option, often inflicted by geographic restrictions (Keen et al. 2022; Moran and Caetano 2022). However, with increased familiarity with online communication platforms forming part of day-to-day operations following the imposition of travel restrictions during the COVID-19 epidemic, the advantages of taking such an approach are being increasingly recognised (Moran and Caetano 2022). In fact, for adolescents, online interviewing has been identified as generating equivalent quality data (Shapka et al. 2016). There are also some suggestions that having been born into a 'digital age' (Livingstone and Smith 2014); children may actually be more comfortable being interviewed online rather than face to face, particularly as this also gives them greater control over their presentation of self (Valkenburg and Peter 2011). For the adults involved in this study, online communications formed part of their daily work for most and was an accessible, familiar tool through which to create a dialogue. For all groups of participants, a home environment enabled a more relaxed, familiar atmosphere from where they could communicate (Moran and Caetano 2022; Valkenburg and Peter 2011).

Interview questions for all 22 participants focused on the following:

Content

Positioning

Understanding

with 'content' questions regarding factual descriptions, 'positioning' questions regarding how children see themselves and are seen as, referees and 'understanding' questions concerning the way in which content and positioning become interpreted by participants. Three case studies formed the basis of this study; each of a county FA in the north of England. Table 1 presents an overview of each with pseudonyms used from this point:

TABLE 1 | Overview of case studies.

Interviewee role case 1	Pseudonym case 1
Referee development officer	RDO case 1
FA youth council representative and referee	NYC case 1
Parent—mother	Mother case 1
Parent—father	Father case 1
Youth official male	YO male 1 case 1
Youth official male	YO male 2 case 1
Interviewee role case 2	Pseudonym case 2
Referee development officer	RDO case 2
Chief executive officer	CEO case 2
Parent—father female youth official	Father 1 case 2
Parent—father female youth official	Father 2 case 2
Parent—father male youth official	Father 3 case 2
Youth official female	YO female case 2
Youth official male	YO male case 2
Interviewee role case 3	Pseudonym case 3
Referee development officer	RDO case 3
Appointing officer	AO case 3
Referee mentor	RM case 3
Parent—father male youth official	Father 1 case 3
Parent—father male youth official	Father 2 case 3
Parent—mother male youth official	Mother case 3
Youth official female	YO female case 3
Youth official male	YO male 1 case 3
Youth official male	YO male 2 case 3
Youth official male	YO male 3 case 3

Abbreviations: NYC, National Youth Council referee member; RDO, Referee Development Officer; RM, Referee Mentor; YO, Youth Official.

3 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this study followed the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research as these provide detailed frameworks for working with both children and adults (BERA 2024). Informed consent was established by all directly involved in the study as the children were considered of an adequate age and comprehension to understand the research; however, because the children were U18yrs old, informed consent for them to participate was also gained from parents. All children had a parent present during the interview even where that parent was not directly being interviewed themselves. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the author's institution.

4 | Analysis

FDA (Armstrong 2015; Fadyl and Nicholls 2013; Poorghorban 2023)was applied to interview data since such an approach focuses on the power relations between actors and consequent meaning of experience. As Foucault's conception of discourse also identifies subjects as structuring their experience with'originary meaning' (Foucault 1977), this created the potential to explore in detail the subjective creation of reality that surrounds children's experiences of being football referees, particularly as this is indicative of social and cultural meaning that may need to be manipulated if experiences are to be improved. To create a framework for this analysis, Willig's six-stage approach (Willig and Rogers 2017) was adapted for this project's specific requirements (Table 2).

5 | Findings and Discussion

Findings identified that there were benefits to becoming a referee; these being the following:

- Financial reward
- Development of self-belief and confidence
- Ability to empathise
- Support for a projected career path

TABLE 2 | Willig's six-stage approach to FDA as specific to this project.

