



Whistleblowing of bullying in professional football: To report or not to report?

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ABSTRACT

Only recently has research begun to focus on workplace bullying within organizations outside of traditional white-collar industries, such as professional football. While this is an important development, there remains a lack of understanding around the reporting of bullying in professional sport. In this paper, the authors explore how the professional football workplace shapes perceptions of whistleblowing and unearths individual perceptions around reporting bullying behavior. We used a phenomenological approach to gain rich experiential data from eighteen male professional football players in the UK. Interview data were analyzed in accordance with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Two superordinate themes were identified from the analysis, (a) professional football's influence on whistleblowing, and (b) the challenges of reporting bullying. These themes highlighted that the unique, institutionalized nature of professional football interacts with participants' ability to report bullying behavior. The participants' accounts revealed divergent perceptions around how professional football shapes the degree to which players feel they can report bullying behavior. It was apparent that the authoritarian, often abusive and intimidatory nature of professional football significantly impacts whistleblowing. Our findings demonstrate the importance of workplace context when exploring the reporting of bullying behavior. They also demonstrate the need to address organizational culture and differentiate bullying education programs to alternative workplaces.

1. Introduction

Despite the claim that professional football (or soccer) clubs take “safeguarding extremely seriously,” and provide “significant reporting mechanisms” for raising concerns, recent allegations have highlighted that staff have been unable to disclose abusive and bullying behavior (BBC, 2018; 2021a). This inability to “blow the whistle” may partly be explained by the normalization of abusive and intimidatory practices in professional football (Kelly & Waddington, 2006), which often leads to feelings of anxiety, isolation, and occupational uncertainty (Parker & Manley, 2016). Worryingly, the football industry assumes players will avoid expressing discomfort with practices such as abuse and bullying, due to their lack of status within their organizations (Parker & Manley, 2016).

The lack of whistleblowing of bullying is a concern, as bullying leads to higher levels of burnout, physical symptoms of stress, turnover intention, and lower levels of subjective wellbeing in the workplace

(Hewett et al., 2018; Verkuil et al., 2015). In sport, bullying leads to feelings of lowered self-esteem, isolation from teammates, and other mental health issues (Jewett et al., 2019). Despite these concerns, sporting organizations have highlighted how they often do not have policies to address bullying or deal with sensitive whistleblowing cases around harassment and abuse (Verschuuren, 2021). Furthermore, despite recent examples of research being undertaken that explores whistleblowing experiences of bullying in the workplace (Park et al., 2020), to our knowledge, there remains no study of this within elite sporting contexts such as professional football. This is alarming, given that bullying can often be “celebrated” in this context (Parker, 1996) which may reinforce the “code of silence” that some in football have suggested acts as a barrier to reporting wrongdoing (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). Therefore, the present study sought to explore the lived experiences of whistleblowing within the professional football context.

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1.1. Defining whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is defined as “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations who may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). This definition can be further categorized into internal and external whistleblowing (Verschuuren, 2020). As Verschuuren (2020) summarized, internal whistleblowing covers reporting through systems that have been formally instructed by the organization itself to manage these allegations, even if reporting is situated outside of the organization. Using professional football in the United Kingdom (UK) as an example, this could be through official channels such as the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA). External whistleblowing by contrast occurs through reports to parties that are not tasked by the organization concerned with managing these complaints, for example, the media (Verschuuren, 2020). To date, while some sporting organizations have set up internal whistleblowing reporting procedures to safeguard their participants, others have not (Verschuuren, 2021). Furthermore, disclosures made by athletes to these systems are problematic when allegations revolve around institutional corruption, harassment, and abuse (Verschuuren, 2020). For the whistleblower, internal whistleblowing poses potential risks around ostracism, threats, and career damage (Miceli et al., 2008).

1.2. The drivers of whistleblowing

While research on whistleblowing in sport is sparse (Erickson et al., 2017), findings in organizational literature conceptualize a range of individual, contextual and organizational determinants of this behavior (Verschuuren, 2020). On an individual level, reporting wrongdoing appears to revolve around aspects such as moral identity, organizational power and status, and organizational commitment or identification (Alleyne, 2016; Fieger & Rice Bridget, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Those with stronger moral and ethical values, who hold greater status and power within an organization are more likely to whistleblow, although no single profile of a whistleblower exists (Verschuuren, 2020). Though this profile does not exist, an individual’s perceived status within the stratified hierarchy of power proposed by Foucault (1977) may help understand potential whistleblowing in sport. Foucault’s (1977) propositions on disciplinary power may be important here, as individuals may feel they have little power to speak out about culturally accepted wrongdoing within the wider culture of professional football. These propositions, coupled with the micro-political perspective in sport (Gibson & Groom, 2018) whereby individuals’ central concern is with their professional self-interests (e.g., selection on the team), may also drive the degree to which individuals whistleblow in this context.

From a contextual standpoint, whistleblowing of negative behavior is more likely if the evidence is available for the observer, such as frequent, intentional, and noticeable acts of serious harm (Chen & Lai, 2014; Keil et al., 2018; Miceli et al., 2012). In sport, this may make reporting wrongdoing problematic, as this type of evidence may not be available. Also, behaviors such as bullying, do not conform to established definitions of this concept in sport. For example, bullying in football has been found to result from “one-off” acts which do not necessarily carry an intent to harm (Newman et al., 2021). In contrast, Olewus’ (1993, p.8) much-cited definition of bullying highlights the repetitive, intentional nature of this “negative action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another.” Thus the targeted view of bullying, in the workplace literature (e.g., Sprigg et al., 2019), contradicts findings in sport where participants are unaware that their behavior is abusive (Stirling, 2013). This raises questions about the degree to which bullying is noticeable. Even if sporting participants are aware of these negative practices, they are often bound by a “code of silence” where they suppress deviant, unethical behaviors for the “benefit” of their group or organization (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). This has been described as a form of intense organizational loyalty (Adler & Adler, 1988). The result

is that individuals may end up trading the morality of fairness (e.g., what is seen as right irrespective of the individuals in the situation) for the morality of loyalty, where they avoid whistleblowing to safeguard individuals or their sporting group (Erickson et al., 2019).

