

Journal Article

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# Exploring player communication in interactions with sport officials

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**Abstract.** Communication and player management are central to officiating, but player-official interaction is difficult to train and unresearched. This study interviewed team captains from different sports and used video elicitation and Goffman's (*The presentation of self in everyday life*, 1959, *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behaviour*, 1967) dramaturgical sociology of social interaction to explore ways players interact and attempt to influence officials. Players were found to behave irrationally sometimes, but mostly they are strategic. Player attitudes to interactions range from fatalistic acceptance to whatever the official decides, through selective complaint, to continuous opportunism. Players attempt to influence officials directly and indirectly through complaining, questioning, flattery or praise. These findings deepen our understanding of the balance – between authority, accountability and respectfulness – that characterises effective communication and interaction with players.

**Key words:** Sport official, player-referee interactions, communication, game management, training

**Résumé.** Exploration de la communication des joueurs lors des interactions avec les officiels des pratiques sportives.

La gestion et la communication avec les joueurs sont au cœur de l'arbitrage, mais l'interaction officiel/joueur est difficile à entraîner et reste largement inexplorée. Cette étude interroge des capitaines d'équipe à partir d'un éventail de sports. Elle utilise la vidéo et la sociologie dramaturgique de l'interaction sociale de Goffman (*The presentation of self in everyday life*, 1959, *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behaviour*, 1967) pour explorer les différentes façons qu'ont les joueurs d'interagir et d'influer les arbitres. Le comportement des joueurs apparaît parfois irrationnel, mais ils sont surtout stratégiques. L'attitude des joueurs dans ces interactions va de l'acceptation fataliste face aux décisions arbitrales, par la plainte sélective, à un opportunisme permanent. Les joueurs tentent d'influencer les arbitres par l'intermédiaire de la plainte, du questionnement, de la flatterie ou des louanges. Ces résultats approfondissent notre compréhension de l'équilibre – entre autorité, responsabilité et respect – qui caractérise une communication et une interaction efficace avec les joueurs.

**Mots clés :** Officiel des pratiques sportives, interactions joueurs-arbitre, communication, gestion du jeu, formation

## 1 Introduction

Communication and player management is clearly central to effective sport officiating yet it has received little research attention from officiating scholars when compared to physical demands (*e.g.*, Caballero, Ojeda, Garcia-Aranda, Mallo, Helsen, Sarmiento, Navarro, & Gardia-Manso, 2011; Weston, Castagna, Helsen, & Impellizzeri, 2009), stress and coping (*e.g.*, Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Voight, 2009), and decision-making (*e.g.*, MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes, & Weston, 2007; Mascarenhas, Collins, Mortimer, & Morris, 2005). Communica-

tion training in most contexts begins with improving understanding of those with whom we communicate, however we have little knowledge of player perspectives in their interactions with officials. The few studies available on officiating communication show that officials attempt to influence social order (*e.g.*, Fruchart & Carton, 2012; Snyder & Purdy, 1987) and players' perceptions of fairness and acceptance of decisions through particular communication styles (*e.g.*, Mellick, Bull, Laugharne, & Fleming, 2005; Simmons, 2009, 2010). Officials also use a range of preventative techniques to avoid sanctioning players or minimise player anger (Mascarenhas, Collins,



& Mortimer, 2005; Simmons, 2006). English Premier football referees report using certain strategies and skills to manage game activities including reading player and manager body language and behaviour, building trust and rapport with players and managers through active listening and displays of empathy, using players' and managers' language and engaging in "banter", and addressing players by first name and shirt number (Slack, Maynard, Butt, & Olusoga, 2013). Skilful officiating communication and game management arguably require higher-order capacities, competencies, and interpersonal skills. Emotional intelligence (Nikbakhsh, Alam, & Monazami, 2013) and social competence (Carlsson, 2006) have been linked to officiating communication and performance effectiveness; however there has been few attempts to explore these concepts in the officiating context.

An interview study with officiating development managers and performance coaches at peak Australian sport bodies highlighted the importance of interactive communication skills for effective communication and player management in sport officiating (Cunningham, Simmons, Mascarenhas, & Redhead, 2014). Interviewees were found to conceptualise communication and player management as a composite of *personal qualities* officials exhibit (personality characteristics and traits), mastery of *one-way communication* techniques (impression management, body language, whistle/flag/voice use and other directive behaviours), *monitoring situations* (reading and interpreting people and situations) and use of *skilled interaction* (the ability to adapt and interact appropriately to people and situation). The interviewees consistently said that one-way communication was relatively easy to train, that personal qualities were difficult to influence, and that, importantly, the two most crucial aspects of communication – situation monitoring and skilled interaction – were the most difficult to train (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2014). Communication theorist Burleson (2007) says that to become a skilled communicator in a particular context, people should prioritise observing and interpreting the unspoken aspects of interactions, including internal states (attitudes, mood) and goals or motivations (intent, desires) of others. Recognising deceptive intentions by players aimed at influencing officials is an important factor in their perceptual and decision making skills (Dosseville, Laborde, & Garnarczyk, 2013; Lex, Pizzera, Kurtes, & Schack, 2014; Morris & Lewis, 2010). Thus a better understanding of the ability to read and interpret people and situations should enable officials to respond more appropriately to the requirements of different situations and communicate and adjudicate more carefully and effectively.