Stage	Purpose
1. Discursive constructions	Identifying how the discursive object (exercise of child rights in officiating football) is constructed—causes and effects
2. Discourses	Recurring terms and key events identified regarding treatment of child referees
3. Action orientation	Considering the function of different discourses as presented by participants (response to discourse)
4. Positionings	Identifying the subject positions of youth officials
5. Practice	Examining how discourses can limit what can be said or achieved
6. Subjectivity	Considering experience with respect to the positioning and constructions utilised

Financial reward was often identified as the catalyst for becoming involved in officiating and also seen as an extension of enjoyment that was experienced playing the game; this compares well to other employment opportunities that participants may have had at their age:

> But obviously it's just always so to do with football as well, like I've always played football, I've always enjoyed football, so refereeing means I can make money doing something l like, so I love .... I can make money by doing something I enjoy really.
>
> (YO Male Case 2)

Noting the development of confidence and self-belief, those working with young officials identified some distinct benefits as follows:

> ... the girls that I've dealt with, I find them, they come out, make it. It gives them a lot more confidence ... And by the end, probably at the end of the first year of referee and you can really see that, you know, they are believing in themselves
>
> (RM Case 3)

The impact of this extends beyond football as follows:

> Well, that makes you like I'm a lot more confident now, you know and like outside refereeing. Like... when I meet strangers and that I'm a lot more like vocal and confident to them ... 'Cause, I mean, like so many people, every weekends. Like, you know, when I meet strangers now like, it does not bother me anymore. I'm a lot more confident
>
> (YO Male 3 Case 3)

However, the referees also developed the ability to establish relationships through empathy as follows:

> Being able to understand people's, you know ... Emotions kind of and have sympathy for people and understand what's going on. But at the same time not letting that take advantage of you and stuff, I think ... Understanding people's circumstances and, you know, going into a game ... You know, I could go by the laws and send not send them off. But you know, have empathy for them and understand what's happened and the rage and stuff like that a bit more like that and more responsibility, of course ... in life as well
>
> (YO Male 1 Case 3)

Thus, there was an identification of 'lifeskills' as resulting from refereening as follows:

> Yes ... but for me though ... I like doing what I doing because I love what I do really. But I hink I think what I've gained is just a massive range of skills, you know, teamwork skills, communication skills. I have gained ... fitness. I've gained a lot. I would not say life experience, but just experience in general how to work well under pressure, how to deal with ... situations.
>
> (YO Male 2 Case 1)

Regarding longer term engagement, the young people saw themselves as remaining in the game and potentially creating a career:

> I this what I want to do as a job. I feel like I wanna go down that path and I want to officiate in like big games like in the English Football League or in the Premier League. Or I feel like the ultimate goal for me is just to have that as a full time career and have to worry about anything else apart from that.
>
> (YO Male 1, Case 1)

Therefore, in terms of referee experiences, the findings of this study can be prefaced with an emphasis on the positive outcomes experienced by children in this role. Nevertheless, all participants identified challenges experienced thus creating the opportunity to investigate how children can be protected, their rights actualised and an overall more positive experience assured in their role.

Discourses concerning the challenges identified through this approach focused on four key areas, these being the following:

- The nature of abuse
- Inevitability
- Individual impact
- Rationalisation

5.1 | Discourse Around the Nature of Abuse

The nature of abuse that arose within discourses here identified the abuse type, the way it is enacted in the refereeing situation and the normalisation of it in the process of its management. According to the Child Protection in Sport Unit, definitions of abuse revolve around physical, sexual, emotional and neglect (CPSU 2025). Here, the terminology used by participants concerned 'verbal' and 'physical' and also included 'encroachment' and was both 'direct' and 'proxima'l and 'normalised':

- Verbal and physical
- Encroachment
- Direct and proximal
- Normalised

In terms of broadly recognised types of abuse, these can be categorised as verbal and physical. Formally forming part of

'emotionalabuse' according to the Child Protection in Sport Unit, the terminology of verbal abuse was utilised to refer to spoken words with the intent of harming the individual who is the object of this. Consistent with other research in the field (Devís-Devís et al. 2021; Mojtahedi et al. 2024; Webb et al. 2020), verbal abuse was the most common form of violence experienced by young referees as follows:

> The main problem is verbal abuse. Whether that's dissent, whether that's just a player consistently nagging, nagging, nagging, or if it's a sort of a one off isolated incident of inflammatory language. That referee, whether it's coaches, parents, parents, you find out a young level ... parents are worse than the players.
>
> (NYC Case 1)

It is interesting to note here that parents are identified as particularly problematic when it comes to recognising verbal abuse—broadly in football, players, coaches and spectators are identified as key perpetrators (Mojtahedi et al. 2024; Radziszewski et al. 2024). For a child, knowing that they are experiencing abuse from individuals who should be protecting them is particularly concerning.

