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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

2 Communication and player management is clearly central
 3 to effective sport officiating yet it has received little re-
 4 search attention from officiating scholars when compared
 5 to physical demands (Caballero, Ojeda, Garcia-Aranda,
 6 Mallo, Helsen, Sarmiento, Navarro, & Gardia-Manso,
 7 2011; Weston, Castagna, Helsen, & Impellizzeri, 2009),
 8 stress and coping (Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Voight, 2009),
 9 and decision-making (MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes, &
 10 Weston, 2007; Mascarenhas, Collins, Mortimer, & Morris,
 11 2005). Communication training in most contexts begins

with improving understanding of those with whom we 12
 communicate, however we have little knowledge of player 13
 perspectives in their interactions with officials. The few 14
 studies available on officiating communication show that 15
 officials attempt to influence social order (Fruchart & 16
 Carton, 2012; Snyder & Purdy, 1987) and players’ percep- 17
 tions of fairness and acceptance of decisions through par- 18
 ticular communication styles (Mellick, Bull, Laugharne, 19
 & Fleming, 2005; Simmons, 2009, 2010). Officials also use 20
 a range of preventative techniques to avoid sanctioning 21
 players or minimise player anger (Mascarenhas, Collins, 22
 & Mortimer, 2005; Simmons, 2006). English Premier 23

1 football referees report using certain strategies and skills
 2 to manage game activities including reading player and
 3 manager body language and behaviour, building trust
 4 and rapport with players and managers through active
 5 listening and displays of empathy, using players’ and man-
 6 agers’ language and engaging in “banter”, and addressing
 7 players by first name and shirt number (Slack, Maynard,
 8 Butt, & Olusoga, 2013). Skilful officiating communica-
 9 tion and game management arguably require higher-order
 10 capacities, competencies, and interpersonal skills. Emo-
 11 tional intelligence (Nikbakhsh, Alam, & Monazami, 2013)
 12 and social competence (Carlsson, 2006) have been linked
 13 to officiating communication and performance effective-
 14 ness; however there has been few attempts to explore
 15 these concepts in the officiating context.

16 An interview study with officiating development man-
 17 agers and performance coaches at peak Australian sport
 18 bodies highlighted the importance of interactive com-
 19 munication skills for effective communication and player
 20 management in sport officiating (Cunningham, Simmons,
 21 Mascarenhas, & Redhead, 2014). Interviewees were found
 22 to conceptualise communication and player manage-
 23 ment as a composite of *personal qualities* officials ex-
 24 hibit (personality characteristics and traits), mastery of
 25 *one-way communication* techniques (impression manage-
 26 ment, body language, whistle/flag/voice use and other
 27 directive behaviours), *monitoring situations* (reading and
 28 interpreting people and situations) and use of *skilled in-*
 29 *teraction* (the ability to adapt and interact appropriately
 30 to people and situation). The interviewees consistently
 31 said that one-way communication was relatively easy to
 32 train, that personal qualities were difficult to influence,
 33 and that, importantly, the two most crucial aspects of
 34 communication – situation monitoring and skilled inter-
 35 action – were the most difficult to train (Cunningham,
 36 *et al.*, 2014). Communication theorist Bursleson (2007)
 37 says that to become a skilled communicator in a par-
 38 ticular context, people should prioritise observing and
 39 interpreting the unspoken aspects of interactions, includ-
 40 ing internal states (attitudes, mood) and goals or moti-
 41 vations (intent, desires) of others. Recognising deceptive
 42 intentions by players aimed at influencing officials is an
 43 important factor in their perceptual and decision mak-
 44 ing skills (Dosseville, Laborde, & Garncerzyk, 2013; Lex,
 45 Pizzera, Kurtes, & Schack, 2014; Morris & Lewis, 2010).
 46 Thus a better understanding of the ability to read and
 47 interpret people and situations should enable officials to
 48 respond more appropriately to the requirements of dif-
 49 ferent situations and communicate and adjudicate more
 50 carefully and effectively.

51 Most studies on sport official communication have
 52 used officials’ perspectives (*e.g.*, Cunningham, Mellick,
 53 Mascarenhas, & Fleming, 2012; Simmons, 2006; Slack,
 54 *et al.*, 2013) and a transmission model of communication
 55 (see, for example, Berlo, 1960) that focuses on impres-
 56 sion management and decision communication, or ways
 57 officials can shape others’ attitudes about them and their
 58 decisions (Dosseville, Laborde, & Bernier, 2014; Mellick,

et al., 2005; Simmons, 2009, 2010). In developing strate-
 59 gies and advice for effective officiating practice and in-
 60 teraction skills, it makes good sense to explore the in-
 61 put of officials and to capture and communicate lessons
 62 from their experience. However, communication is most
 63 effective when interactants are sensitive to the perspec-
 64 tives and preferences of other participants (Blagden,
 65 2012; Bursleson, 2007). While there is some research
 66 (*e.g.*, Dosseville, *et al.*, 2012; Simmons 2010, 2011) that
 67 provides exception by surveying or interviewing players,
 68 most officiating research has gathered data from officials.
 69 To date, there is little knowledge about players’ percep-
 70 tions and perspectives of officials and their communica-
 71 tion, or their attitudes and experience in interaction and
 72 encounters with officials. This study deliberately sought
 73 to explore the perspective of players in interactions with
 74 officials.

