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Author: P. Simmons

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Author Address: psimmons@csu.edu.au

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Competent, dependable and respectful: Football refereeing as a model for communicating fairness

Peter Simmons

Attitude to the fairness of decisions is often influenced by attitude to the decision maker. Football referees communicate hundreds of decisions in each game and perceptions of fairness are difficult to achieve. This study examines the qualities of football referees that influence perception of fairness, and the way those qualities are communicated. It reports that players esteem competence, dependability and respectfulness as the model qualities of a 'fair' referee. Players use an array of communicative heuristics to discern the fairness of referees. The accordance of these findings with previous justice studies suggests the model can be used to train professionals in other contexts where decisions and judgements are communicated.

Key words: fairness; justice; communication; heuristics; football, refereeing

Introduction

Sportspeople emphasise the need for referees to make accurate decisions and to be consistent in their adjudications. It is no coincidence that 'accuracy' and 'consistency' are two of the 'rules' that Leventhal (1980) proffered for procedural fairness. But perceptions of accuracy and consistency are difficult to achieve for referees. Incidents requiring their adjudication are often ambiguous and occur more frequently than in other decision making roles (Mellick et al 2005). Their job is often made harder by 'unrestrained negative feedback' from spectators, players and coaches (Wolfson and Neave 2007: 232). So how do players perceive fairness in referees and their decisions? Can

referees manage their communication in ways that influence perception of consistency and accuracy?

When people feel they are not being treated fairly by an authority, there is a tendency for them to reject the authority and its decisions. Scholars have stressed wide-ranging benefits from understanding the way people form perceptions of fairness in a range of professional contexts including policing (Anderson and Giles 2005), sport refereeing (Simmons 2010), management (Patient and Skarlicki 2010) and teaching (Gordon and Fay 2010). In each of these professions some decision-makers experience greater cooperation because of personal qualities and communication skills that enhance perception of fairness (Patient and Skarlicki op cit; Simmons, op cit). This paper is concerned with understanding decision maker qualities which contribute to perception of fairness and with the displays that communicate those qualities to people affected by their decisions. Theory and findings from previous organisational justice studies are used to guide understanding of the communication that occurs between football (soccer) referees and players. The focus of organisational justice literature has been on what people perceive to be fair, rather than asserting what is or is not fair.

Fairness heuristic theory is used to explain the way referees' communicative displays mitigate uncertainty in player perceptions of the fairness of the referee and their decisions (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). This theory says that people affected by decisions use authority figure displays of fairness (heuristics) as mental short cuts to determine whether a decision making authority is fair and legitimate, and consequently whether to comply with their decisions (Conlon, Meyer and Nowakowski 2005).

A review of the largely quantitative field of organisational justice reported that understanding of justice would improve with more qualitative studies (Fortin 2008). In this study focus groups with teams of footballers revealed that players perceive fairness in referees as a composite of the qualities of competence, dependability and respectfulness. The qualitative method elucidates the way players associate a range of discernible communicative displays with the presence or absence of these qualities. The associations players make generally accord with fairness theories, and findings from previous fairness studies in other contexts. The model is likely to have utility in other professional contexts involving the communication of decisions and judgements.

Football referee communication

Referees believe that communication is central to effective refereeing. In Australia's largest online football referee chat room one referee challenged others to referee a game with whistle, signals and cards alone – without talking - and see how long it took for the game to 'explode'. The thrust of the ensuing discussion was that talking to players is so important that it would be highly irresponsible to accept the challenge. On another thread, referees volunteer advice on tactics for effectively presenting yellow cards (sanction displays) to players (Ausref 2007).

There is little research on which to base training in referee communication and interpersonal skills (Mascarenhas, Collins and Mortimer 2005; Simmons op cit; Mellick et al op cit), but referees' belief that their communication has an important influence on player behaviour is consistent with the small amount of research available on the topic. One study reported that rugby league referees were motivated to manage 'their appearance on and off the field .. to project the image of a competent, confident and decisive official' (Thatcher 2005: 33). Another found that elite level football referees use an extensive repertoire of verbal and non-verbal techniques to 'sell decisions'

and ‘minimise disruption to the game’ (Simmons 2006: 4). Mellick et al highlighted three characteristics in the skilful communication of decisions; ‘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 and just’ (op cit 42). To date there has been just one empirical study that explicitly examined the perception of fairness in referee decisions. That study (Simmons 2010) is discussed in the next section.

