Fair call: Perceptions of fairness in intended and unintended communication

Dissertation research portfolio submitted to Charles Sturt University for the degree
Doctor of Communication

Peter Simmons
Bachelor of Arts (Liberal Studies) MCAE
Graduate Certificate in Organisational Communication CSU
Master of Arts (Communication) CSU

April 2009
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I  PETER DENYER-SIMMONS

Hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Dedication

To Ash.
Didn’t like soccer but would have approved 100%.
Acknowledgements

Along the way many have helped in different ways.

In particular I thank:

Professor John Carroll for inspiration, stewardship and critique.

Richard Lorenc for opening so many doors.

Dr Jill Taylor for passing a torch.

Max Simmons for tactical advice on the road in Malaysia.

Manuel López Fernández for being a rock in Spain.

Bernadette Wood, Helen Simmons, Henry Simmons and Joe Simmons for encouragement and leaving me to it.
**Ethics approval**

Research conducted for this study received approval from CSU’s Ethics in Human Research Committee under protocols:

2006/291
2007/320
Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry is to improve understanding of the influence of football (soccer) referees’ intended and unintended communication on player perceptions of fairness. Three research studies are presented. First is an interview study with highly experienced elite level referees. The second uses focus groups with amateur and professional teams of players. The third is a vignette experiment conducted in person and online to test the effects of several communicative displays with players in five countries.

The two main areas of discovery arising from the project relate to the qualities that players prefer in referees, and the cognitive processes players use in forming perceptions of the fairness of referees and the correctness of decisions. Players generally want referees to provide a fair, safe and predictable environment for play, and they attend to displays of the referee’s competence to judge and decide, dependability under the pressures of the game, and respectfulness towards players. Players use a range of communicative displays as mental shortcuts to indicate the presence or absence of these qualities and thus the trustworthiness of the referee.

Importantly this project found that players use certainty in their perceptions of referees’ procedural and interactional fairness to mitigate uncertainty about the referee’s abilities and intentions, and the correctness of decisions. Unable to read the thoughts of referees, or uncertain about their ability, players attend to displays that suggest they can rely on the referee. Players attend to displays of professionalism, resilience, and courage as proxies for competence, consistency and impartiality.

The project found that different communication of the same decision leads to different player perceptions of the referee and correctness of the decision. When communicating decisions some referee behaviours such as explanation and calm generally improve player perceptions, while anger and ignoring player questions lead to negative player perceptions. Distinct displays of interactional and procedural fairness influence players’ perceptions of the fairness of the referee, and the correctness of their decisions in each country studied. There were some national differences, insofar as player reaction to referee explanation was most positive in Great Britain, and reaction to anger was most
negative in Malaysia, but generally player reactions were similar across the five countries studied.

To complement a sound knowledge of the rules of the game, referees will benefit from improved understanding of the many ways that players perceive fairness, and improved awareness of the effects that their communication has on players. In particular, referees should be trained to understand that when players form perceptions about referees and their decisions, they are influenced by referees’ professionalism in presentation, interpersonal treatment and adherence to procedures.
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview and objectives
This research portfolio dissertation presents an exegesis and three studies that explore the way the communication behaviours and styles of decision makers influence the perceptions and reactions of people affected by the decisions. In particular, the research set out to support the practice of football (soccer) refereeing, and each study focused on the way football referees communicate with players. From the outset the principal aim of the research project was to contribute to understanding of referee/player interaction in ways that support football referees at amateur levels of the game. To achieve this, the project studied referees and players with higher and lower levels of expertise and professionalism.

Before entering the field of referee research I was fascinated by the extreme behaviours and emotions visible at even the lowest levels of football in the community, and interested in the strategies that referees use to manage and prevent aggression and abuse directed at them. My initial background research and field work led to a broad research question and objectives for the research project:

Research question
How do communication practices influence perceptions of fairness?

Research objectives
1. To improve understanding of communicative displays that influence perceptions of fairness
2. To develop recommendations for the training of football referees in effective communication.

Mixed research methods were selected to achieve the objectives. Qualitative analysis of what interviewees said was important, was used to develop ‘understanding’ of communication processes and displays. Statistical analysis with much larger samples of players was used to isolate displays that influence perceptions of fairness, and test some of the qualitative findings.
Although the field research and analysis at each stage clearly focus on football referee communication, the research question and objectives for the project reflect the assumption that refereeing practice can be informed by studies of fairness in other settings, and that referee/player interactions may contribute more generally to understanding the ways people perceive fairness.

The main purposes of this research dissertation portfolio document are to:

- report the three research studies as parts of single research project
- synthesise and reinterpret the findings as a report against the project objectives
- discuss the implications for further research.

The research studies show clearly that each stage derives from the one before. The development of the project accords with the type of progression Sumser (2001) says that grounded theorists would advocate:

> With a vague idea in mind, one goes out and looks at the world and then uses that look to refine the ideas, which, in turn, are used to allow a more precise view of reality. The experiment, in this instance, could provide a more precise view. It will certainly provide a different view’ (Sumser, 2001, p.126).