75 One study that explored the players’ perspective of
 76 sport official behaviour and communication showed that
 77 officials influence players’ in-game psychology and per-
 78 formance. It suggested that officials’ “unnecessary words
 79 or actions” or lack of clarity in player expectancies can
 80 evoke a “performance crisis state” in players (Bar-Eli,
 81 Levy-Kolker, Pie, & Tenenbaum, 1995). Other studies
 82 that explore players’ perspectives of officials have used
 83 organisational justice theories and fairness heuristics as
 84 frames for understanding players’ perceptions and reac-
 85 tions to fairness and unfairness in officials (Faccenda,
 86 Pantaléon, & Reynes, 2009; Simmons, 2010, 2011). Stud-
 87 ies have shown that players are more likely to perceive
 88 officials’ decisions to be correct when they provide an
 89 explanation and communicate decisions in a calm tone
 90 (Simmons, 2010), and officials to be more fair when
 91 they perceive the official to be competent, dependable,
 92 and respectful (Simmons, 2011). Players use particular
 93 fixed (age, physique), psychological (honesty, politeness,
 94 respect), performance (experience, technical skills) and
 95 communication cues (verbal expression, listening skills)
 96 in officials to formulate impressions about their compe-
 97 tence (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2012).

98 Previous explorations of players’ attitudes to officials
 99 have tended to focus on identifying more and less favor-
 100 able ways officials can present themselves, rather than ex-
 101 ploring ways that officials might become more responsive
 102 to different player behaviours and reactions. Studies have
 103 found that player differences in *sensitivity to injustice* in
 104 officiating predict their moral functioning and likelihood
 105 to adopt transgressive or anti-social behavior (Faccenda
 106 *et al.*, 2009), and that individuals differ in the *intention*
 107 *to argue* officiating decisions according to age, nation-
 108 ality and level of play (Simmons, 2009). These findings
 109 evidence player differences in their responses to differ-
 110 ent contextual and official factors, and Simmons (2009)
 111 recommended further study to explore characteristics of
 112 players most likely to argue with officials, including pref-
 113 erences, dislikes and other triggers for such responses. Re-
 114 search to date (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2012; Simmons 2010,
 115 2011) tends to generalise about the players’ view of sport
 116

1 officials as if players were homogeneous, or that all players
 2 view officials similarly. Consequently, this study explores
 3 and identifies differences in player approaches to interact-
 4 ing with officials.

5 Officiating can learn from other occupational and pro-
 6 fessional fields where communication studies are more es-
 7 tablished and advanced. Some fields have used the dra-
 8 maturgical sociology ideas of Erving Goffman to explore
 9 interactions. Goffman (1959, 1967) provides concepts and
 10 vocabulary to better understand complexities in human
 11 interaction and face-to-face behaviour that may help to
 12 explain player-official interaction. Using dramaturgical
 13 concepts, he detailed less-observable dynamics of routine,
 14 everyday interpersonal behaviour including how people
 15 attempt to save and accommodate “face” in interaction
 16 (Goffman, 1967). He was interested in performance as-
 17 pects of self in interpersonal encounters as impression
 18 management and ways we ritually “give”, or “give off”
 19 certain impressions that express our perception of oth-
 20 ers, and definition of situations. Two of Goffman’s pop-
 21 ular concepts, ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’, describe
 22 parts of an individual’s social interaction which func-
 23 tion in general, fixed or adaptive fashion in the pres-
 24 ence of others. These ideas have been used to under-
 25 stand interaction in institutional and professional settings
 26 such as sport coaching (Wilson, 2013), restorative jus-
 27 tice conferences (Bruce, 2013), and medical professional
 28 discourse with patients (Barton, 2004). From this per-
 29 spective, ‘communication’ focuses on the meaning con-
 30 structed from and through interactions, and therefore
 31 directly addresses the variety of “*motivational, strate-
 32 gic, behavioural, attributional and evaluative components
 33 that interactants impose on their own communication ex-
 34 perience*” (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, p. 11).
 35 Goffman’s ideas serve to pattern communicative events,
 36 and view communication for the professional as “*an ef-
 37 fort to give the appearance that his activity in the region
 38 maintains and embodies certain standards*” (Bruce, 2013,
 39 p.107). These are important ethical, institutional and pro-
 40 fessional considerations when thinking about and study-
 41 ing player-official interaction and officiating communi-
 42 cation and player management.

