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It is the paper published as:

**Author(s):** Denyer-Simmons, P.

**Title:** Communicative displays as fairness heuristics: strategic football referee communication.

**Journal:** Australian Journal of Communication

**ISSN:** 0811-6202

**Year:** 2010

**Pages:** 75 - 94

**Volume:** 37

**Issue:** 1

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## **Paper submitted to Australian Journal of Communication**

### **Title:**

Communicative displays as fairness heuristics: Strategic football referee communication

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The research study was supported with a João Havelange Research Scholarship from Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Centre for Sports Studies (CIES) in Switzerland.

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# **Communicative displays as fairness heuristics: Strategic football referee communication**

## **Abstract**

This experimental study of soccer footballers' reactions to referee decisions finds that communicative displays can influence perception of both the fairness of the referee and the correctness of referee decisions. Displays involving content (explanation) and tone (calm manner) of communication can mitigate uncertainty about decision-makers and their decisions, thus providing support for an uncertainty management heuristic conceptualisation of the perception of fairness (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). The paper advances the importance of teaching referees and decision making professionals about the way people perceive fairness to enhance the strategic communication of decisions.

## **Introduction**

A study of ball game players found that referee calls and 'unnecessary words or actions' can worsen negative performance consequences for players. The researchers argued that if referees had greater awareness of the influence their communication has on players, and better communication skills, conflicts between referees and players may be prevented (Bar-Eli, Levy-Kolker, Pie & Tenenbaum, 1995 p. 77). A study with Australian soccer teams reported that players are sensitive to communicative displays – including calm, explanation and anger - that indicate the referee's competence, dependability and respectfulness (Simmons, 2007). This paper explores the way communication influences perceptions of football (soccer) referees and their decisions. In soccer and many other sports, referees frequently experience aggression from players and others disappointed by their decisions. With better understanding of influential communication practices we can prepare and train professionals to develop strategic habits and frames that advance a particular interpretation of events (Oliveira & Murphy, 2009) and are more likely to result in effective and harmonious interactions.

Like teachers, police, customer service officers and health workers, sport referees frequently make and communicate decisions affecting people who may not be well known to them. In each of these contexts the ability to gain acceptance, cooperation or compliance is valuable, and individual professionals experience different patterns of reaction. For example, some university lecturers receive more frequent challenges to their assignment grades from students, some police officers experience more confrontation and less cooperation from civilians.

The study is informed by the large body of scholarly work concerned with organisational justice, where the terms 'justice' and 'fairness' tend to be used interchangeably (Fortin, 2008). Although communication research has a longstanding interest in compliance-gaining (Barker, Giles, Hajek, Hiroshi, Noels, Lim & Somera, 2008), 'fairness' and 'communication' and reactions to decisions are seldom explicitly connected in scholarly works. As communication scholars Anderson and Giles note in their review of a major US study of fairness and effectiveness in policing, the language used is 'replete with communication constructs, although they are not labelled as such' (2005, p. 872). Importantly, this paper also seeks to strengthen links between studies of fairness and studies of communication, which to date have more often been implicit than explicit.

'Fairness' is in several ways a useful conceptual framework for understanding interactions between decision-makers and those affected by decisions. People tend to be more cooperative when they perceive fairness, and less cooperative when they perceive unfairness (Van den Bos, Burrows, Unphress, Folger, Lavelle, Eaglestone & Gee, 2005). The extensive body of evidence concerning what people find to be fair informs understanding of ways that contextual and other factors influence compliance and other reactions to decisions. Lind (2001) suggests that although most often researched in organisations, fairness judgement processes have implications in other human relations contexts. Perceptions of fairness have been linked positively to student experiences in education (Lizzio, Wilson & Hadaway, 2007), union members' citizenship behaviour (Skarlicki & Latham, 1997) and compliance with written return reminders from the Australian Taxation Office (Wenzel, 2006). Jordan, Gillentine and Hunt (2004) provide a compelling argument for applying organisational justice theories and principles to the coaching and management of sports teams, in order to improve cooperation behaviours and individual and team performance.