Most studies on sport official communication have used officials' perspectives (*e.g.*, Cunningham, Mellick, Mascarenhas, & Fleming, 2012; Simmons, 2006; Slack, *et al.*, 2013) and a transmission model of communication (see, for example, Berlo, 1960) that focuses on impression management and decision communication, or ways officials can shape others' attitudes about them and their

decisions (Dosseville, Laborde, & Bernier, 2014; Mellick, *et al.*, 2005; Simmons, 2009, 2010). In developing strategies and advice for effective officiating practice and interaction skills, it makes good sense to explore the input of officials and to capture and communicate lessons from their experience. However, communication is most effective when interactants are sensitive to the perspectives and preferences of other participants (Blagden, 2012; Burleson, 2007). While there is some research (*e.g.*, Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014; Simmons 2010, 2011) that provides exception by surveying or interviewing players, most officiating research has gathered data from officials. To date, there is little knowledge about players' perceptions and perspectives of officials and their communication, or their attitudes and experience in interaction and encounters with officials. This study deliberately sought to explore the perspective of players in interactions with officials.

One study that explored the players' perspective of sport official behaviour and communication showed that officials influence players' in-game psychology and performance. It suggested that officials' "unnecessary words or actions" or lack of clarity in player expectancies can evoke a "performance crisis state" in players (Bar-Eli, Levy-Kolker, Pie, & Tenenbaum, 1995). Other studies that explore players' perspectives of officials have used organisational justice theories and fairness heuristics as frames for understanding players' perceptions and reactions to fairness and unfairness in officials' (Faccenda, Pantaléon, & Reynes, 2009; Simmons, 2010, 2011). Studies have shown that players are more likely to perceive officials' decisions to be correct when they provide an explanation and communicate decisions in a calm tone (Simmons, 2010), and officials to be more fair when they perceive the official to be competent, dependable, and respectful (Simmons, 2011). Players use particular fixed (age, physique), psychological (honesty, politeness, respect), performance (experience, technical skills) and communication cues (verbal expression, listening skills) in officials to formulate impressions about their competence (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014).

Previous explorations of players' attitudes to officials have tended to focus on identifying more and less favorable ways officials can present themselves, rather than exploring ways that officials might become more responsive to different player behaviours and reactions. Studies have found that player differences in *sensitivity to injustice* in officiating predict their moral functioning and likelihood to adopt transgressive or anti-social behavior (Faccenda, *et al.*, 2009), and that individuals differ in the *intention to argue* officiating decisions according to age, nationality and level of play (Simmons, 2009). These findings evidence player differences in their responses to different contextual and official factors, and Simmons (2009) recommended further study to explore characteristics of players most likely to argue with officials, including preferences, dislikes and other triggers for such responses. Research to date (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2012; Simmons 2010,



2011) tends to generalise about the players' view of sport officials as if players were homogeneous, or that all players view officials similarly. Consequently, this study explores and identifies differences in player approaches to interacting with officials.

Officiating can learn from other occupational and professional fields where communication studies are more established and advanced. Some fields have used the dramaturgical sociology ideas of Erving Goffman to explore interactions. Goffman (1959, 1967) provides concepts and vocabulary to better understand complexities in human interaction and face-to-face behaviour that may help to explain player-official interaction. Using dramaturgical concepts, he detailed less-observable dynamics of routine, everyday interpersonal behaviour including how people attempt to save and accommodate "face" in interaction (Goffman, 1967). He was interested in performance aspects of self in interpersonal encounters as impression management and ways we ritually "give", or "give off" certain impressions that express our perception of others, and definition of situations. Two of Goffman's popular concepts, 'front stage' and 'back stage', describe parts of an individual's social interaction which function in general, fixed or adaptive fashion in the presence of others. These ideas have been used to understand interaction in institutional and professional settings such as sport coaching (Wilson, 2013), restorative justice conferences (Bruce, 2013), and medical professional discourse with patients (Barton, 2004). From this perspective, 'communication' focuses on the meaning constructed from and through interactions, and therefore directly addresses the variety of "*motivational, strategic, behavioural, attributional and evaluative components that interactants impose on their own communication experience*" (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, p. 11). Goffman's ideas serve to pattern communicative events, and view communication for the professional as "*an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards*" (Bruce, 2013, p. 107). These are important ethical, institutional and professional considerations when thinking about and studying player-official interaction and officiating communication and player management.