43 This exploratory study aims to provide new insights
 44 into player attitudes and motivations in their interac-
 45 tion with officials that might help officials to interact,
 46 lead and respond more effectively with players. The study
 47 uses video elicitation interviewing to explore players’ at-
 48 titudes, motivations and strategies in interactions with
 49 officials. It uses an interpretive analysis to understand
 50 player-official interaction, drawing on constructivism,
 51 symbolic interactionism and concepts of Goffman (1959,
 52 1967) about interaction and presentation of self. It draws
 53 on communication research from other occupational and
 54 professional settings such as nursing (Shattell, 2004),
 55 policing (Giles, *et al.*, 1991; Sanders, 1979), teaching
 56 (Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 1998), and customer
 57 service (Baker, Magnini, & Perdue, 2012) to under-
 58 stand different ways players manage impressions and

communication in interactions with officials. We were 59
 conscious of the pioneering nature of the study, and did 60
 not know what to expect to find. In a spirit of inquiry 61
 we posed two broad questions to guide our qualitative 62
 exploration: 63

RQ #1: What are players’ motivations and intentions 64
 in interactions with officials? 65

RQ #2: How do players differ in the ways they at- 66
 tempt to influence officials? 67

2 Method 68

2.1 Participants 69

Eleven sport team captains were the study participants. 70
 Captains had current representation with Australian national 71
 (n = 2), professional (n = 3), semi-professional 72
 (higher competitive level than amateur and some finan- 73
 cial compensation; n = 3) and amateur (n = 3) sport 74
 clubs and teams. A range of competitive levels and sport 75
 codes were chosen to represent a greater variety of com- 76
 munication cultures and performance characteristics and 77
 demands of participants. Participants were captains in 78
 six different types of “interactor” (Plessner & MacMahon, 79
 2013) team sport codes including soccer, rugby union, 80
 rugby league, hockey, basketball and netball. Players in 81
 a team captaincy role were purposefully chosen as these 82
 types of sports require the captain to engage frequently 83
 with officials about rule interpretation, game procedures 84
 and other aspects of player behaviour. Captains are for- 85
 mally expected help orientate other team members to 86
 group performance goals and collaborate with coaches to 87
 facilitate role information exchange among team members 88
 (Eys, Schinke & Jeffery, 2007). It may be an assumption 89
 that those in a captaincy role adequately represent the 90
 “normal” player view, however we anticipated here that 91
 investigating “high interactors”, from “interactor” sports 92
 would provide richer data (Patton, 2002). Captains rep- 93
 resent a *third person perspective* (Davis, 1997) as both 94
 a sport participant and as an active and anonymous 95
 observer of game interactions. A third-person perspec- 96
 tive was used as a research strategy as it helps to ex- 97
 plore what people might not want to reveal about them- 98
 selves and interactions, but are open to divulging as a 99
 co-participant/observer of such interactions. 100

Ethics approval was first gained from the principal re- 101
 searcher’s university ethics committee. Once criteria were 102
 established for the sample (*i.e.*, captain, interactor sports, 103
 minimum 2 seasons captaincy) a mixture of convenience 104
 and snowball sampling yielded 8 male and 3 female cap- 105
 tains with a mean age of 25.5 years. Contact with players 106
 was made through game and competition development 107
 managers who assisted in the recruitment of captains by 108
 distributing a participation request to sport teams/clubs. 109
 Other captains were recruited via direct contact based on 110
 their accessibility and proximity to the researcher’s home 111
 institution. Some professional, semi-professional and am- 112
 ateur interviewees were also recruited through existing 113

1 participants who helped to provide access to other cap- 54
 2 tains. Once interest to participate was established, cap- 55
 3 tains were contacted and requested to be interviewed 56
 4 about their “views and attitudes about sport officials and 57
 5 player-official game interactions”. A letter of information 58
 6 and informed consent were provided in advance to in- 59
 7 form captains about the extent of their participation and 60
 8 ensure confidentiality for themselves, and their affiliated 61
 9 sport club. 62

10 **2.2 Design**

11 Video elicitation (*e.g.*, Henry & Fetters, 2012; Heath, 63
 12 Luff, & Svensson, 2007) within semi-structured inter- 64
 13 views with participants was chosen as the research de- 65
 14 sign. Video elicitation is a technique used in training 66
 15 health practitioners to stimulate thought and discussion 67
 16 about trainees’ associated appraisals, beliefs, and emo- 68
 17 tions attached to their consultation experience with pa- 69
 18 tients (Henry & Fetters, 2012). For the purposes of the 70
 19 current study, a video elicitation technique was adapted 71
 20 by using sport examples of player-official interactions in- 72
 21 stead of actual video of the participant. It allows for 73
 22 participants to bring their own language to explaining 74
 23 and describing their sporting experiences. An interview 75
 24 guide was developed and used in combination with video- 76
 25 based stimulus to get participants talking about player- 77
 26 official interactions and trigger discussion by getting them 78
 27 thinking and talking about their personal experience and 79
 28 observation. 80