My ‘vague idea’ was that the practice of football refereeing could be enhanced for all involved, especially referees, if referees could learn which communicative displays are more likely to cause players to become aggressive, and which are more likely to calm. Thus I went into the field to find and understand those displays, with a special interest in the displays that referees could learn and have some control over. The first study explores the perspective of expert referees and identifies important gaps in previous research. The second study explores the largely un-researched perspective of football players, and introduces theories of justice to describe and account for the findings. The final stage tests some of the findings from the previous stage for generalisability, experimenting within and across five different countries.
1.2 Structure of the document

The dissertation portfolio is organised in 5 chapters. After the introduction chapter the structure of chapters follows the chronology of this research journey, and concludes with a chapter dedicated to reflection on the project objectives and implications for practice and research.

Chapter 1. Introduction
This chapter is intended to orient the reader to important aspects of the project and the researcher, guide expectations of the document, and signpost what follows. The objectives of the research are presented and the structure of the document is outlined and explained. The evolution of the project as a means for achieving the objectives is discussed as a product of the influence of my communication practice and scholarship experiences on my own subjectivity, my developing sensitisation to the field, and opportunity. The first chapter concludes with an overview of the contributions the research project has made to the study of football referee communication, fairness and research methodology.

Chapter 2. Entering the field
This chapter describes some of the circumstances and catalysts for choosing football referee communication as a focus for three years of research endeavour. It describes my preliminary reading and contacts in the refereeing industry, and outlines my thoughts before and after the first field research. The main part of the chapter is a paper that reports an interview study with elite level Australian referees. The outcomes of that study and the subsequent project focus on exploring the perspective of football players are explained.

Chapter 3. Exploring Australian player perspectives
The chapter provides the background to a study of football players and describes the use of models and theories of fairness to account for and interpret player perceptions and behaviours. The main part of the chapter is a paper that reports a focus group study of Australian players, and their attitudes to referees and various referee behaviours. The main findings and the importance of exploring referee/player communication through the eyes of players are discussed.
Chapter 4. Testing the effects internationally
An experiment was designed to test some of the findings from study 2 in Australia and other countries. With support from the Football Federation of Australia, the Australian Sports Commission, and the Professional Footballers’ Association, I was awarded a scholarship by FIFA and the CIES in Switzerland to conduct the study during 2008. The main part of this chapter is the final report of that study for FIFA. During the study I developed papers that focused separately on the conceptual framework for studying fairness across cultures, and the development of an online experiment method. These papers were presented at international conferences in Malaysia and Spain.

Chapter 5. Conclusions and implications
The final chapter returns to the research project objectives. Lessons from the project that improve understanding of player perceptions of fairness and referee communication are discussed at length. Finally, the implications for the training of football referees and future research are explained.

References
Each of the three research studies has its own reference section. Details for the references made in the five chapters of the exegesis are listed in the final reference section.
1.3 Evolution of the project

This report shows that at each stage the project has learnt from previous research, and employed or adapted conventional methods that match the requirements and resources of the project. Nonetheless the inception and development of this project reflect my own research position and views of the world and knowledge, and my background in the multidisciplinary field of organisational communication.

Research position

Previously I have conducted and published an eclectic range of communication research studies, at different times drawing on positivist, interpretive and critical stances and methods (Neuman, 2000). The choice of method in each case was based on resources available and a pragmatic approach to the requirements of the research problem. My reflections in each case noted that understanding of the problem could have been heightened by the use or addition of other methods.

The project reported here is a fusion and medley of approaches customarily associated with positivist and interpretivist stances. Philosophical stances help to conceptualise the tools used at different stages, but the project takes a pragmatic stance in which different ‘.. philosophical traditions are de-emphasised and thereby not considered either particularly beneficial or problematic’ (Greene, Kreider, & Mayer, 2005, p.275). The use of different approaches reflects my belief that different research questions require different methods, and that diverse methods and perspectives make the research more comprehensive (Greene et al., 2005).

The project assumes that there are patterns of communicative interaction between referees and players that influence perceptions of fairness, and that the patterns evolve from ‘.. social conventions that people generate as they socially interact’ (Neuman, 2000, p.72). An interpretive stance encourages the researcher to listen to the way interactants talk and think about the phenomenon, and to articulate different perspectives. It assumes that to understand these interactions we need to find out and learn from the people themselves the reasons they give for their actions and beliefs. ‘Individual motives are crucial to consider even if they are irrational, carry deep emotions, and contain false facts and prejudices’ (Neuman, 2000, p.72). To understand the way communication influences perceptions of fairness it was important to hear from players their accounts of what they attend to, and the ways they make sense of the
verbal and the non-verbal, the intended and the unintended. Data always require a level of interpretation, but the only way to capture the voices and thinking of the interactants is to listen to them speak. Studies one and two were designed to hear and interpret the perspectives of referees and players.