This exploratory study aims to provide new insights into player attitudes and motivations in their interaction with officials that might help officials to interact, lead and respond more effectively with players. The study uses video elicitation interviewing to explore players' attitudes, motivations and strategies in interactions with officials. It uses an interpretive analysis to understand player-official interaction, drawing on constructivism, symbolic interactionism and concepts of Goffman (1959, 1967) about interaction and presentation of self. It draws on communication research from other occupational and professional settings such as nursing (Shattell, 2004), policing (Giles, *et al.*, 1991; Sanders, 1979), teaching (Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 1998), and customer service (Baker, Magnini, & Perdue, 2012) to

understand different ways players manage impressions and communication in interactions with officials. We were conscious of the pioneering nature of the study, and did not know what to expect to find. In a spirit of inquiry we posed two broad questions to guide our qualitative exploration:

RQ #1: What are players' motivations and intentions in interactions with officials?

RQ #2: How do players differ in the ways they attempt to influence officials?

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

Eleven sport team captains were the study participants. Captains had current representation with Australian national ( $n = 2$ ), professional ( $n = 3$ ), semi-professional (higher competitive level than amateur and some financial compensation;  $n = 3$ ) and amateur ( $n = 3$ ) sport clubs and teams. A range of competitive levels and sport codes were chosen to represent a greater variety of communication cultures and performance characteristics and demands of participants. Participants were captains in six different types of "interactor" (Plessner & MacMahon, 2013) team sport codes including soccer, rugby union, rugby league, hockey, basketball and netball. Players in a team captaincy role were purposefully chosen as these types of sports require the captain to engage frequently with officials about rule interpretation, game procedures and other aspects of player behaviour. Captains are formally expected help orientate other team members to group performance goals and collaborate with coaches to facilitate role information exchange among team members (Eys, Schinke, & Jeffery, 2007). It may be an assumption that those in a captaincy role adequately represent the "normal" player view, however we anticipated here that investigating "high interactors", from "interactor" sports would provide richer data (Patton, 2002). Captains represent a *third person perspective* (Davis, 1997) as both a sport participant and as an active and anonymous observer of game interactions. A third-person perspective was used as a research strategy as it helps to explore what people might not want to reveal about themselves and interactions, but are open to divulging as a co-participant/observer of such interactions.

Ethics approval was first gained from the principal researcher's university ethics committee. Once criteria were established for the sample (*i.e.*, captain, interactor sports, minimum 2 seasons captaincy) a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling yielded 8 male and 3 female captains with a mean age of 25.5 years. Contact with players was made through game and competition development managers who assisted in the recruitment of captains by distributing a participation request to sport teams/clubs. Other captains were recruited via direct contact based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher's home



institution. Some professional, semi-professional and amateur interviewees were also recruited through existing participants who helped to provide access to other captains. Once interest to participate was established, captains were contacted and requested to be interviewed about their “views and attitudes about sport officials and player-official game interactions”. A letter of information and informed consent were provided in advance to inform captains about the extent of their participation and ensure confidentiality for themselves, and their affiliated sport club.

## 2.2 Design

Video elicitation (*e.g.*, Henry & Fetters, 2012; Heath, Luff, & Svensson, 2007) within semi-structured interviews with participants was chosen as the research design. Video elicitation is a technique used in training health practitioners to stimulate thought and discussion about trainees’ associated appraisals, beliefs, and emotions attached to their consultation experience with patients (Henry & Fetters, 2012). For the purposes of the current study, a video elicitation technique was adapted by using sport examples of player-official interactions instead of actual video of the participant. It allows for participants to bring their own language to explaining and describing their sporting experiences. An interview guide was developed and used in combination with video-based stimulus to get participants talking about player-official interactions and trigger discussion by getting them thinking and talking about their personal experience and observation.