Perception and communication of fairness

Most justice researchers agree that perception of fairness is influenced by a combination of three justice dimensions, distributive fairness (perceived equity in allocation of resources and outcomes), procedural fairness (the processes used to make decisions) and interactional fairness (politeness and respectfulness of treatment by authorities making decisions). Some aspects of procedure and interaction are of particular interest to communicators because they influence perception of fairness independently of the decision or outcome itself (Simmons 2010). Leventhal (op cit) said that people form ‘cognitive maps’ that help them evaluate the fairness of procedures preceding decisions (35) and proffered six rules for the fairness of procedures, consistency, bias, accuracy, correctability, group representation and ethical standards. This paper focuses on the first three:

- consistency – procedures need to be implemented consistently, over time and with different people;
- bias – decision makers should be without self-interest, and unaffected by factors or considerations that lead to favouritism;
- accuracy – procedures need to be based on valid and relevant information, decision-makers need to be informed and to minimise error (adapted from Jordan, Gillentine, and Hunt 2004; Colquitt, Greenberg, and Zapata-Phelan 2005; Leventhal op cit).

The role of judges or sports referees is to interpret and follow fair procedures (Leventhal op cit). Players have very high expectations of fairness in referees (Pawlenka 2005), they want rules and penalties applied consistently without bias, and accuracy is very important. When referees make mistakes, players can perceive injustice and partiality (Faccenda et al 2009). But everyone sees each decision from a different vantage point in football, and consistency, impartiality and accuracy are open to interpretation. So how do players perceive fairness? In some sections of his seminal 1980 work Leventhal indicated the importance of having the right person implement procedures, but his work generally focused on describing and explaining rules for fairness. More recent developments in fairness theory suggest that having the right person implement procedures is indeed very important to mitigate uncertainty about fairness. Attitudes to decisions are largely influenced by attitudes to the fairness of the decision-maker.

In an experimental scenario study both the tone and content of referee communication influenced player perceptions of fairness, independently of the actual decision (Simmons op cit). When a referee calmly communicated a negative decision (against the player's team) player ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly increased, compared to when the referee communicated the same decision angrily. When a referee provided a short explanation for a negative decision, ratings of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision were both significantly increased, compared to not giving an explanation. One way of explaining these findings is the 'substitutability' effect, the use of communication heuristics to mitigate uncertainty about decision-makers and their decisions.

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 (Simmons 2010: 90).

The main implication here is that perception of the fairness of decisions is influenced by behaviours and processes the decision communicator can control.

There is increasing evidence that decision-makers can be trained to communicate sensitively and influence perception of fairness. Managers who received an ‘empathic induction’ – that focused their feelings on the recipients of bad news – displayed improved fairness in their communication (Patient and Skarlicki 2010: 572). The researchers suggest organisations can choose communicators who are able to empathise when bad news needs to be delivered, and they can encourage managers who need to deliver bad news to try to identify with recipients (ibid). Simmons (2010) said referees would benefit from understanding the way players form perceptions of fairness and Skarlicki and Latham (2005: 506) say training that aims to increase perceptions of fairness in organisations should be designed to increase leaders’ ‘understanding of how perceptions are formed’.

Research questions

The study borrows Saul’s (2001) notion of the ‘speculative atom’ comprising qualities and Tyler and Blader’s (2003) assertion that perceptions of fairness are central to people’s evaluation of situations. This study assumes that the qualities players prefer in referees approximate ‘fair’. The assumption is supported by scholarly (Pawlenka 2005; Mellick et al 2005; Simmons 2010) and popular assertions concerning the centrality of fairness to good refereeing. ‘Fair’ is the ‘speculative atom’ in which ‘each quality is a both a proton and a neutron’ (Saul 2001 13).

The study sought to identify the ‘qualities’ of a fair referee, and communicative displays of these qualities. ‘Communicative displays’ are verbal and non-verbal behaviours, policy, and process displays that are interpreted by at least one other person (Pace and Faules 1994). The research questions were:

RQ 1. What qualities do players prefer in a referee?