Fairness heuristic theory is used in this study to inform hypotheses and guide understanding of the way some referee displays contribute to player perceptions of fairness in referees and their decisions. Fairness heuristic theory says that in the absence of all the relevant information about the trustworthiness of decision-makers (such as their attitudes, competencies or bias), people use other information that is available, 'justice heuristics', as mental short cuts to assess fairness and determine reactions (Fortin, 2008, p. 99). In particular this study draws on Lind and Van den Bos' (2002) concept of 'substitutability' in the management of uncertainty about the fairness of decision makers and their decisions. They said that when people are uncertain about the fairness of their situation they use (substitute) certainty in one modality of fairness to mitigate uncertainty about another modality. In the study reported here, football players were exposed to a referee decision about which they are uncertain. The decision is communicated variously with explanation, anger or calm in different vignettes. Players then rated the fairness of the referee and correctness of the decision.

The paper is concerned with understanding the influence of communicative displays on reactions to referee decisions, and the development of fairness as a strategic frame for communicating. 'Communicative display' is defined broadly in this study as that which communicates, that which is perceived and interpreted, consciously or unconsciously, by at least one other person. A 'display' can be intentional or unintentional, it includes the use of tone, timing, and tools (such as whistles and flags), as well as verbal and non-verbal behaviours, policy, and process displays (Pace & Faules, 1994). Some displays, such as physical attributes of the referee are less amenable to control by the individual referee, but most can be influenced either by the individual referee, or the body that chooses which referees to assign to particular matches.

### **Communication training for referees**

Most referees have an opinion about the best way to communicate decisions, but there is little evidence on which to base the training of communication and interpersonal skills (MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes & Weston, 2007; Mascarenhas, Collins & Mortimer, 2005). The lack of empirical data helps to explain the lack of communication practice in formal curricula (Mellick, Fleming, Bull & Laugharne, 2005) and referee training has tended to focus on knowledge of the rules (Mellick et al., 2005) and strength and conditioning. Referees develop communication skills through experience of refereeing (MacMahon et al, 2007) and a variable 'hidden curriculum' based on personal experience in and outside football, and advice from referee assessors, colleagues and mentors

(Mellick et al, 2005, p. 45). Some advisors emphasise showing respect for players, some focus on detachment and maintaining authority (Simmons, 2007).

Recent sport referee studies suggest that referees believe communication skills play an important part in player reactions to decisions. Rugby league referees have been found to be highly motivated to manage 'their appearance on and off the field .. to project the image of a competent, confident and decisive official' (Thatcher, 2005, p. 33). Simmons interviewed elite level football referees and found they use an extensive repertoire of verbal and non-verbal techniques to 'sell decisions' and 'minimise disruption to the game' (2006, p. 4). The study highlighted the importance of appearing calm and confident, and not appearing arrogant or aggressive, as important strategies for preventing and managing player aggression and abuse. It also suggested that referees' ability to adapt their communication techniques and styles to different players and situations was in itself an important skill (Simmons, 2006). A study of elite British football and rugby referees reported that the characteristics of skilful communication of decisions were 'to engage the offender/s attention and instigate a decision interaction episode; to project confidence in the decision made; and finally to promote perception of the decision as fair ...' (Mellick et al., 2005, p. 42).

Simmons (2007) interviewed teams of players in focus groups to explore player perceptions of referees and fairness. He reported that players esteem the qualities of competence, dependability and respectfulness in a 'fair' referee. The study also found that players are sensitive to a range of communicative displays – including calm, explanation, decisiveness, athleticism, listening, intelligence and anger - that guide players' perception of competence, dependability and respectfulness. These findings were consistent with Leventhal's (1980) rules for fair procedures and Bies and Moag's (1986) principles for interactional justice (Simmons, 2007). These are discussed below in a short review of the evolution of our increasingly complex understanding of the ways people perceive fairness.