The purpose of using this research method was to provide participants with observational stimulus of familiar or typical (and less familiar) video examples of sport and player-official interaction situations. The use of video examples in semi-structured interviews provided a “thin-slicing” approach to exploring communicative exchanges between players and officials. Video vignettes provide a set of representative and rich, visual and audio examples of game interactions that capture important verbal and non-verbal cues, dialogue and different players-official encounters and exchanges. Studies in others fields have used similar methods to explore police and public citizen interactions (Engel, Sobol, & Worden, 2000) and in the effectiveness of health consultation between patients and medical specialists (Pappas & Seale, 2009). Other approaches used by social constructionist and symbolic interactional research used to analyse and interpret everyday public and private communicative practices uses ethnography, discourse analysis, participant observation (Goffman, 1981) and conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).

## 2.3 Vignette selection and operationalising sport official interactions

Player-official interactions were sampled from soccer, rugby union, rugby league, basketball, netball and hockey.

Video footage was collected to represent elite (*e.g.*, Olympics, International Rugby Union, FIFA World Cup), professional (*e.g.*, European Hockey League, English Premiership) and semi-professional or amateur levels (*e.g.*, club, state, district). Recordings were collected from an online public video forum ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) based on particular study criteria. One set of recordings of interaction situations (or episodes) between officials and players were used with all participants. Participants were presented vignettes of their own sport and other “interactor” sport types (Plessner & MacMahon, 2013). Recordings of vignettes (soccer = 2, hockey  $n = 2$ , netball = 1, basketball = 2, rugby union = 2, rugby league = 2), ranged in elapsed time from 3 and 15 seconds and were randomly arranged so that all participants would watch the clips in the same order. All interviewees said they were mostly familiar with all sports used in vignettes.

Selection criteria for interaction instances used in video stimulus was informed by previous research on officiating communication, and other fields that study interaction from the perspective of those who receive health (patient to nurse or doctor), educational (teacher to student) and professional services (*e.g.*, citizen to police, customer to service provider). Selected examples of interpersonal encounters and exchanges between officials and players included initial encounters and impressions (clips showed players and officials first meetings prior to game start; Simmons, 2011; Thatcher, 2005), displays of procedural or interactional justice and communication of decisions (clips showed officials delivering decision explanations or rule interpretations; Mellick, *et al.*, 2005; Simmons, 2009, 2010), displays of officiating cues that players use to form expectations about their competence (clips were shown different types of officiating styles and verbal or non-verbal expression; Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014), and instances of interpersonal conflict between players where officials intervene (Mascarenhas, O’Hare, & Plessner, 2006), or where players are arguing with officials (Faccenda, *et al.*, 2009; Simmons, 2009) or being “difficult” (clips showed players infringing officials’ personal space, repeatedly questioning or complaining; Baker, *et al.*, 2012; Shattell, 2004; Velazquez, Contri, Saura, & Blasco, 2006). Researchers ensured a balance in types of interaction across video clips.

## 2.4 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview approach was used to (a) explore players’ attitudes about player-official interaction and (b) to allow participants to reflect and recount on their own sport experience to expand and elaborate on these responses (Maxwell, 2002). Several issues about the interaction situations depicted in video vignettes were discussed with participants. Discussion topics included the nature of the interaction situation/occasion, interpersonal style or approaches used by players and officials, possible antecedents, consequences or alternative courses



Table 1. Interview schedule.

Theme to explore (not stated in interview)	Question to ask
Interpersonal or communication styles in interactions (Goffman, 1959, 1967) "Social perception" (Burlleson, 2007)	<p>What were you noticing about the approaches people were taking within interactions? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What approaches or styles do you prefer in officials?</p> <p>From your experience, in what ways do players respond differently to different officiating styles?</p> <p>What ways can officials interact with players to better gain cooperation and acceptance in their decisions, or authority?</p>
Nature of interaction situation or "definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959) "Message reception" and "Message production" (Burlleson, 2007)	<p>What is going on here in this interaction? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What is happening for the player in this situation? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What are your impressions of the officials' actions to this point? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What particular messages are the player and official trying to send each other in this situation? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What are different ways that other players might react or respond to officials in similar situations that you've seen in your sport?</p> <p>What are different types of interaction situations that arise during games?</p> <p>What are likely future consequences of similar types of interaction for both the player and official?</p>
Unspoken goals, intentions and motivations in interaction (Burlleson, 2007; Goffman, 1959, 1967)	<p>What is this player trying to accomplish in this interaction? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>What might be going on in the mind of the player here? (<i>video</i>)</p> <p>As a captain, how do you try and present yourself to officials?</p> <p>What do players wish for from officials?</p> <p>What are players seeking to achieve in interactions with officials?</p> <p>What types of impressions do players usually present to officials?</p> <p>How do players differ in their acceptance of authority in officials?</p> <p>What are ways that players can act with officials to gain an advantage or influence them?</p> <p>How do personal or game factors influence how players might interact differently with officials?</p> <p>From your experience, how do players or teams attempt to influence officiating decisions?</p>