The purpose of this research project is ultimately instrumental. It also assumed that patterns of cause and effect in the interactions between referees and players could be identified and defined sufficiently clearly to provide a broad guide that can help referees to predict and exercise greater control over the effects of their communication (Neuman, 2000). It also assumed that ‘confidence in the validity of the findings’ would be enhanced if the data was triangulated using mixed methods to capture different perspectives on the phenomenon (Greene, Kreider, & Mayer, 2005, p.274).

To isolate, identify and measure the relative importance of communication variables the third study uses research techniques closely associated with positivist knowledge generation including ‘.. controlled data collection, objective distance between the researcher and the subject, quantitative measurement, hypothesis testing and statistical analysis to prove causality’ (Silk, 2005, p.6). The third study reflects this assumption, but the findings need to be triangulated with other data as much as possible when interpreting the data.

The findings indicate trends in the interactions between referees and players, and are suggestive of effective communication strategies. Although I accept the predictive usefulness of studying observable patterns of behaviour and response across large samples, it is important to be sceptical about application to policy and action without feedback loops and other methods for authenticating the data with its source (Cheney, 2000). I am comfortable discussing behaviour using some of the language of the physical sciences, using terms such as ‘factors’ and ‘effects’, but ultimately the behaviours of individuals in interactions are the result of the interplay of too many irrational, conflicting and intangible influences (Goulding, 2002) for us ever to fully understand and predict individuals’ behaviour from data gathered from factor studies. Behaviour is both externally influenced and internally driven, and individuals ‘react’ differently to myriad circumstances and stimuli. Cheney (2000) also warns that, complex statistics and abstracted measures can remove researchers from their subjects.
An advantage of the mixed method approach used here is that the qualitative and quantitative studies can be compared and used to provide ‘feedback loops’.

The research design reflects an attraction to the complexities of an interpretive research stance, and the ‘.. premise that researchers and subjects are fundamentally and subjectively attached to the world, and that people define their own realities’ (Silk et al., 2005, p.7). It is clear that as Cheney (2000) points out;

any accomplishment of social research ought to be understood as situated, contingent, partial, and subject to revision. This emphasis of interpretation is simply a way of countering the certainties and arrogance with which conclusions about the social world are often presented’ (Cheney, 2000, p.21).

It is therefore important for me to acknowledge the uniqueness of my ‘interpretations’ of football, communication, referees, and referees’ interactions with players, and the data I collected. Through the different studies reported here I construct meaning or make my own sense. I do this through my choice of processes such as the research methods, the use of fairness as a central concept in understanding referee communication, and through my own experiences and relationships to the texts and situations.

**Background**

Two important features of the project reflect my extensive experience working in and teaching organisational communication. First is the broad conceptualisation of communication and what communicates. Pace and Faules (1994) say that organisational communication ‘... occurs whenever at least one person who occupies a position in an organization interprets some display’ (Pace and Faules, 1994, p.21). Thus they conceptualise communicative displays as whatever communicates, intentionally or unintentionally. This includes verbal and non-verbal behaviours, promptness, process displays, and clothing (Pace and Faules, 1994). Consequently I was attracted to understanding referee communication, and the influence it has on player perceptions and reactions, as communicative displays through styles of interaction and procedure, separate to the outcomes of their decisions.

Second is that as a communication practitioner and teacher with training in qualitative research it struck me very early in my investigation that the limited existing literature on
football referee practice was heavily dominated by studies that examined the behaviour and opinions of referees, particularly expert referees. This is discussed further below. The point here is that contemporary approaches to teaching communication, at even the most basic level, focus on improving effectiveness through dialogue with, and understanding the perspectives of, those with whom we communicate. The referee training literature, and indeed referee practitioners, frequently make assumptions about the effectiveness of practices without the benefit of systematically gathered evidence concerning the way practices are viewed by players, or the outcomes of different approaches (Mellick et al, 2005). During my own training as a referee the students were advised by the trainer never to ‘warn’ or discuss with teams our expectations, before a game. We were told that players would only take advantage of referees who ‘laid their cards on the table’ and that it was ‘better to let them all know where you stand with a decisive yellow card early in the game’. To me this advice was counterintuitive, it seemed a provocative approach, and opposite to the sort of advice given to professionals in other contexts that stresses the clarification of expectations. In two focus groups, in unsolicited discussion, players later told me that they would prefer referees talk with teams before a game about their expectations relating to swearing, backchat and other rule interpretations. As well as being consistent with notions of good and open communication of expectations, the opinions expressed by players in the focus groups are consistent with notions of procedural justice, in particular that managers communicate clearly what is expected, and ‘not expect what was not communicated’ (Sheppard & Lewicki, 1987, p.169).

The execution of this study required a peculiar combination of interpersonal skills and qualities, additional to those normally associated with scholarship and project management. My longstanding involvement with football as an amateur player, coach and spectator was an important asset in the conduct and interpretation of the study. In the course of gaining permissions and conducting the project I secured support of players, referees and coaches at the highest and lowest levels in several countries, as well as the heads of government departments, football associations and a football confederation. The familiarity with football language and cultures that I brought to the study enabled me to establish rapport more quickly with contacts and interviewees, and accelerated my access to and understanding of data. My professional experiences in project development and management were invaluable, and my spoken French and Italian skills occasionally proved advantageous when trying to find a common language
for negotiation in Europe! For the final stage of the project, my connection with FIFA was frequently the key to doors which might otherwise have been closed to scholars.
1.4 Contributions

In several ways the project has tackled the ‘underresearched’. This section outlines the original contributions made by the project to understanding the interaction between referees and players, the application of organisational justice theories to sport, and methodology in communication and online research.