RQ2. What communicative displays influence players’ perception of these qualities in a referee?

Method and analysis

A qualitative interview method was selected to listen to players’ perspectives on their interactions with referees, and develop understanding through analysis of their motives, thoughts and feelings (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). The initial analysis used some grounded style techniques (Daymon and Holloway 2011). Open coding yielded units of data with meaning (Lindlof and Taylor op cit), which were then organised into sub-categories and categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and themes.

The first stage yielded a table of referee ‘qualities, dimensionalised and presented in separate cells (Table 1). But in the minds of the players interviewed, and on the football field in interactions with referees, the qualities and the displays that players attend to are neither tabulated nor separated. They are dynamic and interactive.

The second stage of analysis borrows from the thematic narrative analysis technique used by Williams (1984, in Riessman 2008) with interviews about illness. Unlike the grounded-style coding that fractured the data into categories in the first stage (Riessman op cit), the second stage reports

and interprets whole sections of the ‘stories’ (Altrichter and Holly 2005: 29) provided by the players (Riessman op cit).

The second stage of the analysis intertwines players’ stories from the interviews and justice theory to explain the way properties and dimensions that emerged from the first stage of the analysis are displayed by referees. Much is known about the way decision-makers influence perceptions of fairness in other contexts, especially in organisations. The narrative situates the discussion of each of the emergent desired referee qualities – competence, dependability and respectfulness – within contemporary understandings of the way people perceive fairness. Our understanding of the associations that players make between communicative displays and referees’ qualities are enriched and validated by ‘reading’ fairness into the narrative.

Focus groups and sample

Focus groups were preferred for this study because of the ‘group effect’, the potential for members to be stimulated and challenged by each others’ accounts and experiences, and to obtain insights that might otherwise not be accessible (Lindlof and Taylor op cit). Sample selection was based in part on availability of teams. Three team interviews were held with a total of 40 males who play at high levels of the sport. One was a fully professional team in the National A-League. The others (one metropolitan and one regional) were 17 and 18 year olds from the Super Youth league and Development Leagues in NSW, Australia.

Interviews lasted about an hour and avoided imposing preconceived ideas as far as possible (Lindlof and Taylor op cit). Players were encouraged to raise what was important to them in words of their

choosing. The words ‘communication’ and ‘fair’ were avoided until they were raised by players. Early stages of the interviews used general, open-ended questions about soccer and refereeing (“Tell me about a time when you thought “yes, that was good refereeing”). Standardised open-ended questions that related to preconceived themes (“Do you think there are better and worse ways to give a card?”) (Amis 2005) were introduced only if preconceived themes had not earlier been raised spontaneously by players. Focus group recordings were transcribed within two days of interviews.

Findings

RQ1. What qualities do players prefer in a referee?

There are many qualities that players expect of referee. Three main qualities emerged from the data – competent, dependable and respectful. A referee is expected to be ‘competent’ in terms of physicality, mentality, and confidence. ‘Dependable’ referees react well to the many pressures they face in a game, and provide a safe and predictable environment for play. Players believe football is mostly for players, and that referees should respect players by being accountable, discreet and politely responsive. ‘Respectful’ refers to the referee’s attitudes to players, and preferred interaction styles.

Table 1. shows the preferred qualities and their properties and dimensions separated in cells. The positive dimensions are the players’ ideal, and enhance perception of fairness. The negative dimensions detract from perception of fairness.

Table 1. The fair referee – The qualities players prefer in a referee

Quality	Property	Dimensions
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		Positive	Negative
1. Competent	Physicality	Athletic	Unfit
		Aware	Oblivious
	Mentality	Experienced	Inexperienced
		Intelligent	Unintelligent
		Decisive	Indecisive
	Confidence	Assured	Insecure
Assertive		Diffident	
2. Dependable	Consistency	Reliable	Unpredictable
		Professional	Uncaring
	Resilience	Resolute	Yielding
		Courageous	Fearful
3. Respectful	Accountability	Answerable	Unanswerable
		Discreet	Attention-seeking
		Firm	Punitive
	Personality	Engaged	Disinterested
		Affable	Aggressive

The next section explains the communication of competence, dependability and respectfulness, and describes the way some referee displays influence more than one quality.