of the encounter, and unspoken goals and motivations of players. An interview schedule (Tab. 1) was developed using Goffman's (1959, 1967) dramaturgical sociology concepts and Burlleson's (2007) constructivist view of communication skills to give a way to explore participants' attitudes about video vignettes and general perspectives on what players and officials bring to and influence interactions. Many of the later questions listed in the schedule were not asked because interviewees raised pertinent matters without prompting. Researchers were conscious that the topic of player-official encounters and interactions can manifest differently depending on competitive level and sport based on rule structures, norms and consequences of such interactions. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research were considered. Researchers had extensive experience of qualitative interviewing projects with sport officials, sport administrators, coaches and players. The presentation and introduction of video vignettes was designed to avoid leading the participants. They were asked by the researcher following the interview if they wished to change or restate any of their responses that might not have been clear. Researchers made clear recordings of interviews and transcribed them.

They listened again to recordings and checked transcriptions.

## 2.5 Data analysis

Research questions were used to structure the organization and categorisation of data. The theoretical concepts of Goffman (1959, 1967) and Burlleson (2007) were used as an analytical frame to interpret interview data. This was achieved with a multiple-phase data-verification process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involved, first, the researcher gaining familiarity with the data by reading and rereading each interview transcript. Next, transcriptions were examined for words, phrases, descriptions, and examples that indicated player "motivations" and "intentions" in interactions and ways they influence interactions. These fragments were coded with a meaning label and then grouped and thematised manually using an Excel spreadsheet. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), themes that were identifiably consistent with previous research, and the focus of this inquiry, were organised as narrative responses to the research questions. Quotes and examples are used to help communicate the findings.



### 3 Findings and discussion

The aims of the interviews and study here were two-fold. First we sought to explore player perspectives on interactions with officials, especially concerning what they aim to achieve and see other players seek to accomplish through interactions. Second, we aimed to understand ways that players deliberately or unconsciously influence interactions with officials. The following sections present and interpret the findings and themes that emerged from the study through Goffman's (1959, 1967) dramaturgical sociology and use of communication research from officiating and other fields.

#### 3.1 RQ #1: What are players' motivations and intentions in interactions with officials?

This section reports motivations and intentions for players in interactions with officials that include actively attempting to influence officials to favour one's own team, attempting to ensure that officials are "even-handed" insofar as they do not favour their opponents, and not attempting to influence officials' decisions at all. Interviewees said that players, while at times react irrationally to officials and their decisions, are generally strategic in their interactions with officials. Even the least strategically minded players tend to avoid unnecessarily antagonising officials. In Goffman's (1959) terms, people's motivations and intentions in interactions are strongly influenced by their perceived "definition of the situation" (p. 21). Their definition of the situation helps to give interactions a type of coherence. Among interviewees it was common to adapt motivations and intentions to their own definition of the situation, particularly their perceptions of the official they are interacting with. One interviewee reported reluctance to influence officials unless they feel that it is necessary to correct and imbalance in the official's decisions:

*"The umpire wasn't calling it, and this was a terrible thing for me to do, but I sort of yelled out, not directly, but I spoke aloud on purpose to another player, "Look at that goal attack, she's got a hold every time!" and then it went down to the other end the umpire called that after I said it". My intentions of her seeing me upset and hearing it would be to "even up the game" [I10].*

Although most interviewees said that it is difficult to get an official to change their mind, a minority ( $n = 3$ ) reported almost complete fatalism with regard to official's decisions:

*"In most cases they [the official] are going to call what they call. You can't change it. Focusing on your performance and what you have to do out there is a better way I find. If I have to speak to the official, it is usually because I'm concerned about the safety of one of my players" [I9].*

Most revealed that they are opportunistic, willing to influence officials and their decisions in favour of their own team, if they perceive a chance to do so:

*"If you're going to be my friend, if you're referring me and you're calling me by my name, I'll probably talk to you more and try to influence your decisions a bit more" [I5].*

*Picking up on an official's personality is important and knowing how to adapt to that. Some like to be the boss, and you make sure you let them feel that way. Others who are seen to be more friendly can kind of be manipulated in a way. I mean, we all know someone like that, right? You're careful about when to approach them, give a bit of praise here and there, because when something doesn't go your way and you do complain or question them, they'll usually be there for you and a call goes your way" [I2].*

Players in this study also reported that more friendly interaction from officials can be an opportunity to influence officials and their decisions through suggestion, repetition or challenge. Interviewees from rugby union and rugby league said familiarity with officials outside games can be a benefit to the quality of in-game encounters and interaction or boundaries (e.g., engaging in friendly "banter", joking). Elite football referees report that they use communication skills such as "banter" to develop rapport and establish trust with players (Slack, *et al.*, 2013). A number of interviewees from netball and hockey said that players can "get it in their head" [I2, I6] that an official doesn't like them that can influence the quality of interactions. Imbalance in power within relationships between officials and players in interactions can be maladaptive and lead to a game atmosphere of frustration and agitation that translate to aggressiveness between players (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2014) and resistance to officials and their decisions (Faccenda, *et al.*, 2009). Insensitivity from officials in their communication of decisions was also reported to be a trigger for players' performance "crisis" during games (Bar Eli, *et al.*, 1995).