Interaction between referees and players

Although there are football referees in most countries of the world, and numerous international sport scholarship disciplines and traditions (psychology, history, marketing, sociology, performance and management), there has been little systematic or empirical research of sports referees (Anshel, 1995; Mascarenhas et al., 2005; Mellick et al., 2007). Football referees have been less studied than players, coaches and spectators, and referee communication has been much less studied than psychological stressors and decision-making (Mascarehhas et al., 2005). Among the small number of scholarly studies previously conducted on referee performance and communication, the perspective of players has very seldom been explored, and the perspective of amateur players is almost unknown.

The evidence gathered and reported here contributes to understanding of referee/player interactions, which in turn supports training and policy that positively benefits football, and more particularly referees. The first study reports a rare insight into the thinking behind the approaches of elite level football referees. Practicing referees at all levels are seldom interviewed at length about their beliefs, techniques and strategies. The second study reports the perspective of professional and amateur players, and deepens understanding of referee/player interaction. The third study reports measures of almost two thousand player reactions to referee communication, most of them at the amateur level.

The project provides new perspectives on the conventional and anecdotal wisdom concerning football refereeing. In most instances the wisdom developed through hundreds of thousands of hours of practice and reflection is, not surprisingly, supported by this research. Players prefer referees who are calm and consistent. Importantly this research deepens our understanding of the associations that players make between certain displays and the qualities they attribute to referees and their decisions. Sometimes these associations are surprisingly tangential and complex. Understanding is
often the first step to anticipation and a sense of control, and the project contributes insights and constructive ideas for the development of attitudinal and behavioural training for referees.

**New context for applying organisational concepts**

Perceptions of fairness and justice are central to the way people behave and evaluate situations, but it’s important to remember that perceptions of fairness are subjective, insofar as people differ in what they find fair and unfair, and also specific to context (Beugre, 2007). In Round 13 of the ‘A’ league 2008 the Newcastle manager Gary van Egmond brought on a substitute player with only 20 seconds left in the game. Although the substitute didn’t get to kick the ball that day, there was no discussion of the fairness of this substitution to the player. But a coach doing this in the local under 9s would soon have their notions of fairness challenged by players and their families. In the case of player substitution the contexts are in some ways very similar, but they’re also distinguished by the match stakes and the objectives of the various participants.

Much of what is known about what people find to be fair and unfair comes from the study of employee behaviours and perceptions of justice in the context of organisations. In their study of best practice in referee communication, Mellick et al. (2005) refer briefly to organisational justice literature, and the importance of promoting decisions as fair, but there have been very few ‘attempts to study the influence of organizational justice in sport’ (Whisenant & Jordan, 2007, p.93). Jordan et al. (2004) clearly parallel the coaching of teams of players in sport with the management of teams of employees in organisations, and argue that organisational justice concepts can be used to help coaches enhance fairness in team sport settings. Another study found that perceptions of justice positively influence high school students’ intentions to continue participating in a sport (Whisenant & Jordan, 2007).

The latter stages of this project draw heavily on the body of knowledge developed in the study of organisational justice, especially the work on procedural and interactional justice done over the past two decades. Findings from studies done mostly with employees in organisations are compared with and used to interpret and account for player reactions to referee displays. Conceptually this application of the organisational justice is a larger leap to make than the leap Jordan et al. (2004) made from managing employees to coaching teams of players. Like the coach and players in a single football
team, the manager and employees in an organisation are all expected to be working
towards the same goal. But in a football match the two teams are in direct opposition to
each other. A win for one means a loss for the other. The referee is neither manager nor
couch, not on the same side but neutral for two sides. This project found that in most
instances player reactions to referee behaviours and decisions are consistent with, and
can be explained by, previous studies with employees. Consequently the project
contributes to understanding the applicability of organisational justice outside
organisations, and supports a continuation of research based on this application.

The final study reports new data showing the effects of the use of explanation and tone
in communication on perceptions of the decision maker and their decisions, and the
mediating effects of culture. Consequently the project findings for football players
contribute to understanding perceptions of fairness in other countries as well as
organisations. Two important contributions from this study are the evidence the
experiment provides for the cognitive process of substitutability (that players use
displays of procedural fairness to compensate for uncertainty about outcome fairness),
and evidence indicating that players from Western countries are relatively more
influenced by the content of communication, while players from Malaysia are relatively
more influenced by the tone of the communication.