In terms of types of abuse, physical attacks were seen as rarer but more threatening than verbal as below:

> I say after that verbal abuse which covers most of the problems, there is occasionally, and it is few and far between, but it does happen ... there is physical abuse, unfortunately. There was a there was an instance recently with a referee being spat at ... And it's, it's really sort of yes, it is true. I've seen, but that that physical abuse is just, you know, verbal abuse is one thing, but then taking, it's that physical level is something completely different
>
> (NYC, Case 1)

The majority of verbal abuse was identified as being directed overtly towards referees. However, there were also instances where 'proximal' abuse was described as follows:

> ... what both managers have done is actually just sort of talked amongst themselves in earshot of her saying, oh, you know, she's terrible, is not she? She's rubbish. She's this, she's that whatever ... Not to her. No direct conflict at all, but just drip feeding that and that is way more distressing, way more upsetting and unsettling for a young referee accident that direct confrontation because direct confrontation, you can analyse it, cannot you? That's ... clearly inappropriate. That's clearly wrong. But people just being snide and unpleasant, etcetera. Is that actually there's way more damage than that, that that serious direct confrontation because there's a there's almost a reason behind that ...

Abuse of this nature was particularly difficult to rationalise for young officials:

> You know, as the young girl's said to me, you know, why would they just be horrible to me like that? And I said I have no answer to that. Yeah, yeah. It's a great question, is not it? Why would they do that? They're all, you know, their positions in people of authority and in, you know, and in charge of a team. Why would they do that? I've really no answer for you. I do not know why people do that. It's. But that's the stuff that unsettles people, young people. I think more than the, you know, the high end stuff to be quite honest ...
>
> (RDO, Case 1)

This was also seen as potentially more sinister since it is calculated and deliberate without the excuse that some coaching behaviour has been rationalised with it being an expression of passion (Devís-Devís et al. 2021). Additionally, for the child, there are no perceived management procedures to follow in response, and perpetrators were those who hold positions of responsibility towards children. The inference is that such individuals are lacking an awareness of young people's needs and/or lack sensitivity to such considerations when in the context of their own teams playing football. This presents a situation where it is known that the child was in receipt of abuse and that they would necessarily find it difficult to respond to, potentially compounding the impact that this can have beyond direct challenges that can be more readily dealt with.

Ultimately, there are also situations where physical abuse is threatened verbally:

> Like sometimes right at the parents think they know best and like they offer people... they like the offer people to the car park
>
> (YO Female, Case 2)

The concept to 'offer people to the car park' is inviting them to a physical fight following the game. While this is excused in claims that it is not really meant, to the child, this makes even returning home a threatening process.

Considered as an aspect of physical abuse, encroachment involved intentional incursion onto the referee's 'work environment' and personal space since there are instances of the following:

> ... adults ... walking onto the pitch and confronting young referees.
>
> (RDO Case 1)

One might speculate that the absence of contact arguably mitigates actions in the mind of the perpetrator; as with proximal abuse, the context of football would appear to present an environment that disassociates from the norms of society's expectations. It is also accounted for through the easier physical

access that spectators of grassroots football in various countries seem to have of the playing area. Psychological abuse such as this has been reported with adult referees in many contexts (Radziszewski et al. 2024) and within football as being of equal 'seriousness' to other forms of abuse (Dawson et al. 2022).