Organizational variables relate to whether a whistleblower perceives an ethical climate or culture, and the subjective norms around the social pressure to engage in whistleblowing (Verschuuren, 2020). For example, an organizational culture supporting and protecting potential whistleblowers encourages whistleblowing intention and behavior (Alinaghian et al., 2018; Cho & Song, 2015). In other workplaces, individuals may receive greater bullying resulting from whistleblowing (Park et al., 2020). Initial findings in sport appear to corroborate this finding, as whistleblowing schemes often do not protect whistleblowers and instead leave them vulnerable to greater harassment (Verschuuren, 2021). This effect may be exacerbated in the potentially volatile context of professional football, where players are already expected to “put up” with excessive banter and derogation (Parker, 2006), meaning they may be even less likely to report their concerns for fear of retribution.

1.3. Reporting welfare concerns in sport

To date research in sport has tended to focus on how whistleblowing is reported, the consequences and emotions of reporting, as well as the cultural barriers against this behavior (Erickson et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2019; Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). While these sources provide an important contribution to whistleblowing research in sport, they have tended to focus on areas such as doping, match-fixing, and corruption, rather than abusive and bullying behaviors. This is an important limitation given issues have recently been highlighted within reporting systems for safeguarding concerns relating to abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Despite interventions in the form of online manuals and educational programs to prevent maltreatment of athletes (Kerr & Kerr, 2020) and a global strategy to safeguard children against abuse in sport, policies can be seen as reactionary and tokenistic in their response to safeguarding (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). This mirrors findings in professional football, where even with the introduction of Education and Welfare officers (Brackenridge et al., 2004), players still do not engage with safeguarding programs (Parker & Manley, 2016). Here, safeguarding programs may highlight a paradox where the risks a whistleblower might face are highlighted to the players in situ (Verschuuren, 2020). This challenges the view that education around whistleblowing promotes a rise in reporting of wrongdoing (Caillier, 2017). The risks individuals face may be even more pertinent to team sports where initial findings suggest participants face a moral dilemma, compared to individual athletes, around reporting teammates and are more likely to adhere to a code of silence to protect them (Whitaker et al., 2014).

In summary, research has tended not to focus on whistleblowing as a contextually and socially bound behavior (Verschuuren, 2020). To this end, men’s professional football appears to be an ideal context to explore experiences of whistleblowing of behaviors such as abuse and bullying. Football’s legitimization of abusive behaviors (Kelly & Waddington, 2006), as well as its inherent power differentials around bullying (Newman et al., 2021), may create vastly different experiences of whistleblowing depending on where individuals fit within their club’s hierarchy. Furthermore, the sense for footballers that they need to align their values to their club for the sake of the collective organization (Parker & Manley, 2016), raises questions around the degree to which whistleblowing is possible in this context.

Therefore, the present study answered an important call to explore whistleblowing in climates where power differentials exist and where the perception of support (or not) within an individual’s organization shapes reporting (Verschuuren, 2020). Specifically, our study aimed to explore professional footballers’ individual lived experiences and perceptions of whistleblowing of bullying, within the professional football context. Through utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) our study unearthed the individually nuanced (J. A. Smith et al.,

2017) nature of professional footballers' lived experiences of whistleblowing. The focus on perceptions of whistleblowing also aligned with IPA's appropriateness for identifying how individuals view situations they encounter (Reis et al., 2021). Furthermore, as whistleblowing is individually and contextually determined (Verschuuren, 2020), IPA was seen as the ideal approach to explore this behavior. IPA prioritizes how the researcher and participant make sense of the interdependent relationship between the person (e.g., the footballer as a potential whistleblower) and their world (e.g., the context of professional football) (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This was relevant to the current study as footballers may perceive a vastly different status around their ability to report wrongdoing due to the inherent power differentials within professional football (Newman et al., 2021).

2. Method

This study was part of a larger research project which explored bullying within professional football.¹

2.1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The study was guided by the principles of IPA, which was ideal for addressing concerns that experiences within the professional football workplace are varied (J. A. Smith, 2016). Whistleblowing experiences are dependent on perception and context-bound (Verschuuren, 2020), making IPA ideally placed to address participants' subjective experiences of reporting abuse and bullying (Shinebourne, 2011). Through unearthing whistleblowing experiences specifically within professional football, the present study maintained the "contextualist" position of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006), whilst a broadly social constructionist stance was adopted (Shinebourne, 2011). The present study was consistent with IPA endorsing social constructionism's claim around the centrality of sociocultural and historical processes in how individuals experience and understand their lives (Eatough & Smith, 2008). For example, it was important to explore how experiences and understanding of whistleblowing were shaped by the expectations of the professional football context. Moreover, the present study echoed the agreement between IPA and social constructionism that understanding the language used by footballers was important to this enterprise (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Finally, utilizing IPA offered a detailed examination of each participant's lifeworld, which was crucial for understanding their lived experience of whistleblowing, rather than being limited to objective measurements of it (J.A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). This idiographic commitment unearthed convergent and divergent features of participants' whistleblowing experiences, within and across accounts (Brown et al., 2018) providing rich meaning to their data.

2.2. Participants and procedure

Consistent with IPA guidelines a purposive sample (J. A. Smith, 2016) of 18 male professionally contracted footballers ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 2.96$, range = 18–31 years) from three English professional football clubs were recruited (see Table 1). Clubs were in the English Premier League or English Championships divisions at data collection. This study was contextualized to men's professional football as abusive and intimidatory practices have been specifically reported in this environment (BBC, 2018; 2021a). In keeping with recent research in workplace bullying (e.g. Sprigg et al., 2019), there was no requirement for players to have been a whistleblower, but they needed to be sufficiently

¹ To date a previous research article focusing on conceptualising bullying in football has been published from this research project and a second paper has been accepted for publication at the time of writing. The data presented in the present study are unique from this previously published research as is the focus of this work.