**Mixed method**

The study uses an integrated ‘mixed-method’ design. Different methods are used for the
three studies, and include both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell &
Tashakkori, 2008). The project integrates data from the qualitative methods to inform
the design of instruments and methods used at the latter stages of the project (Greene et
al., 2005). As Greene et al. (2005) argue, mixing methods does more than just mix data
comprising words with data comprising numbers. The methods employed here use
notions of question standardisation and reflexivity differently, and pursue different
degrees of generalisability and depth of understanding of the subjects under study
(Green et al., 2005).

Most research into organisational justice has employed experimental and quasi
experimental methods to measure the interaction effects of discreet variables. The mix
of the research methods reported here contribute to understanding of justice and the
perspectives of the interactants in several ways. The first and second studies here use
qualitative methods. The ‘thick’ interview data (Sumser, 2001) privileges the viewpoint of the interviewees, and gives access not only to reports of opinions and behaviours, but the antecedent associations and justifications. For example we learn that two of Australia’s leading referees give players a few seconds to voice their anger at decisions because they accept a ‘need’ for people to get things off their chest (‘as long as they don’t go over the top and push you or swear at you .. you’ve got to let them have their say’). Soccer referees are often criticised (especially by supporters of other codes of football) for ‘allowing’ players to express dissent. By enabling football referees to discuss as well as report behaviours, the open-ended interview provides insights and explanations that other methods might not access.

In the second study, player interviewees very articulately explained that when referees wave ‘play on’ after player contact, they display competence and respectfulness towards players. According to players, the wave shows that the referee has noticed the incident (not been oblivious to it), and that they have judged that the incident does not warrant stopping the game. The referee is seen to prioritise a flowing game where players have central focus, over frequent stoppages which make the referee the central focus. Thus players often interpret this wave as a display of respect for players. These ‘thick’ accounts provide insights not normally accessible through survey and experiment. They enrich understanding of the way fairness is perceived, as well as the referee/player interaction context.

The third study triangulated some of the findings from the second stage with a much larger sample of players. The unique method developed for the study combined an online survey format presented in different languages through football websites in 5 countries, with the experimental concept of randomly assigning conditions to the player subjects. Online surveys are widely used and well understood, but online experiments are not well documented. The vignette methodology used to present the different experimental conditions, although widely used in psychological research, is also underresearched. Consequently the project has made contributions to understanding the application and potential of online methodology.
Chapter 2. Entering the field

2.1 Context for research study 1

I was an experienced football player, coach and spectator when I completed the Level One football refereeing course alongside one of my teenage sons in Australia in May, 2003. Two years later the alignment of several circumstances prompted my decision to investigate football referee communication.

In 2005 I refereed my first games and as a novice my mind was opened to a side of the game I had always taken for granted. The pressures of managing a game are quite different to those experienced by players, referees are accountable to all and have few allies. At the same time in 2005 I enrolled in a Doctor of Communication program. This course requires students to complete a year of reflective practitioner coursework before commencing a program of independent research.

At this time I was involved in a lot of football each weekend. I was travelling hundreds of kilometres most Saturdays with my teenage son who played at a high level of youth football in New South Wales, Australia, and I was playing in a low level men’s Sunday league. In mid 2005 I witnessed several incidents of aggression directed at referees that shocked me, and damaged the experience for people at the games, especially the referee. In one incident a coach appeared to deliberately intimidate a referee throughout a youth game, in a way that seemed calculated to make it harder for the referee to award decisions against that team. After the game the coach so furiously berated the referee I thought he was going to physically assault him. A second incident occurred in a men’s game in a small NSW town called Oberon. A goalkeeper became incensed by a penalty decision. After conceding the goal he threw the ball hard at the referee and it struck him on the head. My curiosity was pricked and I decided to find out more about the problem of referee abuse.

While completing my doctoral coursework I started investigating football referees as one might research any professional or occupational group. I became curious about the way referees are trained, the strategies they use in the practice of refereeing, and the problems that many sports have in retaining referees. While reading widely in industry magazines and scholarly journals I made a number of contacts with peak sports bodies
in late 2005 and early 2006. Several contacts were very encouraging of research into referees, including personnel at the Australian Sports Commission Officiating Unit, the Referee Development Manager at the Football Federation of Australia, and the Referees’ Development Officer at Football NSW.

A repeated message in scholarly articles in sports studies is that referees are underresearched. Referees have been much less researched than players, coaches, spectators and football economics. Studies of referee communication are particularly rare (Mascarenhas et al., 2005; MacMahon et al., 2007; Mellick et al., 2007; Mellick et al., 2005). My initial inquiries focused on what many believe are closely related issues in football and refereeing - abuse of referees by players, coaches and spectators, and difficulties recruiting and retaining referees. Abuse does influence large numbers of referees to quit refereeing, but there are a range of factors that need to be considered when planning to ameliorate the situation. As Cuskelley, Hoye and Evans (2004) pointed out in a report to the Australian Sports Commission, there are a range of factors relating to the governance of grass roots sport and refereeing that worsen the problem, and make solutions more difficult to effect.