In fact, this concept of creating norms that differ from those outside of football, a key discourse in association with any type of abuse was the expectation that young referees had that this would occur; thus, rendering these experiences normalised within refereeing contexts as follows:

> I get verbal abuse from the sidelines, from coaches, from players. Seems to be every single game above the age of 13 you get some sort of abuse ...
>
> (YO 1 Male, Case 3)

Normalisation of abuse of sports officials is in part identified due to the frequency of occurence (Cleland 2021; Mojtahedi et al. 2024), and here, children come to expect abuse on a weekly basis. However, more significant than frequency is the sense of resignation that is evident in the words of the child; the language being indicative of the perceived hopelessness of the situation. Of significance here is the sense that this normalisation in the minds of referees essentially creates an acceptance of the behaviour of perpetrators in their own minds. Within the game, such action is frequently excused on the basis of spectators being 'passionate'and expressing deep emotion (Devís-Devís et al. 2021). The normalising process of abuse concerns the concept shifting from being one that is actually considered abusive to becoming an accepted element of behaviour that no longer requires an exceptional response.

5.2 | Discourses of Inevitability

Associated with the normalisation of abuse is the sense of inevitability—with the distinction being that the latter results in active planning to manage specific contexts. Indeed, coping with abuse has been considered simply an aspect of the role (Devís-Devís et al. 2021). Here, participants identified the following:

> It's an expectation as a referee that if you want to be a referee, that's fine, but you need to accept the fact that you are going to get abused.
>
> (NYC, Case 1)

This was framed within the study as being accommodated into the following:

- Training
- Mentor scene setting
- Parent presence

With respect to training, one county FA specifically spent time developing skills of self-presentation associated with being a more experienced referee as follows:

> So we make it, we make it very real on the courses about what the challenges they face are... I actually go outside the guidelines of the FA course and actually spend extra time on developing communication and confidence. Because they are the real the two main skills that anybody needs to take on board before they go out and take charge of a football match
>
> (RDO, Case 1)

Therefore, county FAs begin to support the development of skills and personal presentation that are identified as necessary to avoid abuse at the very beginning of training. Thus, we are at a stage where abuse is in practice and planned for.

The inevitability that football match environments are predicated on expectations that abuse towards officials is likely to occur is evident where mentors are working with young people as they take on the role of official as follows:

> ... if I'm mentoring someone, I always tend to go to the coaches of the two teams and just say look ... This is a trainee, he or she is a trainee referee. Obviously, they will get things wrong. I'm here to try and help and not teach them but advise them of how they can possibly do things differently.
>
> (RM, Case 3)

Thus, the referee mentor seeks to manage expectations of coaches from the outset of the game on behalf of the referee; within this context, they need to give assurances to the coaches that the referee will develop in order to feel she is providing the support necessary to cope with the environment and manage growth. This is then utilised to create a sense of collaboration and invite coaches to essentially cooperate in the training of the referee by ensuring that they do not challenge the decisions that are being made in the following:

> Again, I really would sort of expect them to respect her decisions or his decision and work with us so you know, it's not just about me. It's about getting feedback from the coaches as well.
>
> (RM, Case 3)

Hence, there is a need to create a sense of collaboration between coach and mentor in order to establish a safe environment for the child referee to operate in. This kind of direction is framed against the following:

> And then, you know, so the coaches then can speak to the players and you know just say look, you know, come on, you know this is a new referee. We do not, we do not do non-respect. We do not expect people to be screaming and shouting.
>
> (RM, Case 3)

Identifying that individuals are not expected to 'scream' and 'shout' within the context of having to proactively encourage coaches not to challenge decisions and to ensure that their

players similarly 'work with' mentors in this way is arguably somewhat contradictory. The fact that the mentor knows the need to actively prevent poor treatment of their referees is clearly indicative that without such preparation, there would, in fact, be the expectation that verbal abuse would occur, thus underlining this sense of inevitability that exists.

Further evidence of perceived inevitability of abuse is the belief that parents had of the need for them to be present at the matches their child was officiating at. This is a concern of mentors as follows:

> I think certainly for the younger ones, I mean obviously as they get older sort of 17/18, then again they probably ... do not need the parents about. But I think when they are in the in that match and they give a decision that maybe people do not quite agree with then I would always advise that a parent stays on site.
>
> (RM, Case 3)

and also parents themselves as below:

> Yeah, (I have) huge concerns (regarding my child's welfare). More, more you get along the lines of, you know, the lack of respect that the referees get ... Especially the child referees, ... I do think it makes a difference and you know I attend ... And I've attended every refereeing game he's done from start to finish and I do not allow him to be on the sidelines on his own. So even now, I do not like it.
>
> (Father 2, Case 3)

All of the parents involved in these case studies felt the need to be present while their child refereed, and clearly, needing to do this was a source of anxiety for the parents themselves.