Table 1

Participant ages and years of experience as a professional football player.

Participant	Age	Years as a professional	Club	Division of club
James	31	14	A	Championship
Oli	21	6	A	Championship
George	20	3	A	Championship
Charlie	19	4	B	Championship
Alfie	19	2	B	Championship
Ricky	19	2	B	Championship
Peter	19	2	B	Championship
Jamal	19	9	B	Championship
Paul	18	4	C	Premier League
Ed	18	7	C	Premier League
Dave	18	2	C	Premier League
Grant	20	5	C	Premier League
Mickey	20	3	C	Premier League
Greg	20	3	B	Championship
Lenny	18	2	B	Championship
Rob	19	2	B	Championship
Kevin	21	3	B	Championship
Phil	18	2	B	Championship

experienced within this context to discuss their views of whistleblowing. The players had between 2 and 14 years of experience as professionals.

Following institutional ethical approval, gatekeepers were contacted at professional football clubs to seek permission to recruit players. Participants were then briefed and those who were willing to take part were given information sheets before providing their informed consent. Given the nature of the study, a semi-structured interview guide was utilized, which retained the phenomenological commitment to meaning-making (Eatough & Smith, 2006). Questions were created in such a way that participants' experiences of whistleblowing could be explored "can you tell me about the degree to which you can report bullying in football?" Probing techniques were also utilized to better understand experiences of whistleblowing (e.g. "Can you tell me more about that?") so researchers could help the participant make sense of their account (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). To authenticate the contextual focus of the study, interviews were conducted at the matchday stadium or training ground of the participant. Interviews lasted between 35 and 70 min ($MDuration = 44.11$, $SD = 10.81$). To maintain participant confidentiality, all names were replaced by pseudonyms.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed in accordance with the idiographic commitment of IPA, whereby a detailed examination was undertaken for each case before data were compared cross-cases (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Throughout, the transcripts were analyzed for points of descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual note (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Stage one of the analysis involved familiarization with the accounts involving repeated listening to audio plus re-reading of transcripts while maintaining an open mind and exploratory attitude to the data (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 2017). At this stage the focus was on exploring the experiential nature of whistleblowing, the language used by the participants (e.g., the negative view of "snitching"), and how these interpretations were contextualized (e.g., how "snitching" or reporting might be seen in professional football). Stage two (see J. A. Smith et al., 2017) involved returning to the notes and transforming them to emergent, experiential themes (e.g., the institutionalized nature of football). Next, emergent themes were clustered into superordinate (e.g., professional football's influence on whistleblowing) and constituent subordinate themes (e.g., the unique, institutionalized nature of football). This was developed within and across cases, using the processes of abstraction and subsumption (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Finally, once all transcripts were analyzed a master table of themes (see Table 2) was created which linked all participant accounts (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2006). Through identifying superordinate themes around whistleblowing in

Table 2
Master table of themes in relation to whistleblowing of abuse and bullying.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Professional football's influence on whistleblowing	The unique, institutionalized nature of football The efficacy in education and welfare
The challenges of reporting bullying	The ability to report Witnessing and bystanding

professional football, concerns were addressed for both convergences of views across accounts and divergence of views within individual accounts (J. A. Smith et al., 2017). Furthermore, this fulfilled the idiographic commitment of IPA (Brown et al., 2018) by conveying individual perceptions of whistleblowing (the person), within professional football (the context).

2.4. Research quality and rigor

Within the present study, the researchers adopted a relativist, rather than criteriological position to maintain data trustworthiness (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Although it is acknowledged that there is no pre-defined “checklist” of what constitutes good quality IPA research (J. A. Smith, 2011), the present study followed the latest guidance for researchers to produce excellence in IPA papers (Nizza et al., 2021). First, a “compelling, unfolding narrative” was constructed (Nizza et al., 2021). In the present study, a story that conveyed a sense of progression was prioritized over a narrative, with carefully selected participant quotes and interpretation of these accounts in the discussion section. As subordinate themes were presented below the superordinate themes, the organization occurred at this level, creating a sense of coherence (Nizza et al., 2021). This was achieved as the themes of the unique, institutionalized nature of football and the efficacy in education and welfare linked to the overall narrative around professional football's influence on whistleblowing in an interconnected manner (Nizza et al., 2021).

Second, following Nizza et al.'s (2021) guidance a “vigorous experiential account” was developed. Here the present study paid close attention to the experiential and existential significance of what the footballers were reporting by paying particular attention to their meaning-making. For example, in “the unique, institutionalized nature of football” theme, players discussed a normalization of workplace practices in football which would not be seen in other domains. Through strong data and interpretation (Nizza et al., 2021), it was possible to demonstrate that players may find bullying difficult to identify and report here.

Third, the present study engaged with a “close analytic reading of the participants' words” (Nizza et al., 2021). To achieve this, quotes were not left to “speak for themselves” and instead were analyzed and interpreted to reveal the further meaning to the data. Using Nizza et al.'s (2021) recommendation features such as the choice of words and phrases were considered (e.g., “snitching”) as well as the use of repetition and emphasis (e.g., Kevin's account within the lack of efficacy in education and welfare subordinate theme).

Last, convergence and divergence were attended to by illustrating similarities and differences across the participants (Nizza et al., 2021). Specifically, a balance was struck between commonality and individuality, by generating superordinate themes across the participants such as the challenges of reporting bullying, whilst reflecting the idiosyncratic characteristics of the participants in their ability to report (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Participants were quoted across the sample, allowing for “representation, prevalence, and variability within the analysis” (Nizza et al., 2021).