29 The purpose of using this research method was to 81
 30 provide participants with observational stimulus of famil- 82
 31 iar or typical (and less familiar) video examples of sport 83
 32 and player-official interaction situations. The use of video 84
 33 examples in semi-structured interviews provided a “thin- 85
 34 slicing” approach to exploring communicative exchanges 86
 35 between players and officials. Video vignettes provide a 87
 36 set of representative and rich, visual and audio exam- 88
 37 ples of game interactions that capture important verbal 89
 38 and non-verbal cues, dialogue and different players-official 90
 39 encounters and exchanges. Studies in others fields have 91
 40 used similar methods to explore police and public citi- 92
 41 zen interactions (Engel, Sobol, & Worden, 2000) and in 93
 42 the effectiveness of health consultation between patients 94
 43 and medical specialists (Pappas & Seale, 2009). Other 95
 44 approaches used by social constructionist and symbolic 96
 45 interactional research used to analyse and interpret ev- 97
 46 eryday public and private communicative practices uses 98
 47 ethnography, discourse analysis, participant observation 99
 48 (Goffman, 1981) and conversation analysis (Hutchby & 100
 49 Wooffitt, 1998). 101

50 **2.3 Vignette selection and operationalising sport**
 51 **official interactions**

52 Player-official interactions were sampled from soccer, 102
 53 rugby union, rugby league, basketball, netball and hockey. 103

Video footage was collected to represent elite (*e.g.*, 54
 Olympics, International Rugby Union, FIFA World Cup), 55
 professional (*e.g.*, European Hockey League, English Pre- 56
 miership) and semi-professional or amateur levels (*e.g.*, 57
 club, state, district). Recordings were collected from an 58
 online public video forum (www.youtube.com) based on 59
 particular study criteria. One set of recordings of interac- 60
 tion situations (or episodes) between officials and players 61
 were used with all participants. Participants were pre- 62
 sented vignettes of their own sport and other “interactor” 63
 sport types (Plessner & MacMahon, 2013). Recordings of 64
 vignettes (soccer = 2, hockey *n* = 2, netball = 1, basket- 65
 ball = 2, rugby union = 2, rugby league = 2), ranged in 66
 elapsed time from 3 and 15 seconds and were randomly 67
 arranged so that all participants would watch the clips 68
 in the same order. All interviewees said they were mostly 69
 familiar with all sports used in vignettes. 70

Selection criteria for interaction instances used in 71
 video stimulus was informed by previous research on offi- 72
 ciating communication, and other fields that study inter- 73
 action from the perspective of those who receive health 74
 (patient to nurse or doctor), educational (teacher to stu- 75
 dent) and professional services (*e.g.*, citizen to police, 76
 customer to service provider). Selected examples of in- 77
 terpersonal encounters and exchanges between officials 78
 and players included initial encounters and impressions 79
 (clips showed players and officials first meetings prior to 80
 game start; Simmons, 2011; Thatcher, 2005), displays 81
 of procedural or interactional justice and communica- 82
 tion of decisions (clips showed officials delivering deci- 83
 sion explanations or rule interpretations; Mellick, *et al.*, 84
 2005; Simmons, 2009; 2010), displays of officiating cues 85
 that players use to form expectations about their compe- 86
 tence (clips were shown different types of officiating styles 87
 and verbal or non-verbal expression; Dosseville, *et al.*, 88
 2012), and instances of interpersonal conflict between 89
 players where officials intervene (Mascarenhas, O’Hare, 90
 & Plessner, 2006), or where players are arguing with 91
 officials (Faccenda, *et al.*, 2009; Simmons, 2009) or be- 92
 ing “difficult” (clips showed players infringing officials’ 93
 personal space, repeatedly questioning or complaining; 94
 Baker, *et al.*, 2012; Shattell, 2004; Velazquez, Contri, 95
 Saura, & Blasco, 2006). Researchers ensured a balance 96
 in types of interaction across video clips. 97

104 **2.4 Semi-structured interviews** 98

A semi-structured interview approach was used to (a) ex- 99
 100 plore players’ attitudes about player-official interaction 101
 102 and (b) to allow participants to reflect and recount on 103
 104 their own sport experience to expand and elaborate on 105
 106 these responses (Maxwell, 2002). Several issues about the 107
 108 interaction situations depicted in video vignettes were 109
 discussed with participants. Discussion topics included 110
 the nature of the interaction situation/occasion, interper- 111
 sonal style or approaches used by players and officials, 112
 possible antecedents, consequences or alternative courses 113

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” (Burleson, 2007)	What were you noticing about the approaches people were taking within interactions? (<i>video</i>) What approaches or styles do you prefer in officials? From your experience, in what ways do players respond differently to different officiating styles? What ways can officials interact with players to better gain cooperation and acceptance in their decisions, or authority?
Nature of interaction situation or “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959) “Message reception” and “Message production” (Burleson, 2007)	What is going on here in this interaction? (<i>video</i>) What is happening for the player in this situation? (<i>video</i>) What are your impressions of the officials’ actions to this point? (<i>video</i>) What particular messages are the player and official trying to send each other in this situation? (<i>video</i>) What are different ways that other players might react or respond to officials in similar situations that you’ve seen in your sport? What are different types of interaction situations that arise during games? What are likely future consequences of similar types of interaction for both the player and official?
Unspoken goals, intentions and motivations in interaction (Burleson, 2007; Goffman, 1959, 1967)	What is this player trying to accomplish in this interaction? (<i>video</i>) What might be going on in the mind of the player here? (<i>video</i>) As a captain, how do you try and present yourself to officials? What do players wish for from officials? What are players seeking to achieve in interactions with officials? What types of impressions do players usually present to officials? How do players differ in their acceptance of authority in officials? What are ways that players can act with officials to gain an advantage or influence them? How do personal or game factors influence how players might interact differently with officials? From your experience, how do players or teams attempt to influence officiating decisions?