5.3 | Individual Impact

Verbal aggression is identified as a form of emotional violence, and many forms can cause longer term harm to an individual's social and emotional well-being (Devís-Devís et al. 2021). The idea that even for those parents bringing their child to referee matches, doing so is a source of concern, raises the question of the impact that abuse in their role is having on the children. Concerns regarding how their children responded were all raised by parents and could be identified as impacts that were visceral and personal.

Responses to abuse in the football environment for these children can be classified as visceral due to the uncontrolled initial emotional reaction experienced:

> Well, there was a few games when he was, you know, he was mentally drained. I remember he nearly halfway through. He nearly came to the sideline like with tears in his eyes.
>
> (Father 2, Case 1)

What is of significance here for these referees is that although such an emotional response is difficult to control, because of the game environment that they are in and the status of their role, the referees are actually expected (and expect themselves) to control this. The exposure of being on a football pitch, the public nature of that exposition and treatment is hugely problematic for children. The 'nearly' here is profound. Evidently, the response would be one to remove themselves from the situation, but this is not possible for them in this context. Therefore, the child is managing both the abuse and the conflicted emotions they are experiencing as a result of this.

One of the issues surrounding the abuse of child referees lies in the sense that comments are taken to be meant on a personal level as follows:

> I know people think on a football pitch and know how they wanna speak to people, speak like that. I can just take it. I can take. I can take words and words do not affect me, but I feel like some people they just they cannot hack it. They cannot. When someone tells them to like 'F off' or something they take it to heart. They...think they are saying that to them cause they do not like them and they just saying it because cause that's what it is ...
>
> (YO Male, Case 3)

Within the current debate, advocates of 'child first' approaches in actualising rights in sport propose this conceptualisation be reversed. Rights-based philosophies evident in sports coaching such as through the work of the Children's Coaching Collaborative as sport practitioner activists have garnered political influence to create campaigns such as 'Play their way' in the UK Government that is funded to support coaching in sport that prioritises the choice, voice and right to play of youth participants in sport (Play Their Way 2023). However, within programmes such as this, emphasis is specifically on player participants and there is a neglect of this drive with respect to child participants as officials. In a game situation, youth referees towards whom abuse is directed are seen potentially first as referee, second as child, only as 'referee' or even more disturbingly, as a referee who is 'only' a child. Indeed, it may be that child referees are purposely challenged more than adult as follows:

> Because I'm only like 16, and like adults like 18, like a lot older than me and it's like they tower down on you and everything. So you have to get like, you have to tell them that they cannot do stuff. And it's like you have to basically tell them straight or they'll keep on doing it to see what, like what your limit is.
>
> (YO Female, Case 2)

Thus, there is a degree of irony for those referees who may interpret intent as being personal in that they are not being seen as an individual in any sense but purely as a representation of a role and/or inferior life stage status.

5.4 | Rationalisations

Clearly, some child referees continue in their roles; for participants in this study, this is achieved through three key rationalisations that are used to explain abuse that is experienced, these being the following:

- Referee responsibility
- Culture of society
- Culture of football

In terms of 'responsibility', young referees distanced themselves from those who experience abuse through identifying that if responsibility is taken, then negative behaviours are limited as follows:

But I myself as a referee, I think I'm very authoritative and a very vocal.

> And I think that if you show the players, you know during the first 10 to 15 minutes, that's right, this is how it's going to be played. This is going to be played by me. You know, if you want to talk, you cannot talk to me. But you know, do not come running up to me type of thing. And then I think it tends to be all right. And because I feel that most referees that have problems cause themselves problems really.
>
> (YO Male 2, Case 1)

Conceptualising 'problems' as emanating from referee action, or lack of action, is a process through which 'successful' referees can disassociate themselves from others. This arguably gives them a sense of control and ownership; however, it also serves to potentially excuse perpetrator behaviour. Assuming control of a match from its outset is an approach taught to child referees and clearly serves well to set a tone for a game; however, caution needs to be exercised in ensuring that clubs primarily take responsibility for players/coaches/spectators to maintain a standard of behaviour conducive to positive experiences for all.