3. Results

Participants highlighted two superordinate themes: (a) “professional

football's influence on whistleblowing” including the subordinate themes of “the unique, institutionalized nature of football” and “the efficacy in education and welfare” and (b) “the challenges of reporting bullying” comprising the subordinate themes of “the ability to report” and “witnessing and bystanding.” The themes hosted divergent perceptions around the degree to which the professional football workplace shaped whistleblowing and the extent to which players felt they could report bullying.

3.1. Professional Football's influence on whistleblowing

A consistent theme was the influence the professional football context has on shaping whistleblowing behaviors. Players portrayed an environment perceived to be unique from other industries. More specifically, football was characterized as being laden with institutionalized practices which negatively shift the tolerance of banter, so it becomes more extreme and where bullying becomes accepted. In this sense, football can be viewed as a large social institution where disciplinary regimes are prevalent to the extent that players become subservient and normalize bullying as well as more severe forms of banter (Foucault, 1977; Jones & Denison, 2016). This had implications for the degree to which players felt they could report wrongdoing. Subsequently, despite efforts to address education and welfare in this context, players held inconsistent views around the efficacy of these channels.

3.1.1. The unique, institutionalized nature of football

Despite the variation in players' ages, experiences, and clubs (see Table 1) they unanimously saw professional football as different from other workplaces. Seemingly, expectations regarding behavior are shaped by the encompassing tendencies of professional football as an institution (Goffman, 1961). There is also a lack of standardized protocols to address bullying. Greg provided an initial sense of how the football workplace normalizes behaviors that might not be appropriate elsewhere, raising questions around how much players might report wrongdoing:

But the way we talk to each other on the football pitch probably wouldn't be right in another job, but we know that in the football environment it's just talking because they want the best for the team and each other to do well.

Greg's intimation that “it's just talking” as well as framing potentially inappropriate communication as wanting the best for each other, provided evidence for “situated learning” in professional football (Parker, 2006) where players may have misguidedly learned that these behaviors are acceptable. Charlie reaffirmed that this unique cultural expectation is ingrained into professional footballers' experiences within this workplace environment by stating, “you have to get used to taking a bollocking,² and if you can't take a bollocking then ...” Players' seeming acceptance that potential abuse is inevitable (and necessary) in football, highlighted issues around what bullying is in the first place (Newman et al., 2021). This acceptance would certainly raise questions around the extent to which they would go against the expectations of the sport to whistleblow.

The ritualistic nature of professional football, which places an expectation to go through initiation ceremonies, added weight to the sense that any form of reporting of bullying would lead to severe sanctions. Rob provided a vivid account of this:

An example could be like in the young kids, if you go into the first team you have to sing. If you go into an office or a workplace, if you make someone sing, you'd probably be sacked the next day, 'cos it's not right it's not appropriate to put someone in that situation. But in football, that's just part of the job, you have to do it ... Or otherwise,

² A ‘bollocking’ is British slang for being reprimanded.

I've heard stories where players are like "I'm not gonna sing" and the manager's said "well I'm not gonna play you then" and they've had to leave the club because they won't become part of the team.

Rob's account raised various issues. It demonstrated that any form of reporting would lead to potentially career-ending dismissal, reasserting a sense of potential fragility on behalf of the players. It also revealed the disciplinary power coaches and managers hold to prevent this reporting (Foucault, 1977). Meanwhile, it maintained a thread across players' accounts that the situation is *different* in the football workplace compared to others. This implies a feeling of entrapment to football's demands or even a passive, perhaps willing, subservience that players and managers hold towards bullying.

The perception of a general lack of adherence to standard workplace conventions in professional football was evident from James:

(Bullying) would never go on in a workplace. Because ... is it HR? Or there are things that can be done about it, if people are talking badly to you or you think you're being bullied in a workplace you can say something.

This account was damning of the lack of formalized workplace policies and practices available to players and the belief that support services do not exist. As such, professional football clubs appear to operate outside of the practices of appropriately functioning organizations with players feeling helpless to bullying behavior. James reaffirmed this view when discussing discriminatory bullying:

I talked about this PFA (Professional Footballers' Association) thing and there are all these words you can say about race, religion and all that you can't ... you wouldn't ... you'd never because you're not allowed to say anything like that outside, you'd get arrested.

Here despite the intervention of bodies such as the PFA, players feel that discriminatory bullying can go unreported in a way not permitted in other contexts. Interestingly, the use of the term "outside" drew potential parallels with prison-like conditions. The enclosed, segregated nature of professional football shapes the working lifeworlds of players (Goffman, 1961; Parker & Manley, 2016), leaving a sense of helplessness that shapes beliefs around the extent to which bullying occurs in other occupations.

3.1.2. *The efficacy in education and welfare*

Despite notable attempts from professional football organizations to educate players, introduce codes of conduct, and boost player welfare (see Parker & Manley, 2016) players held mixed views of these potential reporting channels. Some felt that the support on offer has been beneficial, yet others were less certain about the efficacy of the delivery of these approaches and were damning of them. Mickey outlined a positive view:

There's a lot more awareness of what you can and can't say, religions and races 'cos there are so many people from different countries, so you just have to be fair to different people. People do come in from the Premier League and give speeches and presentations on what is bullying, and what is banter, and what is racism and stuff like that.

From Mickey's perspective, it was clear effort has been put into considering player welfare and education about bullying and banter. Engagement from key stakeholders such as the Premier League was important in distributing safeguarding material to players. At 20 years old and with three years of experience as a professional, it may reflect that these programs have been efficacious for younger, less experienced players like Mickey. This was supported by the view of Dave who was of a very similar age and experience:

We've got a website xxx. You can go on and read and go and check. You can go and speak to the safeguarding officer, and she can give us

leaflets ... There are leaflets dotted about the classroom, signs everywhere about bullying.

While on the surface this was encouraging as Dave talked positively about the resources available to footballers which raised their awareness around bullying, other players were more dubious about the quality of the resources available to them. This potentially explains why codes of conduct may be limited in encouraging whistleblowing and that safeguarding strategies in UK sports do not effectively target those over the age of 18 (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020; Rhind et al., 2015). The apparent skepticism around the efficacy of the presentations delivered by the Premier League and other organizations reinforced this.