RQ2. What communicative displays influence players’ perception of these qualities in a referee?

Players have strong views about the need be competent (to enact good decisions), dependable (consistent in rule administration and not easily influenced), and respectful towards players. These qualities are consistent with procedural and interactional fairness, but they are abstract, and perception of these qualities is influenced by more concrete communicative displays players associate with the qualities. Diagram1. shows a model that integrates the qualities of a fair referee.

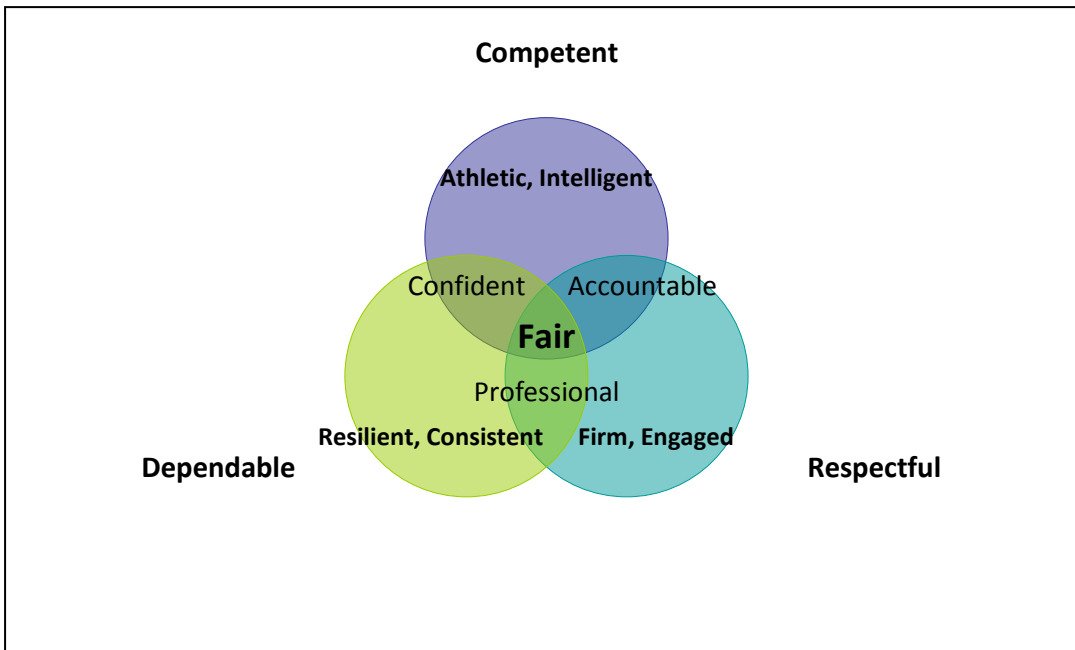


Diagram 1. Integrated model of players' preferred qualities in a referee

Communicating competence

Leventhal's accuracy rule says that fair process requires decisions to be based on 'as much good information and informed opinion as possible', and that there should be safeguards 'that deter people from violating fair procedure' (op cit 41). Players repeatedly expressed preferences that can be interpreted as a desire for referees to be competent to gather accurate information for decisions. Interviewees said referees need to be fit to keep up with play, in order to be close to incidents when they occur on the field. They stressed the importance of athletic appearance and mobility on the field, and notice displays suggesting the referee might be unable to keep up with play, such as overweight, frail stature, or the wrong age (too young or too old). Hearing aids and glasses display compromised awareness that diminish ability to obtain accurate information.

Players believe intelligence is required to make good judgements quickly, justify decisions, and

avoid being fooled by cheats. Referees display intelligence mostly through the quality of their voice and articulation, and the speed of their answers and decisions.

I think like some of the guys were saying [about better referees].. You ask questions and they've quickly got answers. You know what I mean. They're quick, they've got quick minds.

Players in each group said they admire referees who penalise cheating. Detection and discipline of 'diving' (pretending to have been fouled) displays acuity required to avoid being deceived.