On 6 October 2005 I instigated a meeting at the Australian Sports Commission with representatives from the Commission’s Officiating Unit and the Football Federation of Australia to discuss a program of communication research focused on issues relating to football referees. I presented a short paper as a background to discussing options that included campaigns to address recruiting referees, referee accreditation, and referee abuse, and studies of the communication training and skills for referees. At that meeting and in other discussions with personnel at peak bodies I encountered a certain resignation to the notion that abuse and negative attitudes towards referees are strongly engrained in our ‘culture’. Without a massive injection of funding ‘culture’ was assumed to be a phenomenon too large for organisations to realistically attempt to influence. Due to the massive scale of the ‘problem’, there is pessimism about the prospective success of campaign approaches - media and other public awareness initiatives - to shifting people’s attitudes and behaviours towards referees.

More than one official suggested that among the strategic options available for addressing problems of the abuse of referees, the most effective channel for meaningful intervention is to focus on preparing and fortifying referees to deal effectively with
abuse. This idea resonated with me as I knew there was evidence from psychological studies (Neave and Wolfson, 2003; Friman et al., 2004) that experienced referees cope more effectively with player abuse. What might be learnt from experienced referees that could be passed on to others? In the following months I prepared to explore the communication strategies used by experienced referees to prevent and manage abuse and aggression from players. I wanted to find out how referees could reduce the aggression directed at themselves. The Referee Development Manager at the Football Federation of Australia introduced me to some of Australia’s most senior and experienced referees. In March 2006 I interviewed three football referees who practice at the highest level of the game in Australia about their strategies for managing aggression and abuse from players.
2.2 Research study 1.

This paper was peer reviewed by the Australia and New Zealand Communication Association and accepted for presentation at their annual conference in Adelaide 2006.


The paper is also available at the conference website.

TACKLING ABUSE OF OFFICIALS: ATTITUDES AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF EXPERIENCED FOOTBALL REFEREEES

Abstract

Many Australian and overseas sports bodies are experiencing difficulties retaining referees at the grass roots level, especially young referees. Abuse and aggression from players and spectators are the most commonly given reasons for referees leaving. This paper uses in depth interviews to explore the way a small sample of experienced, successful football (soccer) referees think about and deal with abuse and aggression.

Referees interviewed ultimately judge their own performance by the correctness of their decisions and application of the rules. Central to their communication is a deliberate projection of calm and confidence in themselves and their decisions.

Player abuse is perceived to be driven by frustration, disappointment and partiality. Referees adapt their response according to situation. They articulated an extensive repertoire of verbal and non-verbal techniques for enhancing player acceptance of decisions, and dealing directly with player abuse and aggression.

Spectators are generally considered to be partial, poorly positioned to judge, and lacking in understanding of the rules. By focusing on the game and reminding themselves of their own expertise, referees are able to ‘block out’ most spectator abuse.

Some of the attitudes and skills of successful referees may be passed on to inexperienced referees through explicit teaching, practising communication skills, and performance evaluation systems. Their strategies for projecting confidence and enhancing acceptance of decisions may be transferable to other professions and situations.
A personal reflection on early refereeing experiences

My first game was a ‘Ladies C Grade’ fixture on a freezing night, a good fixture for a new referee because it would be played at a gentle pace in a competition known for its good sporting conduct. I left work later than I had intended and had to put my uniform on when I arrived at the ground. Five minutes before kick off, as I scratched around in my bag looking for my pen and whistle, managers were asking me for the official ‘match record card’ which hadn’t yet arrived at the ground. I was reflecting-in-action that I needed to be earlier and more organised for future games.

In the interests of establishing an air of authority I had planned to be in the centre of the field with my assistants at kick off time, whistle the teams to the centre for a jewellery check, coin toss and pre match talk. As it turned out the teams were in the centre before me, and as soon as I arrived we tossed the coin. My assistants did the jewellery check and I hurriedly, and to no-one in particular, said something about playing fair and having a good game. Fortunately it all slowed down after I blew the whistle for the game to start! Be organised!

Five minutes into the game one of the red team’s players, in the penalty area and going towards goal, was sandwiched and felled by two of the white team defenders. I immediately blew my whistle and signalled for a penalty. Immediately the response from the two defenders was ‘she ran into us and fell over’. Others on the white team also said they felt the decision was harsh. I said that it was clearly a foul and a penalty. The penalty was taken and scored.

There were very few heavy tackles and fewer fouls in the game, but those that were committed were by and awarded against the white team. The red team stayed just within the rules of the game, but I sensed that the players and crowd felt I was showing bias when I started getting comments like “It has to cut both ways”. “There are two teams here ref”. My confidence in my own decisions started to waiver. I began to wonder if I had blown the whistle for the penalty too immediately (had I allowed time for a properly considered decision?), and questioned whether I had seen the penalty correctly. I noticed myself looking for fouls by the reds so that I might award something for the whites and at least appear to even the ledger. The reds continued to play within the rules and I didn’t even the ledger at all, apart from twice allowing the whites to rethrow the ball when I could have given a foul throw over to the reds.
At half time I joined the assistant referees in the middle of the field. As I approached, one of them, aged 14, said “What about those idiot defenders saying it wasn’t a penalty – what do they expect when two of them hack her down. I’ve never seen a more definite penalty”. Instantly my confidence in my decision making was restored.