Phil discussed specific issues around the appropriateness and quality of the delivery:

Some are engaging, some aren't. I think you've gotta engage the group. If you don't engage the group, I don't think you'll benefit. The team won't benefit and you won't benefit, cos what you're trying to implement won't be implemented. So you've got to entice the group into your session and make them come out thinking. You want the session to be that memorable and some of them are. "Do you remember this da da da" a few months ago?

Taken on face value, Phil's view may be reflective of educational provision in professional football being viewed as survival management for those leading the sessions (Parker, 2000). Moreover, in saying "do you remember this da da da" a few months ago, Phil conveyed the mundanity of a professional footballer's world (Parker & Manley, 2016), where educational provision lacks stimulation and impact in terms of benefiting the team. This may create a larger cultural problem within the sport in which belief in the value of the sessions is low and therefore not worthwhile.

A teammate of Phil's, Kevin delivered an even more damning assessment of potential inadequacies within the delivery of programs. For Kevin education programs promoted explicit and implicit messages around bullying:

(The PFA) give presentations and they'll be asking the whole team. What person is going to put their hand up to say something in front of the whole team? When subconsciously they're going to hold back because what I say everyone's gonna hear it and what reaction are they going to have? They're gonna have a reaction ... Cos' football's a team environment, you need to do everything as a team.

This was interesting as, despite the similarity of players' ages and experience across this subordinate theme, they held markedly different views of the education programs available to them. Kevin revealed deeply ingrained cultural beliefs around remaining silent, where the presence of internal whistleblowing mechanisms adds to the reluctance and fear to speak out about inappropriate behavior. It is noteworthy to consider whether this represents a failure of wider organizations such as the PFA or is something more specific to players' clubs. Seemingly, the issue may be with the former based on Kevin's quote. Nonetheless, the views of Kevin and to a lesser extent Phil were markedly different from the earlier views of Mickey and Dave. The pairs of players were from different clubs (see Table 1), questioning the degree to which whistleblowing behavior may be encouraged or not depending on the organization. For some players, perceptions of whistleblowing may be grounded in their experience of socialization to their club's expectations around behavior, working practices, and the conformity to norms around disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) within their organizations.

Kevin delivered a further indictment around the education and welfare on offer to players:

We could have a meeting this week, have a presentation this week, next week you don't remember anything we've talked about and next week nothing's changed. You just talk about things (racism) or

raising awareness about something, but you'll have forgotten about it next week ...

This assessment is worrying on a couple of levels. First, these programs do not maintain long-term engagement and behavioral change. Second, despite this education, it suggests bullying remains commonplace rather than being reported. The degree to which Kevin suggested that players return to normal, despite this awareness, suggested a deeply institutionalized prejudice that may be particular to his club. Alarmingly, this was reiterated with Kevin's overall assessment that:

There's nothing set up where if you are being bullied in football that there's no form of solution to it. It's more like it's in control of the people being bullied or the people doing the bullying ... I think the club likes to think they employ people, not many people; they like to think they employ people to help with that kind of stuff. But a coach is not there to stop you from getting bullied.

This reflected a sense of abandonment on behalf of some players that there is nowhere to safely report bullying. It also suggests that despite professional football's attempts to address inappropriate behaviors, the welfare "people" Kevin referred to, are perceived to be a tokenistic, reactionary attempt to safeguard players. Kevin's assertion reaffirms the sense that both the potential to whistleblow in football, as well as bullying itself, is governed by disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). As coaches do not protect players from being bullied, it reinforces wrongdoing such that it becomes expected and rewarded, rather than prevented (Jones & Denison, 2016). Moreover, from a Foucauldian perspective, professional football acts as a panopticon, where players appear to be coerced from speaking out, particularly as those responsible for maintaining discipline in coaches do not provide any support. This dangerously leaves the resolution of bullying to bullies and victims. However, given the range of views across cases within this theme, it was unclear whether this issue is particular to certain clubs such as Kevin's or is more of an issue for the wider professional football context.

3.2. The challenges of reporting bullying

This theme provided a genuine depth of convergence and divergence in participants' accounts. Significant tensions were reflected across and within participants around whether the bullying act can be reported. It also highlighted potential outcomes for the whistleblower and the contextual influences which may act as a barrier to reporting.

3.2.1. The ability to report

Kevin was a powerful voice in the discussion around whistleblowing. He drew on a seemingly culturally accepted view of "banter" to illustrate how for some, reporting wrongdoing in football is regarded as forbidden:

You'd never go and tell someone or go and complain to the coach about someone getting banter. I've seen people getting banter to the point where I feel sorry for them and they still won't go and say anything just because of the football culture you won't, you can't, it's a really hard thing ... because you're selling out your teammates in a way. You can't it's meant to be a team thing and in the same way, you can't sell them out. You can't get them in trouble when really, you're meant to be able to take it, so you've got to find a way to combat it without going to the coach. If you speak to most lads, they won't think of going to the coach to deal with banter or tell him or anyone at home.

The unease in Kevin's account where he recounts "you won't, you can't, it's a really hard thing" illuminates a sense of imprisonment for victims of bullying and shows how some players believed reporting behavior akin to this is a "no-go" area. Kevin's experiences reinforced a sense of entrapment within the enclosed world (Goffman, 1961) of professional football. This shapes a collective identity where players

cannot show weakness and must accept banter, regardless of their feelings. Thus banter acts as a form of "discipline" which reinforces both expected and accepted behaviors around conforming to a particular identity as a professional footballer (Jones & Denison, 2016). Equally, reporting a teammate is seen as treachery and contrary to the team dynamic, as supported by Ed:

'Cos you're a team and you're with each other every day. Cos you're with each other, relying on each other. So, if someone's getting bullied, even though it shouldn't happen and they go and tell someone, they might see it as someone going against the group and stuff like that and feel like they shouldn't be part of their team.