### **Fairness, procedure and communication style**

For more than five decades organisational justice researchers have examined perceptions of fairness in workplaces and other contexts. Early research focused on perceived equity and fairness in allocation of resources and outcomes (distributive justice), but by the 1980s the focus had shifted to procedural justice (Colquitt, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan, 2005) and other factors that can influence fairness perceptions. This shift was important to those who communicate decisions because it highlighted the influence of variables separate to the decision itself, variables that might be strategically managed by decision-makers to influence perceptions and reactions to decisions.

The 'fair process effect' has been described as 'one of the most robust findings in social and organizational psychology (Collie, Bradley & Sparks, 2002, p. 454). It says that people react more positively when they perceive that they have experienced fair treatment, and more negatively when they perceive they have experienced unfair treatment (Van den Bos et al., 2005). Importantly,

*being treated fairly goes further than simply receiving a fair outcome. It is often how (in terms of process and interpersonal style) the outcome is received rather than what is received that seems to matter (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003, p. 253).*

It's also important to note that understanding perception of unfairness is perhaps more important than understanding fairness because unfair events affect 'cognitions and reactions stronger than fair

events' (Van den Bos, 2005, p. 280). Perceptions of unfairness have been linked to a wide range of antisocial cognitions and behaviours in the workplace (Lind, 2001), 'hot emotions' (Beugre, 2007, p. 105) and hostility, indirect aggression, and resistance to instructor requests among college students (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Van den Bos (2005) suggests that 'fair' may be what is expected, that unfairness violates the expectation, and thus leads to strong reaction.

If the fair process effect applies in football, players who feel they have been treated fairly may be more accepting of referee decisions that go against their team, and respond more cooperatively. Unsurprisingly, Leventhal's (1980) 'rules' for fairness in the procedures used to allocate outcomes are similar to conventional expectations of good refereeing. The rules of fair procedures include the need for consistency in implementation, absence of bias, accuracy in information used to inform decisions, the ability to appeal a decision, and ethical standards such as the absence of corruption (adapted from Colquitt et al., 2005; Jordan et al., 2004; Leventhal, 1980). Players can't be sure about referees' capacities, thoughts or biases.

Simmons (2007) drew on Leventhal's (1980) rules when explaining players' preference for the qualities of 'competence' and 'dependability' in referees, and their perception of these qualities. Players believe referees need to be physically competent to be in the right position to get accurate information to inform decisions, and mentally competent to make good judgements. Quick decisions and articulate explanations are important displays of mental competence. Players attend to justifications for decisions, and displays of equal treatment of players and teams, as indicators of the presence or absence of bias. Players esteem dependability in terms of consistency and resilience. They want to be able to rely on referees to judge consistently for both teams at all times, and to be resilient to pressures on their decision-making, especially pressures from opposing players, coaches and supporters. Players articulated a number of communicative displays indicating the referee's consistency and resilience, including various displays of professionalism and body language. Although players do not expect referees to alter decisions on appeal, they become frustrated if referees are perceived not to listen (Simmons, 2007).

Leventhal's (1980) rules spawned a large body of research on many aspects of procedure, but factors relating to those who implement procedures, such as the idiosyncracies of communication styles, have been less researched (Blader & Tyler, 2003).

Interactional justice has been described as 'aspects of the context involving the treatment of individuals during an interaction (eg courtesy, respect)' (Cole, 2002, p. 545). Bies and Moag's (1986) seminal work on interactional justice argued that communication might be the reason for people feeling unfairly treated even when describing process and outcomes to be fair. They proffered respect and justification among dimensions used to evaluate fairness in communication. Numerous studies have shown that interactional justice helps us to understand behavioural and attitudinal reactions to decisions and outcomes (Bies, 2005) and that interpersonal treatment mediates reactions to negative decisions and outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2005). Perceptions of fairness are positively influenced by respectful interpersonal treatment (Buttner, 2004; Tepper, Eisenbach, Kirby & Potter, 1998) including positive demeanour and explanations (Cole, 2004) and attentive and relaxed style (Sitter, 2003). Studies have shown that managers can be trained in interactional justice to produce positive outcomes for employees and organisations (Greenberg, 2006; Skarlicki & Latham, 1997) and fairness has also been shown to be important in written communication. The inclusion of empathy and respect or explanation both increased taxpayer compliance with Australian Taxation Office tax return reminder letters (Wenzel, 2006).