1 of the encounter, and unspoken goals and motivations of
 2 players. An interview schedule (Tab. 1) was developed us-
 3 ing Goffman’s (1959, 1967) dramaturgical sociology con-
 4 cepts and Burleson’s (2007) constructivist view of com-
 5 munication skills to give a way to explore participants’
 6 attitudes about video vignettes and general perspectives
 7 on what players and officials bring to and influence inter-
 8 actions. Many of the later questions listed in the schedule
 9 were not asked because interviewees raised pertinent mat-
 10 ters without prompting. Researchers were conscious that
 11 the topic of player-official encounters and interactions can
 12 manifest differently depending on competitive level and
 13 sport based on rule structures, norms and consequences of
 14 such interactions. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for
 15 trustworthiness in qualitative research were considered.
 16 Researchers had extensive experience of qualitative inter-
 17 viewing projects with sport officials, sport administrators,
 18 coaches and players. The presentation and introduction
 19 of video vignettes was designed to avoid leading the par-
 20 ticipants. They were asked by the researcher following the
 21 interview if they wished to change or restate any of their
 22 responses that might not have been clear. Researchers
 23 made clear recordings of interviews and transcribed them.

They listened again to recordings and checked transcrip- 24
 tions. 25

2.5 Data analysis 26

Research questions were used to structure the organiza- 27
 tion and categorisation of data. The theoretical concepts 28
 of Goffman (1959, 1967) and Burleson (2007) were used as 29
 an analytical frame to interpret interview data. This was 30
 achieved with a multiple-phase data-verification process 31
 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involved, first, the researcher 32
 gaining familiarity with the data by reading and reread- 33
 ing each interview transcript. Next, transcriptions were 34
 examined for words, phrases, descriptions, and examples 35
 that indicated player “motivations” and “intentions” in 36
 interactions and ways they influence interactions. These 37
 fragments were coded with a meaning label and then 38
 grouped and thematised manually using an Excel spread- 39
 sheet. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), themes 40
 that were identifiably consistent with previous research, 41
 and the focus of this inquiry, were organised as narrative 42
 responses to the research questions. Quotes and examples 43
 are used to help communicate the findings. 44

1 **3 Findings and discussion**

2 The aims of the interviews and study here were two-
 3 fold. First we sought to explore player perspectives on in-
 4 teractions with officials, especially concerning what they
 5 aim to achieve and see other players seek to accomplish
 6 through interactions. Second, we aimed to understand
 7 ways that players deliberately or unconsciously influence
 8 interactions with officials. The following sections present
 9 and interpret the findings and themes that emerged from
 10 the study through Goffman’s (1959, 1967) dramaturgical
 11 sociology and use of communication research from offici-
 12 ating and other fields.

13 **3.1 RQ #1: What are players’ motivations**
 14 **and intentions in interactions with officials?**

15 This section reports motivations and intentions for play-
 16 ers in interactions with officials that include actively at-
 17 tempting to influence officials to favour one’s own team,
 18 attempting to ensure that officials are “even-handed”
 19 insofar as they do not favour their opponents, and not
 20 attempting to influence officials’ decisions at all. Intervie-
 21 wees said that players, while at times react irrationally to
 22 officials and their decisions, are generally strategic in their
 23 interactions with officials. Even the least strategically
 24 minded players tend to avoid unnecessarily antagonising
 25 officials. In Goffman’s (1959) terms, people’s motivations
 26 and intentions in interactions are strongly influenced by
 27 their perceived “definition of the situation” (p. 21). Their
 28 definition of the situation helps to give interactions a
 29 type of coherence. Among interviewees it was common to
 30 adapt motivations and intentions to their own definition
 31 of the situation, particularly their perceptions of the of-
 32 ficial they are interacting with. One interviewee reported
 33 reluctance to influence officials unless they feel that it is
 34 necessary to correct and imbalance in the official’s deci-
 35 sions:

36 *“The umpire wasn’t calling it, and this was a ter-
 37 rible thing for me to do, but I sort of yelled out,
 38 not directly, but I spoke aloud on purpose to an-
 39 other player, “Look at that goal attack, she’s got
 40 a hold every time!” and then it went down to the
 41 other end the umpire called that after I said it”.
 42 My intentions of her seeing me upset and hearing
 43 it would be to ‘even up the game” [I10].*

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

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

Most revealed that they are opportunistic, willing to in- 54
 fluence officials and their decisions in favour of their own 55
 team, if they perceive a chance to do so: 56

57 *“If you’re going to be my friend, if you’re refer-
 58 eeing me and you’re calling me by my name, I’ll
 59 probably talk to you more and try to influence your
 60 decisions a bit more” [I5].*