For Ed, breaking from the group and reporting bullying would leave the player disowned from their team with surveillance acting as a mechanism for disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). As Foucault (1977) described whistleblowing would represent a departure from correct or accepted behaviors. In football the result of this is that players are punished through ostracism from the group. This ultimately acts as a subtle form of "discipline," which prevents each other from speaking out. Charlie concurred:

If a coach stepped in to defend a player who is being bullied or bantered maybe. I think that could make the situation worse ... 'Cos the person who's doing the bullying or banter could stick on them saying "why's the manager sticking up for you?" It's like [he is] his pet of whatever.

Language such as "snitching" used by players such as Kevin and Dave supported an underlying perception that reporting bullying would leave the whistleblower as an outcast. This acts as another form of punishment with the player receiving further bullying for breaking from the group's order. These dominant cultural beliefs which players passively or actively accept, strip individuals of the ability to report. This is to avoid further bullying because of whistleblowing (Park et al., 2020).

On a wider and perhaps even more alarming level, players illustrated that despite knowledge of different potential supporting organizations, reporting bullying to these would be avoided at all costs:

We have the PFA don't we and you have a phone number you can ring but how many people have the balls to admit they're being bullied because if that ever got out, you'd get bullied even more. (James)

Do you know like even if you were to ring up the PFA to say someone's bullying me, you wouldn't actually get someone to come in and do something about it cos we're all men? People laugh and all that and (would) be like 'he's not being bullied.' You know what people are like 'we're only having a laugh; we're just having banter'. That's when people sweep it under the carpet, they try and hide it under the banter carpet. (Kevin)

Kevin provided one of the most disturbing quotes within all the participants' accounts, as it highlighted a potentially systemic, organizational failure across professional football to support victims of bullying and instead to conceal this behavior under the guise of banter. Our participants viewed organizations responsible for players' welfare and education, such as the PFA, as complicit in the bullying process. As such this reflects what Ahern (2018) articulates as an institutional betrayal of victims. In addition, at the individual level the image of victims being laughed at reinforced a highly degrading feeling for them. Pertinently James' reference to having the "balls to admit" being bullied demonstrates the high stakes risks around reporting in football. Despite their differences in terms of age and experience, Kevin and James (see Table 1) reaffirmed the secluded environment of football leaves them with the feeling that reporting these behaviors is futile.

It should be noted though that this was not the case throughout participants' accounts. Elsewhere, Ed and Dave highlighted

contradictory views to other cases (as well as their own within this theme) which suggested that you cannot go against the team:

The coaches do come and have a lot of talks with us and say obviously there should be no bullying but if you do have a problem, come talk to us or the head of welfare and stuff like that. (Ed)

Obviously, it's not a nice thing. It needs to be stopped ... but that's why it's a safe environment and you can go and speak to someone. (You can go to) the safeguarding officer and say I'm not comfortable. (Dave)

These views offer more encouragement in that reporting channels are available for the players and that some individuals feel a greater ability to report. Nonetheless, the views only express a potential to report from individuals who claimed reporting would be challenging elsewhere in their accounts. This creates doubt around the ability to speak out. Moreover, these accounts were only indicative of players at one club (see Table 1). While this was encouraging for this club, it suggests there may be issues with reporting in other organizations and professional football more broadly.

3.2.2. Witnessing and bystanding

Although most participants framed whistleblowing from the context of challenges and potential outcomes for the victim of bullying, it is important to note that some players also addressed the potential challenges for witnesses and bystanders. In some cases, as James alluded to: "even if you feel sorry for people it's hard because if you are seen to be sticking up for them, then you're in danger of getting the brunt of it as well." Thus, whistleblowers are at the risk of ending up as victims of bullying themselves for speaking out, reinforcing a code of silence (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020) in professional football.

Some did, however, suggest wrongdoing could be reported with other players acting as intermediaries to help resolve the situation. Alfie promoted a more positive view of surveillance as an enactment of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977):

I think in our changing room we've got a lot of bonding from the younger lads and older lads, so I think if there was a problem, they'd say to me or one of the older lads. I think it would be resolved.

One potential explanation for this contrasting opinion may be that this is a result of individual differences around reporting. Alternatively, Alfie's and James' views may reflect differences in their experiences in the operation of power differentials at their clubs, which shape the ability to speak out within a team. Alfie's teammate Phil concurred with this more positive view of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), where whistleblowing was possible and the responsibility of the whole team, not just the victim of the behavior.

Because as a team you need to know when it's all banter and then you need to understand when someone's fully overstepped the mark. 'Cos then as a team if you understand what boundaries ... you can push and what you can't, and you can all clamp it out together it's much better, well it's much easier, 'cos you can't let one person get away with it.

Players like Phil may feel an obligation to avoid organizational bystanding and instead engage with the process of altruistic bystanding, acting from a compassionate subjective state, to prevent harm to the victim of bullying (Linstead, 2013). This may be shaped by the moral atmosphere of specific clubs or is reflective of individual differences in moral values and personalities from club to club. Nonetheless, the framing of Phil's quote is potentially problematic as it infers that the players are left responsible for determining the appropriateness of behavior. This may only be effective if the players adopt higher-level moral reasoning and leave a lingering doubt about professional football's attempts to address bullying.

4. Discussion

Our study aimed to explore professional footballers' individual lived experiences and perceptions of whistleblowing bullying, within a professional football context. Players revealed important findings around the influence professional football has on potential whistleblowing of bullying through its unique, largely institutionalized culture. Furthermore, players held inconsistent views around the efficacy of professional football's attempts to provide education and welfare to address bullying. Consistent with this, players identified convergent and divergent accounts around the challenges with reporting bullying, as well as some of the potentially severe outcomes of whistleblowing in the professional football context for victims, witnesses, and bystanders alike.