Interviewees who participated at higher levels of competitive sport said that officials can develop reputations that can often provide information for players about how they should adapt their play and interaction to fit the official. More often in this study, captains from soccer, rugby union, rugby league, basketball and netball discussed visible official displays in interactions, especially displays of weakness or uncertainty, that would influence their intentions and motivations in subsequent interactions. Interviewees used labels such as "weak" [I1-4, I9, I11] or "overly friendly" [I4-5, I8, I11] and said these type of officials were seen to be more easily influenced, while "firm or authoritarian" [I2, I4, I9-11] or "confident authoritarian" [I5] officials required a different interaction approach. Some interviewees said that players can develop an increased awareness to the personality traits of



officials and that influences when or when not they choose to interact:

*“I think that the ref that doubts themselves or is hesitant when you’re playing, and you approach them about a decision and you see she is doubting herself, I’d think ‘If I keep working on her maybe I can break her down to change her decision’” [I11].*

Goffman (1959, 1967) said people try to present themselves in favourable ways to others for various purposes. In hospitals, patients may use flattery with nurses as a way to “save face”, or to maintain a degree of autonomy and self-esteem (Shattell, 2004). Similarly, many team captains interviewed here said that players can alter the way they interact to fit the type of refereeing style they perceive, using praise or intermittent criticism, or by being overly respectful or positive. There are some impressions that captains generally wish to project to officials, such as appearing “reasonable” [I2], “neutral” [I1-I2, I5], “knowledgeable” [I5, I9], “calm” [I1, I5-6, I9] and “in-control” of self and players’ [I2, I5, I9]. One professional rugby union captain captured a common sentiment when he said that he wished to be seen to be as a “communication channel” [I2] between the official and other players.

Several interviewees indicated concern not to be perceived to be difficult or disrespectful, and that deciding how often to interact with officials and what to interact over is an important impression management decision. They emphasised the importance of being selective about what issues to approach officials with because a good relationship with officials is useful when managing decisions against their team:

*“You gotta sort of pick your battles about what to talk to the referee about. You want to avoid being seen as a nuisance to the referee about something that really isn’t important. You’ll never really get them on your side. If there is an area of the game you are getting penalised for repeatedly, that might be where you take the time to go to the referee [I3].*

*“You have to be selective when you interact with the umpire: the times when you go up to them and ask what for. A lot of people just go up and complain about everything they think is wrong. In the grand scheme of things you don’t want to hassle the referee, but some things should be heard” [I7].*

The interactions between officials and players are complex, and influences and manifestations can be both distinct and subtle. Goffman’s (1959) notion of the “back-stage” as the space where individuals are not being evaluated by an audience, and free from the judgement and interpretations of others, is useful for understanding some of the complexity. The backstage enables one to prepare “face-work” impressions for future encounters, to ensure a presentation of self remains intact, and that one’s identity does not become discredited or stigmatized (Goffman, 1959, 1967). A later interpretation of front and back stage

emphasized “linking together communicative events, providing a means by which inter-subjective stances can build up an identity across interactions” (Wilson, 2013, p. 182), rather than two distinct physical spaces or “regions” of social behaviour, as Goffman’s work originally suggested. Some interviewees described interpretations of officials in “front-stage” interactions that were influenced by “back-stage” dialogue between players:

*“You can tell it from the coin toss. It’s their body language and the way they speak to you. Like you just think to yourself, ‘Wow, what is this guy doing here today?’, and as a captain, I’ll go back to my teammates and say, ‘Look, be aware, I don’t think this guy is going to be real good today’. Usually, if my teammates take on the advice, they’ll change the way they play and how they speak with the guy over the game” [I7].*

Wilson’s (2013) adaptation of Goffman’s (1959) front and back stage is useful in accounting for some of the unseen and the indirect contributors to the complexity of official and player interactions. This section has articulated some of the often unspoken motivations and intentions that players bring to interactions with officials. The next section explores the ways that players attempt to shape and influence interactions with officials.