In a range of societal contexts there are ‘strong normative expectations’ for leaders to explain controversial decisions (Bobocel & Zdanuk, 2005, p. 470). Footballers interviewed by Simmons (2007) repeatedly said that it was important for referees to explain decisions and be accountable to players. Simmons (2007) reported that accountability and firm but polite engagement with players display ‘respectfulness’, the third dimension of referee fairness esteemed by players. He argued that when players perceive referees to explain decisions well they perceive mental competence, independent thought required for dependability in decision-making, and respectfulness through the display of accountability. In contrast he said that the display of anger was perceived variously by players as a display of insecurity and incompetence, intimidation and lack of dependability, and a disrespectful attitude to players (Simmons, 2007).

Theories of fairness perception generally include distributive, procedural and interactional dimensions of justice, but differ in their emphasis on aspects of fairness such as cognitive processes, context, social engagement and blame. For a review of theories see Blader and Tyler (2005) or Beugre (2007). The next section presents a heuristic conceptualisation of the influence of communication on perceptions of fairness.

### ***Fairness heuristics, communication and managing uncertainty***

Developments in understanding perception of fairness increasingly suggest the importance of communicative dimensions that can be influenced by decision makers. Research has found that perceptions of fairness and reactions to decisions are influenced by procedural and authority figure heuristics (Conlon, Meyer & Nowakowski, 2005) and that when people anticipate unfairness, they are more likely to perceive unfairness in decisions (Shapiro & Kirkman, 2001).

Fairness heuristic theory says that ‘individuals form fairness heuristics based on their first few encounters with the authority’, and then rely on these initial judgements to serve as proxies for trust in subsequent situations (Colquitt et al., 2005, p. 44).

*If the individual feels that the authority figure is fair and legitimate, the person is more likely to believe that the authority’s decision is fair and legitimate. This ‘fairness heuristic’ suggests that people use their evaluations of the process and outcome to decide whether the authority is fair, and then subsequently to decide if the authority should be obeyed (Conlon et al., 2005, p. 307).*

‘Uncertainty management theory’ is another heuristic conceptualisation of fairness that aids understanding player perceptions of fairness in football. In most contexts people find uncertainty uncomfortable, and perception of fairness helps to mitigate uncertainty about the trustworthiness of authority figures and the fairness of outcomes (Beugre, 2007). When people are uncertain, they turn to their impressions of fair or unfair treatment to help them decide how to react. Despite the uncertainty inherent in a competitive football match, footballers at all levels have very high expectations of equal opportunity and impartiality (Pawlenka, 2005), and studies in anticipatory justice have found that ‘justice matters more when people expect to be treated fairly’ (Bell, Wiechmann & Ryan, 2006, p. 462).

If players are uncertain about fairness they may resolve this uncertainty using shortcut reasoning, such as that involved in substituting one modality of fairness judgment for another (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002, p. 199). Studies have shown that

*if people have some information about one modality of fairness, say procedural fairness, but are uncertain about another modality, say outcome fairness, they will use the information about the more certain modality to generate a belief about the less certain modality' (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002, p. 197).*

Other research shows that this 'substitutability' effect can work around the other way if the outcome information is more certain and the procedural information less certain (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). This heuristic conceptualisation suggests that when players are uncertain, some communicative and procedural displays may influence their perceptions of fairness in referees and decisions.