...it all comes with the experience of the ref...the more experienced the ref, the more times they've seen diving and the easier it is for them to pick it...

They just turn and drop to their knees and the refs give it to them

If they were ex-players it would be a lot different...they'd sit there and the ref would say 'get up...play'.

The perception of experience is highly esteemed. Players perceive that playing experience gives referees empathy and understanding that results in sympathetic judgements. Refereeing experience leads to better decisions. But players do not normally know a referee's experience, and they infer experience from various displays such as a calmer style, explaining decisions (with the caveat that the explanations make sense), and resilience to pressure. Players said experienced referees use interpersonal strategies that minimise disruptions to the game, such as admonishing players when the ball goes out of play.

[good referees] let the game continue and talk to players as the game's going on. You know, they're talking all the time. But I think for a ref that comes with experience...because

you will never see a young guy doing that .. With the more experienced guys and the older guys .. the game will continue on and they're talking to people.

Displays of inexperience include youthful appearance, getting in the way of the game (referee does not anticipate play), panic, anger and 'trying to stamp their authority' on the game by issuing lots of sanctions.

Players said they want referees to assert themselves confidently to deal effectively with foul and dangerous play. Displays of confidence include a calm manner, the ability to talk and explain in a 'normal' voice to players, and a sense of proportion in decisions and hand signals, even under pressure. Players said a preference for warning players before penalising displays confidence, but penalising to 'stamp authority' displays a lack of confidence or maturity. Shouting, waving arms, and brandishing cards angrily show low confidence. Other indicators of low confidence are panic, taking player criticism personally, avoiding difficult decisions and ignoring disrespect from players.

Communicating dependability

Perceptions of fairness are diminished when there are deviations from expected procedure (Van den Bos, Vermunt and Wilke 1996). Leventhal (op cit) said that fair procedures are consistent and avoid favouritism. Footballers expect consistency in referee decisions for both teams, from game to game, and from referee to referee. Deviation from expectations, for any reason, can cause players to doubt the dependability of the referee. This section explains communicative displays that influence the perception that the referee is the sort of person players can depend on to be consistent, impartial, committed to the rules, and resilient to pressure on their decisions.

Players are very sensitive to any deviation from equal treatment. For example, referees who use first names for one team and not the other, or otherwise appear more familiar (especially ‘home referees’), can create uncertainty about their dependability. Players said referees sometimes ‘pick on certain players’. The deviation from equal treatment might be justified in the referee’s mind (perhaps preventing illegal or dangerous play), but players can view this deviation as less than complete commitment to treating players equally.

One concrete display of inconsistency raises questions about consistency more generally. When referees make repeated warnings to players, but don’t carry them out, players perceive an inconsistency between words and actions. Referees should be perceived to be wholly committed to the rules. Sometimes referees award a penalty for one team, and are subsequently perceived to make a decision that ‘squares the ledger’. Such perceptions cause players to doubt the referee’s complete commitment to judging each decision according to the rules. Players esteem a ‘professional’ approach to refereeing that includes a commitment to propriety, attention to detail, and discreet efficiency. Neat attire and grooming display pride in refereeing, while old boots and poor grooming show lack of care. One player asked:

If he doesn’t care what he looks like, why would he care about getting decisions right?

Clear voice and articulation were also associated with the referee’s professionalism.

...when he speaks to your team before the game.. if he’s slow and doesn’t know what he’s

saying .. so he's going to be a pretty casual ref .. but if the guy's like real professional spoken and shit [laughter] .. you just know that he's going to be professional.

Players want referees to make their own decisions, stand firm and be resilient when subjected to influence from players or other pressures. Explaining decisions suggests the decision is the referee's own, not one prompted by the players or the crowd.

If he's got an answer for it you know it's all about him .. You know it's what he wants.

Interviewees said 'changing the decision' or 'taking the whistle out of his mouth before he blows' can suggest the referee is yielding to pressures from players and spectators.

Players admire referees with the courage to make decisions they know will meet an angry response from players and spectators. Younger players suggested that referees need courage to confront abusive coaches, parents and spectators, and that calm manner in the face of anger displays courage.