### 3.2 RQ #2: How do players differ in the ways that they attempt to influence officials?

This section describes ways that players can attempt to influence officials through deliberate, planned, opportunistic or unconscious interpersonal strategies. Interviewees said that players actively influence officials, and by implication their decisions, by openly challenging or questioning as well as less direct means, such as exhibiting “desirable” personality traits:

*“I can influence referee decisions by being friendly with them and just praising at the right time, and give criticism when they sort of listen to you. Certainly I think I have influenced the way a referee handles the game at certain stages, not the whole game, but it is easily done, they are human beings really aren’t they?” [I5].*

The interviews revealed a spectrum of approaches to influencing officials through interactions. Some players and teams use subtle and indirect approaches, while others are more confronting, applying pressure by overwhelming or surrounding officials through infringing personal space. A frequently described type of overt behaviour used by players was said to be complaining or questioning. Players can use complaints to pressure officials or attempt to get officials to change decisions to a less severe infraction to their team. Complaints can be genuinely felt by the complainant player, but they can also be manufactured to influence future decisions or reduce the punishment:

*“They probably know what the umpire has called is correct, but are trying to manipulate them to doubt*



*themselves, to change their behaviour so it suits them better... a different type of penalty or something that may benefit them.” [I5].*

A study of complaint behaviour in customer service found the primary determinants of complaints were customers' degree of dissatisfaction, attitudes towards complaining, importance of situation, and probability of success (Velazquez, *et al.*, 2006). People can have different reasons to complain, which are influenced by both personal and situational factors. In sport, Simmons (2009) showed that players differ in their intention to argue officiating decisions by nationality, age and level of competition. Interviewees said some players are natural complainers and have a reputation for complaining, others saw complaining as one means for players to intimidate and assert dominance over officials:

*“Players can influence officials through pressure, just continual pressure. If the referee doesn't penalise a player for how you speak to them, or try to intimidate them, you got the referee bluffed” [I3].*

*“A player can influence an official through intimidation and influence through being positive with the referee. But, I think the player that intimidates and doesn't get penalised for intimidating can have more of an effect on the official than someone who respects them and addresses them more positively” [I8].*

Challenging and questioning the official is sometimes used to gain advantage because it delays the game or “buys time”:

*“Sometimes just asking questions can allow your team to get set-up; it's a tactical thing. While the official is busy explaining some law to you, your guys are already onside” [I3].*

*“You get tired out there. A few questions about the last play with the ref that slows down play is a good way to catch your breath” [I9].*

One interviewee said that when officials facilitate the flow of play by giving a “running commentary” [I6], they lessen the amount of questioning. Interviewees also shared more indirect strategies that players can engage in to influence officials. When captains have to interact with an official, other players' displays of frustration or verbal comments to their captain were thought to be a way to make the official aware of growing player frustrations. One netball captain described the ways captains and players can attempt to manipulate emotions of the official, if they are perceived to lack confidence or a particular game presence:

*“I think that the ref that doubts themselves or is hesitant, like when you're playing and you approach the ref about a decision, if she is doubting herself, I'd be, “If I keep working on her maybe I can break her down to change her decision” [I11].*

*“If I have to speak with the ref, I'll be standing here [points to himself] and you're the ref, and my halfback is here [points beside him] and he'll go “Can you tell the ref this and that”. It isn't actually to me, it is really to him. I reckon the good ref ignores that a lot of the time, but I do feel many take it on and nine times out of ten you'll see it in their decisions after” [I4].*

Other subtle ways to influence were to direct officials' attention to particular aspects of the game, without conveying the impression of criticism, and the intermittent or selective use of praise. Such attempts by players were thought to be successful in persuading and shifting the focus of official to give their team decisions in their direction:

*“If you think about the psychology of any person, if you mention something enough they'll look at it. So to get into the head of the ref, you don't have to tell them what's going wrong, you just have to tell him to look at something” [I4].*

*“They want to be told they are doing a good job. Unless you are thick skinned, no one wants to be criticised. You either learn from your mistake or you think that person is just trying to get into my head. If you criticise someone enough and they change the way they do something because they don't want to be criticised again then you have influenced the outcome or you've influence the way someone referees” [I7].*

Sometimes influence starts before the game and without the opponent's knowledge. Interviewees who played at higher levels said that making officials aware about the reputation of a particular player or “style” of team play can be an effective way to influence officiating. Also, at the higher levels, some interviewees said that highly reputed players such as national representatives can have a disproportionate influence on officials. Officials listen more carefully to, and often find it harder to resist the exhortations and demands of, high status players.