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

72 Players in this study also reported that more friendly 72
 interaction from officials can be an opportunity to influ- 73
 ence officials and their decisions through suggestion, rep- 74
 etition or challenge. Interviewees from rugby union and 75
 rugby league said familiarity with officials outside games 76
 can be a benefit to the quality of in-game encounters 77
 and interaction or boundaries (*e.g.*, engaging in friendly 78
 “banter”, joking). Elite football referees report that they 79
 use communication skills such as “banter” to develop rap- 80
 port and establish trust with players (Slack, *et al.*, 2013). 81
 A number of interviewees from netball and hockey said 82
 that players can “get it in their head” [I2, I6] that an of- 83
 ficial doesn’t like them that can influence the quality of 84
 interactions. Imbalance in power within relationships be- 85
 tween officials and players in interactions can be maladapt- 86
 ive and lead to a game atmosphere of frustration and 87
 agitation that translate to aggressiveness between play- 88
 ers (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2014) and resistance to officials 89
 and their decisions (Faccenda, *et al.*, 2009). Insensitivity 90
 from officials in their communication of decisions was also 91
 reported to be a trigger for players’ performance “crisis” 92
 during games (Bar Eli, *et al.*, 1995). 93

94 Interviewees who participated at higher levels of com- 94
 petitive sport said that officials can develop reputations 95
 that can often provide information for players about how 96
 they should adapt their play and interaction to fit the 97
 official. More often in this study, captains from soccer, 98
 rugby union, rugby league, basketball and netball dis- 99
 cussed visible official displays in interactions, especially 100
 displays of weakness or uncertainty, that would influence 101
 their intentions and motivations in subsequent interac- 102
 tions. Interviewees used labels such as “weak” [I1-4, I9, 103
 I11] or “overly friendly” [I4-5, I8, I11] and said these type 104
 of officials were seen to be more easily influenced, while 105
 “firm or authoritarian” [I2, I4, I9-11] or “confident au- 106
 thoritarian” [I5] officials required a different interaction 107
 approach. Some interviewees said that players can de- 108
 velop an increased awareness to the personality traits of 109

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

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

8 Goffman (1959, 1967) said people try to present them-
9 selves in favourable ways to others for various purposes. In
10 hospitals, patients may use flattery with nurses as a way
11 to “save face”, or to maintain a degree of autonomy and
12 self-esteem (Shattell, 2004). Similarly, many team cap-
13 tains interviewed here said that players can alter the way
14 they interact to fit the type of refereeing style they per-
15 ceive, using praise or intermittent criticism, or by being
16 overly respectful or positive. There are some impressions
17 that captains generally wish to project to officials, such as
18 appearing “reasonable” [I2], “neutral” [I1-I2, I5], “knowl-
19 edgeable” [I5, I9], “calm” [I1, I5-6, I9] and “in-control” of
20 self and players’ [I2, I5, I9]. One professional rugby union
21 captain captured a common sentiment when he said that
22 he wished to be seen to be as a “communication chan-
23 nel” [I2] between the official and other players.

24 Several interviewees indicated concern not to be per-
25 ceived to be difficult or disrespectful, and that deciding
26 how often to interact with officials and what to interact
27 over is an important impression management decision.
28 They emphasised the importance of being selective about
29 what issues to approach officials with because a good re-
30 lationship with officials is useful when managing decisions
31 against their team:

32 *“You gotta sort of pick your battles about what to*
33 *talk to the referee about. You want to avoid being*
34 *seen as a nuisance to the referee about something*
35 *that really isn’t important. You’ll never really get*
36 *them on your side. If there is an area of the game*
37 *you are getting penalised for repeatedly, that might*
38 *be where you take the time to go to the referee* [I3].
39 *You have to be selective when you interact with the*
40 *umpire: the times when you go up to them and ask*
41 *what for. A lot of people just go up and complain*
42 *about everything they think is wrong. In the grand*
43 *scheme of things you don’t want to hassle the ref-*
44 *eree, but some things should be heard”* [I7].

45 The interactions between officials and players are com-
46 plex, and influences and manifestations can be both
47 distinct and subtle. Goffman’s (1959) notion of the “back-
48 stage” as the space where individuals are not being eval-
49 uated by an audience, and free from the judgement and
50 interpretations of others, is useful for understanding some
51 of the complexity. The backstage enables one to prepare
52 “face-work” impressions for future encounters, to ensure a
53 presentation of self remains intact, and that one’s identity
54 does not become discredited or stigmatized (Goffman,
55 1959, 1967). A later interpretation of front and back stage
56 emphasized “linking together communicative events, pro-
57 viding a means by which inter-subjective stances can

build up an identity across interactions” (Wilson, 2013, 58
p. 182), rather than two distinct physical spaces or “re- 59
gions” of social behaviour, as Goffman’s work originally 60
suggested. Some interviewees described interpretations of 61
officials in “front-stage” interactions that were influenced 62
by “backstage” dialogue between players: 63

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

73 Wilson’s (2013) adaptation of Goffman’s (1959) front 74
and back stage is useful in accounting for some of the un- 75
seen and the indirect contributors to the complexity of of- 76
ficial and player interactions. This section has articulated 77
some of the often unspoken motivations and intentions 78
that players bring to interactions with officials. The next 79
section explores the ways that players attempt to shape 80
and influence interactions with officials.