One of the concerns expressed with respect to abusive behaviour and, indeed, the escalation of abusive behaviour in football is attributed to broader concerns regarding shifts in parameters of acceptance within wider society:

> I think societal issues are massive nowadays in terms of the way that anybody in positions of authority are approached and are viewed...just in life really. So the challenges that face all referees and particularly young referees are I think way greater than they have ever been. Certainly, over the last two years, we have had more discipline issues than ever before.
>
> (RDO, Case 1)

Although wider society is deemed to have shifted in terms of expressions of respect for authority, thus impacting on football, the game itself is also identified as embodying a particular culture that is damaging for officials. This is particularly significant with respect to the treatment of child referees; many manage games of other children prone to mimic behaviours seen in media:

> I think it's like the football culture in general. I think you see people see on the TV that the .... Pundits and stuff getting on the referees back. So I think that kind of channels into it ...the attitude of people at the top of the game. I think it all trickles down. I know people will think it works from the bottom, but I think ... I think for example, you watch ... kids watch a match and copy, the ... players. So they see on TV and they'll do it in their pitch. So if we have a bit more positivity about referees (that would help).
>
> (YO 2 Male, Case study 3)

Therefore, displaying more tolerant attitudes through language and analysis demonstrated by influential figures could progress some way to addressing concerns through the positive framing of the role of referees.

6 | Limitations

This paper has considered the subjective experiences of U18 year-old referees and those who support them. The three case studies form a basis for exploring experience but clearly are culturally bound by country location (all English regions), and there may well be significant differences in the impact of socio-geographical influences on referee experience.

There are also distinctions evident in the treatment of male and female referees that have been previously identified, with females being particularly vulnerable (Gubby and Martin 2024). Such issues are not explored within this paper but will form the basis of future explorations.

7 | Conclusion

A significant decline of referee numbers in football internationally has frequently been defined as problematic and the result of poor treatment of individuals in this role (Dell et al. 2016). It is important for the future of sport which, although marginalised in many considerations, is dependent on officials (Downward et al. 2024). However, from the perspective of this paper, the treatment of referees, and in particular, youth referees, frequently more likely to experience abuse (Mojtahedi et al. 2024) demands urgent attention on the basis of safeguarding them as children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 2023). Article 19 of the UNCRC entitles them to freedom from all forms of abuse, violence and neglect, including in sports environments and clearly locates responsibility for this with all adults holding a duty of care for children to protect and support them, a responsibility that is being questionably addressed in the context of this research (United Nations 2011). Additionally, given that policies in safeguarding within sport largely hold all who are involved in that environment of practice as accountable for the welfare of children within it (Everley 2025), the sources of maltreatment of referees are particularly concerning.

Considering the findings of this paper, it is evident that for children that remain engaged in the role of referee, there are distinct benefits to personal, social and financial capital leading to increased confidence, self-esteem and interpersonal skill development. However, abuse of child referees is, in some instances, culturally embedded, meaning that:

- Child youth officials experience abuse when completing their role on a regular basis.
- Adults involved in the training of referees put into place actions to mitigate against this.
- Abuse of youth officials is discursively constructed to be justified within the cultural characteristics of football.

Recognition of the places of societal and sports based cultures contributing to the abuse of children in the role of referees needs to be extended to action. For an England-based context, campaign such as 'Respect' designed to draw attention to paying due regard to referees (Cleland et al. 2018) can go some way to challenge grassroots treatment of young people; however, there needs to be a much stronger, wider call to action from all involved in football. Within the broader scope of sport, rights-based action evident in supporting child players needs to be extended to children in officiating roles where it has so wrongly become 'part of the job'.

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Ethics Statement

This research followed the British Educational Research Associations (BERA) Guidelines and ethical approval was granted by the University of Chichester.

Consent

Informed consent was given by all participants following BERA Guidelines.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Permission to Reproduce Material

There is no requirement to request permission to reproduce material from other sources or clinical trial registration.

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