The present study extended previous research by providing empirical evidence for how individual, organizational and contextual factors (Verschuuren, 2020) play a crucial role in the degree to which whistleblowing occurs in professional football. From a contextual stance, players largely discussed how the encompassing tendencies (Goffman, 1961) of professional football serve to legitimize behaviors that would be inappropriate in other industries and act as a barrier to potential whistleblowing. Professional football serves, to some degree, as a "total institution" where players follow both formal and informal rules such that any deviation from these (e.g., reporting wrongdoing) can be seen as a major infraction (Goffman, 1961). Seemingly what is "legitimate" or "illegitimate" in professional football depends on who defines wrongdoing, meaning that behaviors that may be seen as deviant, are widely accepted in the culture of this sport (Young, 2019). This reflects potential overconformity to the sport ethic (Coakley, 2015) in professional football, whereby tolerating deviant behaviors like bullying may be seen as a necessary part of team membership.

Furthermore, players' accounts reinforced the coercive power of managers and coaches (Anderson & White, 2017) to punish those who offer an individual view that differs from the institutional perspective of these rules (Goffman, 1961). Grounded within Foucault's (1977) theoretical propositions, players feared disciplinary punishments such as being deselected from the team for those who may want to speak out around bullying during initiation ceremonies. This finding carries a potentially important implication for other workplaces which are characterized by initiation ceremonies. For example, although attempts have been made to address hazing behavior in contexts such as the military (Keller et al., 2015), the current study highlights questions around the degree to which individuals can report wrongdoing in certain industries. There may still be a perception that whistleblowing leads to greater bullying (Park et al., 2020), especially when organizations like professional football remain underpinned by authoritarianism, subservience, and "rule-bound" behaviors (Parker & Manley, 2016). Therefore, in industries such as professional sport, individuals appear to trade the morality of principle around reporting wrongdoing, for the morality of loyalty (Erickson et al., 2019). The result is a level of commitment to their organization that goes beyond other occupations (Adler & Adler, 1988) which may be problematic in creating a psychologically unsafe climate. Here whistleblowing wrongdoing may be viewed as a "risky" interpersonal behavior that receives a negative response from other team members (Edmondson, 2004).

The contextual and organizational influence of professional football on reporting bullying was also reflected in participants' views of education and welfare systems in place. Players at certain clubs talked favorably of the implementation of education and welfare at clubs to facilitate reporting wrongdoing. This was consistent with Caillier's (2017) research demonstrating positive associations between whistleblowing education and reporting. For some in the present study, football clubs are seen to be keen to address wrongdoing, and individuals feel supported in raising concerns about bullying. These players highlighted a preference for using internal whistleblowing mechanisms should they need to voice their concerns (Caillier, 2017).

Nonetheless, others were much less complimentary about their

clubs' ability to manage concerns, as well as the other internal whistleblowing mechanisms which professional football promotes. This adds important empirical evidence to claims that whistleblowing training programs may have a counterintuitive effect by highlighting the risks a whistleblower might face (Verschuuren, 2020). There was a worrying trend in the data that professional football that organizations who are leading on players' welfare such as the PFA, indirectly perpetuate the issues of failing internal disciplinary systems and victim silencing (Nite & Nauright, 2020). Most graphically, players feared ridicule for reporting bullying, which reinforced the sense that reprisals are a taken-for-granted response to whistleblowing within sports organizations. This further represents the enactment of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), whereby players potentially surveil one another from the bottom up and preserve bullying as a mechanism to maintain the group's order in professional football. Furthermore, the apparent worthlessness of the education on offer highlighted by certain players demonstrates a potentially systemic failure of professional football to address concerns with educational provision (Parker, 2000). Thus, the present study challenges the view that whistleblowing education can help change whistleblowing culture in sport, by signaling that an organization values reporting wrongdoing and protects whistleblowers against retribution (Erickson et al., 2019). The present data reveal that until proper mechanisms are in place to protect whistleblowers, the process of raising awareness becomes delegitimized (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020).

Furthermore, it was evident from the players' accounts that organizational and contextual factors not only determine (Verschuuren, 2020) but also interact to impact players' ability to report bullying. Professional football promotes a code of silence (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020) where an individual's need to demonstrate "intense loyalty" to their club (Adler & Adler, 1988) means whistleblowing of bullying remains more difficult than in other workplaces. Alarming, attempts to report wrongdoing increases the relationally abusive element of ostracism (Newman et al., 2021), which underpins bullying in football. Through "situated learning" it appears players absorb informal rules within professional football (Parker, 2006), which in this case means they do not report bullying for fear that whistleblowing may affect their survival within this workplace. Once more this may reflect more broadly, workplaces that are similar to professional football such as the army and prisons (Parker & Manley, 2016).

It should be noted though that in occasional cases players contested this notion. Players appeared to provide evidence for the claim that an individual's perception of power (see Verschuuren, 2020) is a potentially important determinant of whistleblowing in sport. Given that characteristics such as age and experience appear not to drive this view within the present findings, alternative mechanisms may be in place. An individual's perception of power to report wrongdoing may instead be determined by their apprenticeship to the cultural norms of football when they are socialized as an academy player (Parker & Manley, 2016). Furthermore, personality traits such as high extraversion and dominance and low agreeableness (Bjorkelo et al., 2010) may fuel agency in reporting, as well as an individual's morality (Zhou et al., 2018), though further work is required to corroborate this in professional football. Nonetheless what was more apparent was that when clubs provide supportive conditions, the process of reporting is facilitated.