3.2 RQ #2: How do players differ in the ways 81 that they attempt to influence officials? 82

83 This section describes ways that players can attempt 84
to influence officials through deliberate, planned, oppor- 85
tunistic or unconscious interpersonal strategies. Interview- 86
ees said that players actively influence officials, and by 87
implication their decisions, by openly challenging or ques- 88
tioning as well as less direct means, such as exhibiting 89
“desirable” personality traits:

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

97 The interviews revealed a spectrum of approaches to in- 98
fluencing officials through interactions. Some players and 99
teams use subtle and indirect approaches, while others 100
are more confronting, applying pressure by overwhelming 101
or surrounding officials through infringing personal space. 102
A frequently described type of overt behaviour used by 103
players was said to be complaining or questioning. Play- 104
ers can use complaints to pressure officials or attempt to 105
get officials to change decisions to a less severe infraction 106
to their team. Complaints can be genuinely felt by the 107
complainant player, but they can also be manufactured 108
to influence future decisions or reduce the punishment:

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

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

4 A study of complaint behaviour in customer service
 5 found the primary determinants of complaints were cus-
 6 tomers’ degree of dissatisfaction, attitudes towards com-
 7 plaining, importance of situation, and probability of suc-
 8 cess (Velazquez, *et al.*, 2006). People can have different
 9 reasons to complain, which are influenced by both per-
 10 sonal and situational factors. In sport, Simmons (2009)
 11 showed that players differ in their intention to argue of-
 12 ficiating decisions by nationality, age and level of com-
 13 petition. Interviewees said some players are natural com-
 14 plainers and have a reputation for complaining, others
 15 saw complaining as one means for players to intimidate
 16 and assert dominance over officials:

17 *“Players can influence officials through pressure,*
 18 *just continual pressure. If the referee doesn’t pe-*
 19 *nalise a player for how you speak to them, or try*
 20 *to intimidate them, you got the referee bluffed” [I3].*
 21 *“A player can influence an official through intimid-*
 22 *ation and influence through being positive with*
 23 *the referee. But, I think the player that intimidates*
 24 *and doesn’t get penalised for intimidating can have*
 25 *more of an effect on the official than someone who*
 26 *respects them and addresses them more positively”*
 27 *[I8].*

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

31 *Sometimes just asking questions can allow your*
 32 *team to get set-up; it’s a tactical thing. While the*
 33 *official is busy explaining some law to you, your*
 34 *guys are already onside [I3].*
 35 *You get tired out there. A few questions about the*
 36 *last play with the ref that slows down play is a good*
 37 *way to catch your breath” [I9].*

38 One interviewee said that when officials facilitate the flow
 39 of play by giving a “running commentary” [I6], they lessen
 40 the amount of questioning. Interviewees also shared more
 41 indirect strategies that players can engage in to influence
 42 officials. When captains have to interact with an official,
 43 other players’ displays of frustration or verbal comments
 44 to their captain were thought to be a way to make the
 45 official aware of growing player frustrations. One netball
 46 captain described the ways captains and players can at-
 47 tempt to manipulate emotions of the official, if they are
 48 perceived to lack confidence or a particular game pres-
 49 ence:

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

If I have to speak with the ref, I’ll be standing here 55
[points to himself] and you’re the ref, and my half- 56
back is here [points beside him] and he’ll go “Can 57
you tell the ref this and that”. It isn’t actually to 58
me, it is really to him. I reckon the good ref ignores 59
that a lot of the time, but I do feel many take it 60
on and nine times out of ten you’ll see it in their 61
decisions after” [I4]. 62

Other subtle ways to influence were to direct officials’
 attention to particular aspects of the game, without con-
 veying 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 direc-
 tion:

“If you think about the psychology of any person, 70
if you mention something enough they’ll look at it. 71
So to get into the head of the ref, you don’t have 72
to tell them what’s going wrong, you just have to 73
tell him to look at something [I4]. 74
They want to be told they are doing a good job. Un- 75
less you are thick skinned, no one wants to be crit- 76
icised. You either learn from your mistake or you 77
think that person is just trying to get into my head. 78
If you criticise someone enough and they change 79
the way they do something because they don’t want 80
to be criticised again then you have influenced the 81
outcome or you’ve influence the way someone ref- 82
erees” [I7]. 83

Sometimes influence starts before the game and with-
 out 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 re-
 puted 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 interview-
 ees 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., 2012; Plessner & MacMahon, 2013) categorise of-
 ficiating across sports based on proximity to players, fre-
 quency 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 offi-
 cials 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.