Some of the comments from the players and crowd continued through the second half of the match, but I was unperturbed because I had stronger belief in my own judgement and neutrality. After the game I was told that the loss meant the white team were out of the semi finals.

The personal narrative above was written by the author two weeks after officiating his first full football match at the age of 44. It is used here to give the reader an insight into a referee’s experience of pressure from spectators and players, albeit relatively low level pressure (Markula & Denison, 2005). It shows a vulnerability to dissent and abuse that led the referee to doubt his own judgement. This contrasts with research with experienced football referees. One study found that many have attitudes to abuse and dissent that help them to externalise the causes of, and avoid being influenced by, abuse and pressure (Neave & Wolfson, 2003). Mellick et al. (2005) found that elite level rugby and football referees employ a range of communication strategies that enhance player acceptance of decisions and influence those involved in the game (2005). What do inexperienced referees have to learn or become to deal effectively with abuse and aggression?

**Communication and aggressive behaviour in different settings**

Referees are tasked with ensuring that the rules of the game are observed by the teams playing in the match. The world’s best known football (soccer) referee Pierluigi Collina says the most important quality a referee can have is the courage to decide and take difficult and important decisions ‘even when it would be easier not to’ (Collina, 2003).

The prevention and management of aggression is a concern in many professions and civil settings where decisions are made and communicated. The perception of justice has been linked to lower levels of student aggression and hostility in a study of US college classes. In particular, student perceptions of procedural justice (belief that the evaluation process was fair) were found to be more important than distributive justice (the outcome or teacher decision) (Chory-Assad & Paulsel 2004). If this notion is applied to the football context, players will be more accepting of decisions against them
and their team if they perceive that the decision is made in accordance with the rules and that the rules are being consistently applied. Referees might enhance perceptions of fairness if they communicate links between their decisions and the rules, and to other incidents and decisions in the game.

In the context of mental and other health care, Duxbury distinguishes the focus of three models for explaining and managing aggressive patient behaviour. Insofar as the health care context can be transposed to football matches, the staff/patient relationship may be applied to the referee/player or referee/spectator relationships. Duxbury (2002) says that an ‘internal model’ views patient variables as the cause of patient aggression and violence. In mental health, patient variables studied have mostly been age, gender and mental illness. An ‘external model’ “directly opposes the internal model and highlights the impact of environmental factors upon patient aggression” (p.327) including space, privacy provisions, timing and overcrowding. It also includes staff characteristics such as gender, experience, training and seniority. The ‘situational model’ is multidimensional, covering the internal and external factors as well as combinations of factors, and the interactions between staff and patients. She says that despite evidence showing the complexity of aggressive behaviour, lending support to the situational model, the internal model has dominated research efforts because of the relative ease of isolating patient variables for study.

The internal, external, or situational focus that health care services use to explain aggressive patient behaviour influences the strategies they use to manage it. While staff tend to have an internal, patient focus the result is the use of a narrow, reactive and sometimes inappropriate range of strategies (especially chemical and physical restraint) for managing patient aggression and violence. She argues that a multiperspectival focus on internal, external and situational factors will yield strategies that prevent and manage aggression more effectively (2002). A study of patient violence and aggression in three mental health wards found that patients and nurses differed in their perceptions of the causes and solutions. Patients attributed aggressive behaviour largely to environmental conditions and poor communication, and they advocated training in nurse communication skills to improve management. Nurses attributed aggressive behaviour mainly to the patient’s mental illness, and suggested organisational solutions (Duxbury & Whittington, 2005).

The parallels between referees and hospital staff as authority figures tasked with making final decisions will not be examined at length here. However the final discussion will
consider referee attitudes to player abuse, and communication skills, in terms of internal, external and situational focus.

**Aggression and referees**

Referees routinely experience dissent and abuse and other forms of aggression at all levels of match. They experience hostile reactions to their decisions and aggressive attempts to influence them from players, coaches, parents and spectators. Abuse of sports officials is widely understood to be the main reason for a decline in the number of sports officials in Australia (ASC, 2004) and other countries. In 2003/4 the Australian Sports Commission funded a national public education campaign to discourage abuse of officials (ASC, 2004).

Although there have been many investigations dealing with sports fan and other aggression in sports, ".. there is a lack of studies that have focused on the situation of sports judges/referees/umpires exposed to aggression (Friman et al., 2004, p.653). Little is known about the reasons for aggression and abuse, the place of official abuse in cultural practices, situations and strategies that lead to or prevent abuse, the outcomes of abuse for those involved, or the relationship between abuse and decisions by referees to discontinue refereeing.

Most of the research that has focused on referees and pressure or aggression has been done by psychologists using various forms of self-report by experienced referees. Studies have identified individual referee differences in perceptions of (Friman et al., 2004) and response to (Folkesson et al., 2002) aggression and abuse, and high levels of self-confidence among experienced referees that help them to externalise and cope with abuse (Neave & Wolfson, 2003). Explanations advanced for the abuse of officials include lack of respect for authority figures, young people imitating professional sport role models (NASO, 2002), spectators acting-out their feelings and frustrations (in Friman et al., 2004), and excessive importance of sport to the identity of small communities (in Friman et al., 2004; NASO, 2002).