Although there appear to be some isolated signs of encouragement regarding the potential to whistleblow in professional football, the potential outcomes for the whistleblower as either the victim, witness, or bystander to bullying are central in preventing reporting of wrongdoing. In the present study, players gave a sense that a whistleblower would be dismissed by internal organizations which are set up to protect them such as the PFA. For some, the PFA was almost seen as part of a silent discreet mechanism of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), which prevents rather than supports players to whistleblow wrongdoing. These findings may help explain why sporting participants are less likely to report their concerns to authorities connected to their sport, but rather

highlight the wrongdoing to another individual such as a coach (Erickson et al., 2017). Albeit potentially indirectly, these organizations such as the PFA appear to maintain the culture of victim silencing (Nite & Nauright, 2020), rather than leaving individuals with a strong sense that they will be protected. This potential failure represents institutional betrayal whereby footballers' expectations for safety and at work are violated (Ahern, 2018), which may explain why some individuals are driven to the point of considering suicide (BBC, 2021b).

The present findings also add to limited previous research (Richardson & McGlynn, 2014) which has explored the potential retaliation that may take place for whistleblowers in hypermasculine, highly competitive sporting environments. For many victims, witnesses, and bystanders of bullying in professional football, it is evident they go through a cost-benefit analysis (Richardson & McGlynn, 2014) where the risks of reporting are too great in terms of further bullying or threats to their position on the team. These beliefs appear to be exacerbated by the hypermasculine culture of professional football, where players determine that their "professional" identity and "will to win" needs to be displayed by conforming to these practices (Parker & Manley, 2016). The tolerance players are expected to display to severe banter means that their need for closeness, intimacy and respect gets converted into a narrow form of group-oriented bonding based on competitive one-upmanship, self-destructive behaviors, and silent conformity to group norms (Messner, 2002). Furthermore, this adds to the sense that codes of silence (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020) become more entrenched in team sports, where the primacy of culture and hierarchy means that subordination is more likely and individuals may be less willing to speak out (Verschuuren, 2020). On occasions, though this view was contested, offering some hope that altruistic bystanding is possible, which could address some of the negative impacts of organizational bystanding for both witnesses and victims (Linstead, 2013).

4.1. Practical implications

The present study provided key practical implications concerning whistleblowing of bullying in professional football. First, within historically masculine, authoritarian industries such as professional football, education programs need to challenge the prevailing organizational culture which may be a barrier to reporting. Players' accounts suggest that many do not speak out for fear of going against implicit and explicit rules within this sporting workplace. To address this, interventions need to take place at the organizational level, including key stakeholders such as the PFA, boards of directors, managers and coaches, players, as well as sport psychologists. Sports psychologists especially can play a proactive role in facilitating these educational efforts (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017) to challenge the issues highlighted in the present study. Importantly these interventions need to reassure individuals that they will not be ridiculed for reporting wrongdoing such as bullying.

Second, professional football needs to raise the confidence in players of the quality of its educational and welfare provision. In the present study, players reflected a view that education programs are something which to survive and "get through" (Parker, 2000). Future educational programs need to offer clearer guidance on how to whistleblow and its benefits (Erickson et al., 2019) but these need to be accompanied by proper mechanisms to protect whistleblowers to act on their complaints (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). Organizations such as the PFA, need to provide clear evidence of how allegations are responded to and how bullies are addressed. Sport psychologists are potentially critical here in creating psychologically safe and respectful environments (Edmondson, 2004; Fisher & Dzikus, 2017) which can address fears that players will be ridiculed for reporting wrongdoing.

Finally, the inconsistency in the players' accounts around their ability to whistleblow within their club, as well as the sense that it may be difficult to report concerns to outside organizations such as the PFA, suggests that education and welfare programs need to be tailored more

to the individual organization. From the participants' data, it further reflects that classroom education programs are too remote and not effective in professional football (Higham et al., 2021), resulting in players not having the courage to call the PFA to report their concerns. By involving coaches, players, and sports psychologists to co-construct education and welfare policies at a club level, it may better integrate empirical and experiential knowledge (Stone et al., 2020) to address bullying within their organization. In this regard, sports psychologists can assist in developing ethical guidelines, policies, and practices for their club (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). This may raise the profile of bullying to coaches who can be seen to originate abusive behavior, whilst also regulating who can whistleblow in the first place (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Verschuuren, 2020).

4.2. Limitations and future research

Common with recent research into safeguarding in sport (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020), the present study may have been limited by the sensitive nature of the topic area and the degree to which participants may have been apprehensive about sharing their data. This effect may have been exacerbated, given the concerns highlighted by players about their careers and fear of ridicule for reporting bullying behavior in professional football. While these are notable concerns, significant efforts were made to build rapport within the interviews to reassure players through the process of gaining consent (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020) and to remind the players of the confidentiality of their data. Importantly, this study also addressed limitations highlighted by previous research (Newman et al., 2021) by exploring the degree to which education and welfare provision supports players in their ability to report bullying.

An additional point worthy of consideration for future research to consider is to focus on the views of various stakeholders concerning whistleblowing of bullying within professional football. The present study was limited to the expressions of players, whereas recent research into workplace bullying has advocated a broader sampling strategy (Sprigg et al., 2019). It might be useful to employ this approach within an organization to recruit participants other than the players. This aligns with beneficial advancements around safeguarding in sport where an organizational focus has been adopted (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). To address concerns raised by some players regarding the involvement of coaches in terms of preventing whistleblowing, it may be useful to involve the views of this group. By doing this it may sensitize this group (Newman et al., 2021) to the issues with reporting bullying in professional football, while hopefully encouraging their moral engagement to administer protection for whistleblowers (Verschuuren, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The present study makes an important contribution to whistleblowing research in the sporting workplace while demonstrating the potential for understanding this behavior in organizations and workplaces more broadly. It demonstrates the importance of organizational and contextual factors and the degree to which these shape the reporting of workplace bullying in professional football. Furthermore, it highlights the need for relevant, tailored education and welfare programs that individuals feel they can access. The present study also illustrates the important interaction between these organizational and contextual factors and an individual's perceptions around their ability to whistleblow and the potential ramifications for them of doing so. Overall, the findings present a vital challenge for sport to develop appropriate policies and procedures for whistleblowers while providing safeguards for those wishing to report wrongdoing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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