## **Hypotheses**

The experiment reported here sought to triangulate some of Simmons (2007) findings by testing the influence of communicative displays of calm and explanation on perceptions of referees and their decisions. Using Lind and Van den Bos' (2002) notion of substitutability in uncertainty management, it was hypothesised that referee communicative displays (procedural/interactional fairness) would influence player perceptions of a referee (decision-maker) and the referee's decision (outcome). Using written vignettes that describe a tackle incident in a football match, footballers are asked to imagine a referee awarding a decision against them. The vignettes were developed with expert referee advice and pilot tested with footballers to ensure comprehension and a sense of authenticity. The circumstances of the incident are typical of a football match. They are somewhat ambiguously described to create uncertainty about whether the player has broken the rules, and consequently what decision the referee should make. That is, respondents are told that they 'feel the[ir] tackle is probably legal'. The independent variables – communicative displays of explanation, anger and calm – were manipulated by changes to the referee communication of the decision in different vignettes. The design sought to compare the influence of two types of communication content (explanation versus no explanation), and two types of communication tone (anger versus calm). It did not seek to compare the influence of content and tone. The age of the referee was also manipulated, however the referee's age made no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ) to responses and the data for referee ages have been combined.

The hypotheses were:

H1. Players will react more favourably to a negative referee decision when an explanation is given (versus no explanation).

H2. Players will react less favourably to a negative referee decision that is explained when the referee displays anger (versus calm).

Each of these hypotheses had 3 sub-hypotheses concerning the favourability of player 'reactions' (the dependent variables). These were respondent ratings of 1. fairness of the referee (four items); 2. correctness of the decision (single item); and 3. their intention to argue with the referee (two items).

## **Method**

The project used a between-subjects experimental design in a questionnaire delivered online in 2008. The sample reported here (n=1577) are adult (aged 18 and over) male footballers, amateur and professional, from Australia (n=675), Spain (n=537) and the UK (n=365). The sample was obtained through football organisations. In Australia and Spain links to the internet version of the study were posted on state and regional football federation websites, and in the UK the sample were accessed with the aid of leading competition organisers, Football Mitoo. Web links invited footballers to participate in a study about 'Player attitudes to match events'. They were not told that the study was interested in fairness or communication. On clicking their agreement to participate, players were randomly assigned one of 8 vignette conditions describing a scene from a football match. The scene was designed to evoke the tension of close and hard fought competition, without conveying referee error, bias or some other extraneous characteristic that might prejudice or distract the subjects. Apart from the systematic variation of the referee's age and communication style (the independent variables), little information is provided about the referee. After reading the vignette, respondents used 9 point Likert scales to indicate the level of their agreement with statements about the referee and the decision. In vignette studies subjects apply their own stereotypes based on the information supplied (Sleed, Durrheim, Kriel, Solomon & Baxter, 2002), in this case the stereotypes were influenced by the systematically manipulated communication variables. The questionnaire could be completed in under five minutes.

The instrument was produced in English, translated into Spanish, and then backtranslated. To enhance instrument equivalence, translations and back translations were done by native speakers of the target language (Mattila & Patterson, 2004). Data was analysed using SPSS. Hypotheses were tested using single tail analyses of the variance of the means. The research was approved by a university ethics committee.

## Results

Hypothesis 1.1 was supported. Ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) higher when they received an explanation for the decision than when they did not receive an explanation, as shown in Table 1 and Graph 1.

Hypothesis 1.2 was supported. Ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) higher when they received an explanation for the decision than when they did not receive an explanation, as shown in Table 2 and Graph 2.

Hypothesis 1.3 was not supported. Intentions to argue with the referee were not significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ) influenced by the presence or absence of an explanation.

Hypothesis 2.1 was supported. Table 3 and Graph 3 show that ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) higher when the decision was communicated calmly, than when the decision was communicated angrily.

Hypothesis 2.2 was supported for the total sample ( $p < 0.02$ ), and for the UK ( $p < 0.04$ ), but the effect was not significant in Australia or Spain ( $p > 0.05$ ). Table 4 and Graph 4 show that attitudes to the correctness of the decision were significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) lower in the UK when the referee communicated the decision angrily, than when the decision was communicated calmly.