1 **4 Conclusions**

2 This research explored player motivations and intentions
 3 in interactions with sport officials, and ways they at-
 4 tempt to influence officials. It provides new insights into
 5 player differences in interactions with officials, building
 6 on previous research that assumed players to be ho-
 7 mogeneous and communication as one-way (Dosseville,
 8 *et al.*, 2012; Simmons, 2010). Dramaturgical sociology
 9 (Goffman, 1959, 1967) provides a useful framework of
 10 concepts and vocabulary for building understanding of
 11 communication and interaction in sport officiating. Some
 12 players use their interactions with officials to influence
 13 them. Other players attempt to ensure that officials are
 14 “even-handed”, at least to the point of not favouring their
 15 opponents, while some do not attempt to influence offi-
 16 cials’ decisions at all. This research found that players
 17 do behave irrationally in the heat of the moment, but
 18 mostly they are strategic in their interactions with offi-
 19 cials, at least to the point of some degree of impression
 20 management. The team captains interviewed all attend
 21 to what they perceive to be the preferences and char-
 22 acteristics of officials, as part of what Goffman (1959)
 23 would describe as their “definition of the situation” or the
 24 “line” people bring to interaction. They modify their ap-
 25 proach according to their perceptions of the official and
 26 the “social occasion” (Goffman, 1959) or situation. Player
 27 attitudes were found to range from fatalistic acceptance
 28 of whatever the official decides, through selective chal-
 29 lenge and complaint, to opportunistic, alert to any dis-
 30 play of official weakness. Players both deliberately and
 31 unconsciously use strategies such as complaining, criti-
 32 cism, challenging, questioning and flattery or praise to
 33 influence officials.

34 The methodology used in this research helps give a
 35 richer understanding of the ways players perceive offi-
 36 cials and what they bring to interactions, than would be
 37 usually obtained with positivist approaches (*e.g.*, scaled
 38 responses to officiating communication characteristics or
 39 traits). With that said, the information generated by this
 40 research could be used to develop quantitative instru-
 41 ments that examine patterns in player perceptions and
 42 the influence of variables such as gender, sport and cul-
 43 ture. However, the researchers here believe that the next
 44 stage of interaction research should focus on understand-
 45 ing and articulating characteristics of different types of
 46 player-official interactions. There were a few limitations
 47 to the research that should be considered. A small number
 48 of interviewees were chosen from each sport ($n = 2$), thus
 49 we should be careful inferring differences between sports.
 50 While many video elicitation studies have preferred to
 51 present complete encounters with participants reflecting
 52 on their own interactions, this study used a ‘thin-slicing’
 53 technique to present video excerpts of familiar stimuli as
 54 the basis for discussion. Although the complete interac-
 55 tion approach permits access to the reported thoughts of
 56 the interactants, it can encourage presentation of more
 57 socially desirable selves. The method used here enabled

interpretation by uninvolved, experienced third parties, 58
 without leading the interviewees to comment on possibly 59
 player anti-social attitudes and motives. 60

Forewarned may be forearmed. This information 61
 about player differences is useful for officiating communi- 62
 cation and interaction education and training, specifically 63
 to help officials monitor, recognise, anticipate, interpret 64
 and manage sport situations and interactions they en- 65
 counter. Police training addresses officer attitudes and 66
 comprehension of criminal behaviour as *schema*, or the 67
 beliefs and mindset that guide interpretation and use of 68
 social information including goals and motivations in so- 69
 cial settings (Blagden, 2012). Sport officials can develop 70
 more sophisticated schema about player behaviour and 71
 interaction, as their communication relies on the ability 72
 to make sense of others’ actions and intentions to inter- 73
 act in more effective or impactful ways. Such training may 74
 focus on improving observation and interpretive skills for 75
 social cues, and reflexivity to different types of encoun- 76
 ters with players in relation to game context. Burleson 77
 (2007) generally and Simmons and Cunningham (2013) 78
 with specific reference to sport officiating, have suggested 79
 that communication training address the “unspeken” in 80
 interactions. 81

Finally, several players in this research said that re- 82
 spectfulness from officials is favourable in interactions [I2- 83
 I4, I6, I8-I11]. This is consistent with previous studies re- 84
 porting that players prefer officials to be respectful. An 85
 interview study found that footballers prefer officials to be 86
 personable and accountable (Simmons, 2011) and other 87
 studies show players rate respect as an influential cue in 88
 forming impressions about the competence of sport offi- 89
 cials (Dosseville, *et al.*, 2012) and that insensitive com- 90
 munication from officials can trigger a performance crises 91
 in players (Bar Eli, *et al.*, 1995). Future research should 92
 explore if the preference for respectfulness is due in part 93
 to interaction enabling players an opportunity to influ- 94
 ence officials. According to Goffman (1967), “...ceremonial 95
 rules [of deference and demeanor] *play their social func-* 96
tion, for many of the acts which are guided by these rules 97
last but a brief moment, involve no substantive outlay, 98
and can be performed in every social interaction” (p. 90). 99
 These findings deepen our understanding of the balance 100
 - between authority, accountability and respectfulness - 101
 that characterises effective communication and interac- 102
 tion with players. 103

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