Some interviewees preferred less interaction and more distance from officials, while others said that due to the frequency of player-official interaction in their sport some officials could be more actively influenced. Some interviewees from netball [I6, I7] and hockey [I2] sports said that often less interaction happens in their sport than that in rugby and soccer. Some officiating research (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014; Plessner & MacMahon, 2013) categorise officiating across sports based on proximity to players, frequency of interaction, and number of decision cues. It was also clear that there are many similarities in the nature of interactions across different sports. In each sport there are players who will use interactions to manipulate officials and their decisions, especially where they perceive weakness, and players who do not. Differences are in part due to the rules and conventions of different sports, and in part due to the preferences and beliefs of individual players and teams.



## 4 Conclusions

This research explored player motivations and intentions in interactions with sport officials, and ways they attempt to influence officials. It provides new insights into player differences in interactions with officials, building on previous research that assumed players to be homogeneous and communication as one-way (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014; Simmons, 2010). Dramaturgical sociology (Goffman, 1959, 1967) provides a useful framework of concepts and vocabulary for building understanding of communication and interaction in sport officiating. Some players use their interactions with officials to influence them. Other players attempt to ensure that officials are “even-handed”, at least to the point of not favouring their opponents, while some do not attempt to influence officials’ decisions at all. This research found that players do behave irrationally in the heat of the moment, but mostly they are strategic in their interactions with officials, at least to the point of some degree of impression management. The team captains interviewed all attend to what they perceive to be the preferences and characteristics of officials, as part of what Goffman (1959) would describe as their “definition of the situation” or the “line” people bring to interaction. They modify their approach according to their perceptions of the official and the “social occasion” (Goffman, 1959) or situation. Player attitudes were found to range from fatalistic acceptance of whatever the official decides, through selective challenge and complaint, to opportunistic, alert to any display of official weakness. Players both deliberately and unconsciously use strategies such as complaining, criticism, challenging, questioning and flattery or praise to influence officials.

The methodology used in this research helps give a richer understanding of the ways players perceive officials and what they bring to interactions, than would be usually obtained with positivist approaches (*e.g.*, scaled responses to officiating communication characteristics or traits). With that said, the information generated by this research could be used to develop quantitative instruments that examine patterns in player perceptions and the influence of variables such as gender, sport and culture. However, the researchers here believe that the next stage of interaction research should focus on understanding and articulating characteristics of different types of player-official interactions. There were a few limitations to the research that should be considered. A small number of interviewees were chosen from each sport ( $n = 2$ ), thus we should be careful inferring differences between sports. While many video elicitation studies have preferred to present complete encounters with participants reflecting on their own interactions, this study used a ‘thin-slicing’ technique to present video excerpts of familiar stimuli as the basis for discussion. Although the complete interaction approach permits access to the reported thoughts of the interactants, it can encourage presentation of more socially desirable selves. The method used here enabled

interpretation by uninvolved, experienced third parties, without leading the interviewees to comment on possibly player anti-social attitudes and motives.

Forewarned may be forearmed. This information about player differences is useful for officiating communication and interaction education and training, specifically to help officials monitor, recognise, anticipate, interpret and manage sport situations and interactions they encounter. Police training addresses officer attitudes and comprehension of criminal behaviour as *schema*, or the beliefs and mindset that guide interpretation and use of social information including goals and motivations in social settings (Blagden, 2012). Sport officials can develop more sophisticated schema about player behaviour and interaction, as their communication relies on the ability to make sense of others’ actions and intentions to interact in more effective or impactful ways. Such training may focus on improving observation and interpretive skills for social cues, and reflexivity to different types of encounters with players in relation to game context. Burleson (2007) generally and Simmons and Cunningham (2013) with specific reference to sport officiating, have suggested that communication training address the “unspoken” in interactions.

Finally, several players in this research said that respectfulness from officials is favourable in interactions [I2-I4, I6, I8-I11]. This is consistent with previous studies reporting that players prefer officials to be respectful. An interview study found that footballers prefer officials to be personable and accountable (Simmons, 2011) and other studies show players rate respect as an influential cue in forming impressions about the competence of sport officials (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2014) and that insensitive communication from officials can trigger a performance crises in players (Bar Eli, *et al.*, 1995). Future research should explore if the preference for respectfulness is due in part to interaction enabling players an opportunity to influence officials. According to Goffman (1967), “...ceremonial rules [of deference and demeanor] play their social function, for many of the acts which are guided by these rules last but a brief moment, involve no substantive outlay, and can be performed in every social interaction” (p. 90). These findings deepen our understanding of the balance – between authority, accountability and respectfulness – that characterises effective communication and interaction with players.

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