Hypothesis 2.3 was not supported. Intentions to argue with the referee were not significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ) influenced by the presence or absence of anger in the communication.

**Table 1. Explanation and perception of referee fairness**

Country Variable	AUSTRALIA		SPAIN		UK		Total	
	Explain	No explain						
N	157	179	146	121	90	89	393	389
<b>Mean</b>	<b>22.95</b>	<b>17.92</b>	<b>22.63</b>	<b>18.55</b>	<b>24.98</b>	<b>14.96</b>	<b>23.29</b>	<b>17.43</b>
Standard Deviation	7.21	6.98	9.77	7.07	6.68	7.06	8.20	7.16
t - Equal variance assumed	6.492				9.767		10.63	
t – Equal variance not assumed			3.962					
P = significant <0.05	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	

**Table 2. Explanation and perception of decision correctness**

Country Variable	AUSTRALIA		SPAIN		UK		Total	
	Explain	No explain	Explain	No explain	Explain	No explain	Explain	No explain
N	157	179	146	121	90	89	393	389
<b>Mean</b>	<b>5.04</b>	<b>3.82</b>	<b>4.65</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>5.36</b>	<b>2.84</b>	<b>4.96</b>	<b>3.52</b>
Standard Deviation	2.42	2.2	2.98	2.21	2.62	1.95	2.70	2.18
t - Equal variance assumed	4.851						8.172	
t – Equal variance not assumed			3.289		7.289			
P = significant <0.05	0.000		0.0005		0.000		0.000	

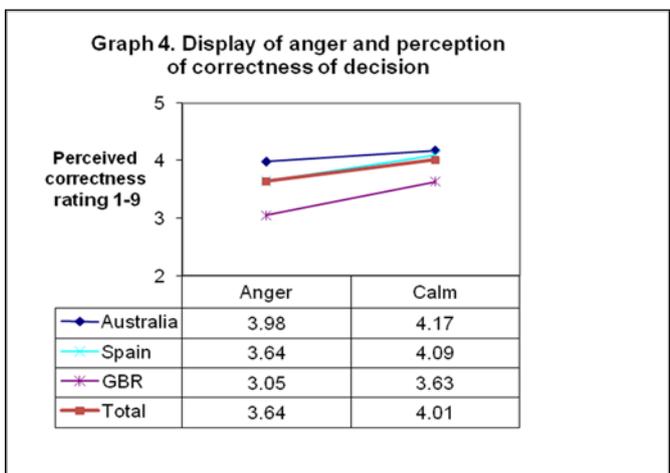
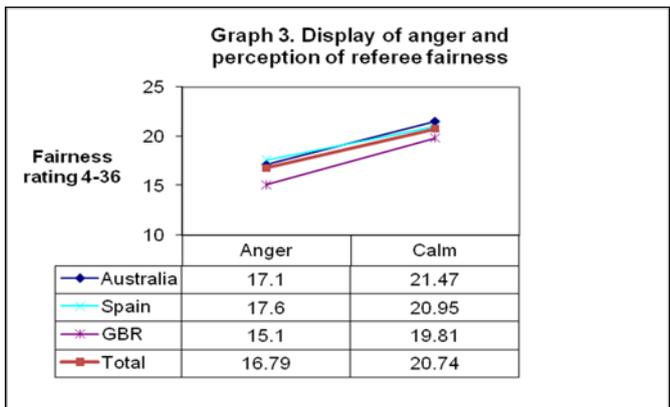
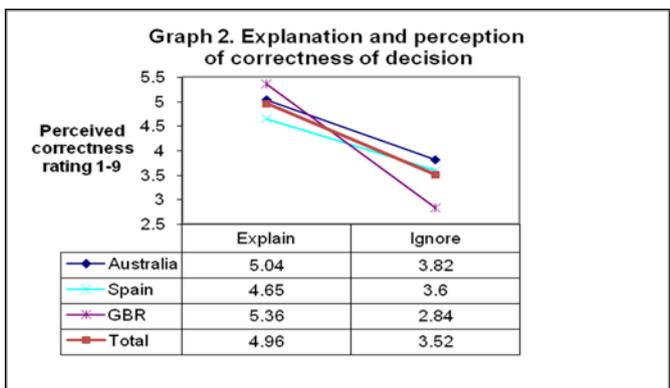
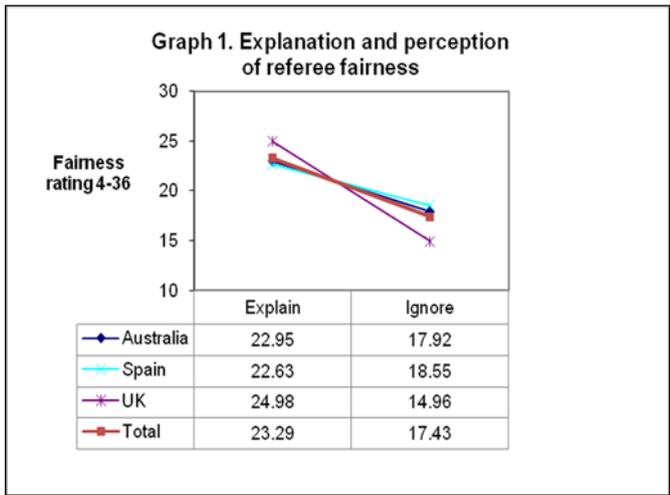
**Table 3. Anger and perception of referee fairness**