Like when a ref goes over to the coaches on the sideline and says to get out or he's not going to take any more from him .. It ruins the game if the parents and coaches start yelling and stuff...It starts to become about them...The boys can't enjoy the game.

Players said that unwillingness to confront difficult situations and ignoring abuse from players displays lack of courage.

Communicating respectfulness

Interactional justice refers to the effects of interpersonal treatment on perceptions of fairness (Colquitt, Greenberg, and Zapata-Phelan op cit). Bies and Moag (1986) posited truthfulness, justification, respect and propriety as dimensions of fairness in interpersonal treatment. Since the 1980s there have been numerous studies showing that interpersonal treatment mediates behavioural and attitudinal reactions to negative decisions and outcomes (Bies 2005; Colquitt, Greenberg, and Zapata-Phelan op cit). Perceptions of fairness are positively influenced by respectful interpersonal treatment (Buttner 2004; Tepper et al 1998) including positive demeanour and explanations (Cole 2004) and attentive and relaxed style (Sitter 2003). Bobocel and Zdanuk (2005) report that there are 'strong normative expectations' for organisational leaders to 'explain controversial actions' (470).

Respectfulness refers to referees' attitudes to players and preferred interaction styles. Interviewees stressed that games are played for players (and spectators in the case of professionals), and that referees should respect players by being accountable, discreet and polite.

There should be respect both ways...Don't demand respect...A lot of refs give an early yellow card or even red card for something stupid or soft...And that's often them showing that they've got more power over you...I reckon they should be just a normal person...talk to you normally... explain things to you...have respect for you so that you show it back to them.

Players dislike referees unnecessarily drawing attention to themselves through excessive stoppages or even brightly coloured uniforms.

You've got so much going on, so much information coming in from everywhere, on the field, off the field or from the coaches .. the last thing you want to worry about is the ref.

Displays of respect for players include a free flowing game, clear and specific justifications for decisions, answers to player questions and apologies for bad mistakes. Players frequently reported getting angry or frustrated when referees ignore or dismiss them, and that younger referees were often less likely to answer than older referees.

The younger a ref is .. they tend to have more attitude than a more senior ref .. You might go 'Oh what's that ref?' and a young ref's says 'Shut up and get on with the game' ... But if you've got a senior ref he'll explain things to you more.

Players said good referees exercise discretion that respects players. They resist heavy sanctions, and find alternatives to stopping play, such as warning players during ordinary stoppages. Waving and calling out 'play on' shows that the referee has seen the incident (acuity), but prefers the game to flow (respect for the game and players).

Players' consistently expressed a preference for referees to be firm, not punitive. Players said that gestures should be proportional to the seriousness of the foul. Punitive approaches display lack of

accountability to players, frustrate individuals and teams, and are likely to inflame. Punitive referee displays include anger, frequent stopping and sanctions, heavy penalties for actions that do no harm (such as players swearing at themselves), and sharp and confrontational gestures such as waving arms and 'shoving cards at players' faces'.

If someone did that to you in the street it's going to end up in a fight...it's going to make you angry.

Many players felt that use of aggression to assert control over the game is counterproductive.

When they throw cards around it gives them nowhere to go...like that dickhead on the weekend. He tried to impose himself on you. 'I'm in control here'...For the first couple of minutes when I came on as a sub he just abused me. 'If I see you doing that again you'll be off' Blah Blah .. 'It will be a penalty next time I see you touch him'...You know, [he's] thinking that that is going to change my game but it only makes me frustrated.

Players prefer referees to be approachable, to talk normally without shouting and threats, and to respond to reasonable questions. Calm, smiling referees display confidence and approachability that can influence the atmosphere of the game.

If the ref's calm the players are going to be calm too. Cause if the ref's like screaming at you, you're not going to talk back to them in a nice way...Players scream back at him and then that causes yellow cards...It changes the game.

Displays of aggression and unwillingness to engage include ignoring, turning back on players, dismissing concerns, anger, verbal abuse, sharp gestures and threatening players.

Limitations

The sample here was all male. Females have been found to perceive and communicate fairness differently to males (Cole 2004). The adult males in this sample were all full professionals.

Consequently the perspective of the 'Sunday League' lower grade, where referees often operate in less protected environments, was not included. This research achieved saturation in the third group, but future studies should target amateur male and female adults.