Country Variable	AUSTRALIA		SPAIN		UK		Total	
	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm
n	174	165	124	146	95	91	393	402
<b>Mean</b>	<b>17.14</b>	<b>21.47</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>20.95</b>	<b>15.11</b>	<b>19.81</b>	<b>16.79</b>	<b>20.74</b>
Standard Deviation	6.78	6.82	7.98	8.41	6.81	7.36	7.24	8.0
t - Equal variance assumed	-5.869		-3.346		-4.531		-7.29	
t – Equal variance not assumed								
P = significant <0.05	0.000		0.0005		0.000		0.000	

**Table 4. Anger and perception of decision correctness**

Country Variable	AUSTRALIA		SPAIN		UK		Total	
	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm	Anger	Calm
n	176	165	124	146	95	91	395	402
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>4.17</b>	<b>3.64</b>	<b>4.09</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>3.64</b>	<b>4.01</b>
Standard Deviation	2.24	2.14	2.31	2.63	1.92	2.28	2.23	2.37
t - Equal variance assumed	-0.809		-1.488				-2.264	
t – Equal variance not assumed					-1.853			
P = significant <0.05	0.209		0.067		0.033		0.0119	

# Influence of communicative displays on perception of referee fairness and decision correctness



Explaining the decision had a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) positive influence on player ratings of the fairness of the referee, and the correctness of the decision, compared with not explaining. Calm in the referee's explanation had a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) positive influence on player ratings of the referee fairness, compared with anger. Calm in explanation had a significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) positive influence on player ratings of the correctness of the decision in the UK, but not in Australia or Spain ( $p > 0.05$ ), compared with anger.

### **Limitations and strengths**

The participants in the present study were required to imagine themselves involved in a single hypothetical described in 140 words on a computer screen. It's important to remember that they were given limited information about the scene and the interactants, and were not told the research was concerned with communication or fairness. On one hand we might not expect this simulation to evoke feelings as strong as those experienced routinely in real matches, yet significant differences were found in responses. On the other hand, the perceptions and attitudes evoked by real match variables not captured in this study, might, relatively, be so powerful as to render single exposures to the stimuli simulated here negligible in real exchanges.

Participants in vignette experiments are expected to apply their own stereotypes based on the manipulated variables (Sleed et al., 2002). Thus the response ratings recorded in this experiment can be understood as player 'stereotyping' of referees, based on the presence or absence of a short explanation, or displays of anger or calm. These variables produced strong patterns of response, suggesting that these displays can trigger profound inferences about and attitudes toward referees (Collins & Brief, 1995). Whatever the cognitive processes involved in 'stereotyping', in a real match we might reasonably expect that the influence of these displays would be enhanced by the emotional realities of real world interaction, and multiplied by repeated occurrence.

The vignette match simulation influenced significant differences in respondents' stated perceptions, but did not significantly increase players' stated behavioural intention to argue. It may take more than a single written hypothetical to influence a change in behavioral intent. Future designs should consider repeated and variable exposure to decision communication, and focus on understanding players and coaches known to repeatedly argue with referees.

The large samples were gathered anonymously online. The limited information they supplied about themselves (age, gender, relationship to football, level of play, nationality) was unverifiable. That said, the data were gathered using links from football websites.

The use of a between-subject method in an experimental design with large samples adds credibility to the findings concerning the differential responses to the independent variables. Importantly, the findings are generally consistent with conventional wisdom in refereeing, fairness principles, and previous studies of refereeing (Mellick et al, 2005; Simmons, 2007).

### **Discussion**

The study breaks ground in several ways. Referee/player interactions occur daily in every part of the world but they are underresearched. The results support Simmons' (2007) qualitative findings

because they link communicative displays to player perceptions of fairness. Importantly, this study found that both content (explanation) and tone (anger/calm) of communication led players not only to perceive the referee to be more fair, they also perceived the decision to be more correct. The received football wisdom that referees should project calm is supported. Referees should also try to be accountable for their decisions.

Anger had a significant negative influence on perceptions of the fairness of the referee. However it was only in the UK that the effect on players' perception of the correctness of the decision was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). According to Leung (2005), fairness is important in all cultures but the determinants of fairness are not necessarily generalisable across cultures. This study raises questions about cultural differences in the role of communication in perceptions of fairness that will be discussed elsewhere.

The findings support Lind and Van den Bos' (2002) heuristic notion of 'substitutability' and thus have important implications for referees and others responsible for communicating decisions. Footballers appear to use certainty about procedure and interactional style (communicative behaviours) to mitigate uncertainty about fairness and correctness in decisions. That communicative displays influence perception of decisions heightens the importance of communication and the need to train those who communicate decisions. Although theories of fairness heuristics and uncertainty management do not link fairness and cooperative behaviour (Beugre, 2007; Blader & Tyler, 2005), Beugre (2007, p. 47) argues that 'their assumptions can be extended to make such a link'. The influence of referees' communication on player behaviour should be a focus in future research.

We need to take care in extrapolating recommendations about effective strategies in individual encounters from data taken from large samples. Each situation is complex and nuanced, and for some players who are intoxicated by revenge, rage or substances, communicative skill will have no influence. As Mattila and Patterson (2004) suggest it may be more useful to view people's justice perceptions as situation specific and dynamic. Sensitivity to individuals and situations is doubtless an important skill for referees, but this study shows patterns of response to certain displays that decision-makers should be aware of. Many referees understand the importance of managing impressions and 'selling' decisions, but many don't.

Skarlicki and Latham (2005, p. 506) suggested that when leaders are trained to enhance perceptions of fairness in organisations the training should be 'designed to increase their understanding of how perceptions are formed'. Simmons (2007) argues that players believe referees have great influence over games and demand that the referee be a person who will exercise their influence capably and responsibly. He proffered a framework for helping referees to understand the way players form perceptions of fairness in referees, arguing that referees should take care to present themselves as 'competent', 'dependable' and 'respectful'. Future studies linking fairness, communication and decisions should continue to explore and operationalise the concepts.

There are few exercises available to help referees develop more effective communication skills. Although the importance of communication is widely recognized, and conventional wisdom is abundant, the cognitive processes and importance of certain displays are often not well understood. This study offers evidence and principles that can help to focus and guide the development of training and exercises that contribute to referees' awareness and control of important communicative displays.

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