Many players behave deceptively and disingenuously on the field and may have been acting out in the focus group interviews. It is possible that some interviewees, surrounded by their peers, were less than frank about some of their beliefs and motivations. That said, each of the interviews proceeded with what seemed an appropriate blend of open discussion and good faith.

Discussion

The many qualities required for effective refereeing are best acquired through training and experience (Simmons 2006). However the tripartite model of competence, dependability and respectfulness, developed here using fairness theory and evidence of players' preferences, provides an easily-remembered framework to guide a strategic approach to communicating fairness. This model, and findings concerning the way referees communicate these qualities, provide new insights

that can be used to train referees to become more self-aware, and more strategic in their communication. Referees can reflect on the way they are perceived, and deliberately focus on presenting themselves (eg in speech, manner, rule implementation, attire, grooming) as competent, dependable (eg displaying calm, attention to process and even-handedness) and respectful (eg firm yet responsive). Studies in fairness heuristics suggest that self-presentation is especially important in early encounters when impressions are formed (Lind, Kray and Thompson 2001).

The congruence of the model with previous fairness studies in a range of contexts suggests the model has utility in many professions and situations where decisions are communicated. Players believe referees have powerful influence over safety, fairness and other outcomes for individual players and teams. They want referees to be people who exercise their power capably and responsibly and they attend to both intended and unintended communicative displays in assessing the referee's competence, respectfulness and dependability. In accordance with Leventhal's (1980) accuracy rule in procedural fairness, players desire athletic and intellectual competence in a referee because they want decisions based on accurate information.

Players' preference for dependability can readily be viewed as support for Leventhal's (1980) rules for consistency and bias-suppression. Procedures should be predictable, consistent and administered with equal opportunities for the parties affected. The importance of respectful treatment has frequently been claimed in interactional fairness (Patient and Skarlicki op cit; Buttner op cit; Tepper et al op cit; Bies and Moag op cit). Players expect referees to be sufficiently firm and confident to assert themselves, but dislike arrogance and aggression. Justification is well known to enhance perceptions of fairness in many situations (Bobocel and Zdanjuk op cit) and players expect answers to 'reasonable' questions. Clear and calm explanations display respect for players.

The focus on decision-maker qualities and influential displays using a qualitative approach improves understanding of the way people perceive fairness, and supports Fortin's (op cit) call for more qualitative research in the organisational justice field. Analysis of player discussions and responses to open-ended questions improves our sense of what is important to those receiving decisions, and reveals nuanced associations that standard questioning techniques might fail to uncover. Players' said they consciously make links between concrete displays such as calm, and more abstract qualities such as consistency.

Associations of this kind were frequent in the interviews and give support to the idea that people use heuristics to mitigate uncertainty about authority figures (Lind and Van den Bos op cit).

Skarlicki and Latham (op cit) suggested that leaders need to be trained in the way perceptions of fairness are formed. Referee development programs could be enhanced by training modules that help referees to explore the way procedural and interactional fairness heuristics influence player perceptions of referee fairness and decision correctness. In particular, trainees would benefit from understanding the principle of substitutability (Lind and Van den Bos 2002), the idea that players use displays about which they can be certain, such as attire, to form judgements about more abstract qualities such as competence and dependability.

Previous research has found that the tone and content of communication influence perception of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision (Simmons op cit). This research reports competence, dependability and respectfulness as qualities that help to communicate fairness to footballers, and suggests that these qualities are likely to communicate fairness in other contexts where decisions are communicated. Although players occasionally linked specific referee displays

to their own reactions, the data gathering and analysis methods used here do not enable assessment of the effects on players, or the relative importance, of the different qualities. Many referees appear to manage football matches effectively without visible displays of accountability or engagement with players. Future research should examine the influence of specific communicative displays on cooperation and compliance with decisions, and explore the relative influence of the qualities in football and other decision communication contexts such as eg teaching, surgery and management. Competence, dependability and respectfulness may be desirable in most professionals, but it seems likely that it will be relatively more important for teachers to communicate respectfulness, and for surgeons to communicate competence.

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Note on the contributor