Referee skills in communication have been incidental to previous research findings, rather than the focus of the research. This paper reports a preliminary, exploratory study of successful football referees’ attitudes towards, and communications skills for dealing with, abuse from players and spectators. The purpose of the study is to gain insights that might help with the training and development of inexperienced referees, many of whom
are leaving refereeing. The next sections review the problems of abuse and referees leaving, and the findings of interviews conducted for this study.

**Abused referees are leaving**

Elite football in Australia has recently established the successful national A-League, entered the Asian confederation, and qualified for the World Cup finals. These achievements are likely to result in a surge in grass roots football participation, and an expanding need for referees. But football, like many other sports in Australia, Europe and North America at the non-professional level, has problems retaining officials. Australia’s largest state (NSW) loses and has to replace approximately 25% of its referees each year (Oke, 2002; Oke, 2005). An FFA survey of state referee bodies identified abuse of officials, poor club and association attitudes to the safety and protection of referees, and poor retention of experienced and inexperienced referees were their largest concerns at the grass roots level (Lorenc, 2005).

An Australian Sports Commission survey of a random sample of Australian households suggested that abuse in non-professional sports is a frequent and increasing in occurrence in non-professional sport in Australia (2004, p.9), and that 77% of those involved in non-professional sport are very or somewhat concerned about abuse of officials (2004, p.11). Instances of abuse were most commonly observed at AFL games, followed by soccer, rugby, league, rugby union and netball (2004, p.15). Although the majority of people (81% of people attending, playing in or officiating at non-professional sport) believed abuse of officials is never acceptable, 16% believed that abuse of officials is sometimes acceptable, and two per cent believe abuse is always or mostly acceptable. Three per cent of those involved in sport as players, officials or spectators admitted abusing (insult or violence) officials in the previous 12 months (2004, p.19).

Studies have found that aggression directed at referees commonly results in referees losing concentration, performance, motivation, and doubting their own decision-making (Friman et al., 2004), and that the effects are worse for younger referees (Folkesson et al., 2002).

You do get affected and if you have no prior experience, it will nearly kill you. I was almost dead after a specific game, I was feeling sick (From Friman et al., 2004, p.664-5).
Abuse is experienced by referees of all ages, but young referees have been found to be “notably more exposed to occasions of verbal aggression” (Folkesson et al., 2002, p.322) and players are more likely to try to obtain advantage with younger referees (Oke, 2005; Friman et al., 2004).

The transition of football (soccer) referees from inexperience to experience parallels development in other fields that require practitioners to deal with aggression and abuse, such as teaching, policing, nursing and many front-line public sector positions. However the issues of abuse may be more acute in sports officiating for several reasons. The sports field is a forum for heightened physical and emotional stressors (Folkesson et al., 2002) and levels of dissent and direct challenge to the authority figure may be higher. For many referees, organisational back-up is not readily available if control is lost. Training for sports officiating is often counted in hours, not months or years as it is for most professions, and the trainees are often as young as fourteen.

Drawing from definitions used by Friman et al. (2004), Folkesson et al. (2002) and a survey by the Australian Sports Commission (2004), this paper understands abuse as verbal (including insult, threats, swearing, criticism, dissent) and non-verbal behaviours directed at referees which the referee experiences as unpleasant.

Previous research with experienced referees on abuse and pressure

Some referees are much less affected by dissent, abuse, threats and violence than others. Experienced referees often employ strategies for coping with and handling aggression and other on-field situations. Some report dealing effectively with aggression by ignoring or “keeping it out”, others by staying cool while confronting and dealing with the perpetrators, and others by reminding themselves not to take it personally (Friman et al., 2004).

A British study found that a sample of 63 experienced referees (average age 40 years and ranging from 4-25 years refereeing experience) displayed a range of coping mechanisms that made them highly resilient to criticism and verbal abuse (Neave & Wolfson, 2003). The referees believed that dissent and abuse were much more likely to result from people not understanding the rules of the game, and bias towards their own team, than from real referee errors. The referees reported low levels of stress from the physical and psychological demands of the game and high levels of optimism and confidence in themselves before and after games. Their confidence was reflected in an
ability to reflect positively on their own mistakes, including reminding themselves of all the good games they referee, and that their errors are rare. When asked to compare themselves with other referees they showed a high level of self-confidence, scoring themselves higher than the majority of other referees in terms of honesty, decisiveness, confidence, knowledge of the rules, reading of the game, and fitness (Neave & Wolfson, 2003).

The Neave & Wolfson (2003) study paints a picture of successful referees having a range of internal strengths and mechanisms for coping with dissent and abuse - including a belief that most abuse is beyond the control of referees, and is not to be taken personally – and very high confidence in their own ability and decision-making. This is consistent with findings from a study of elite level rugby and football referees, and best practice in referee communication of decisions. Mellick et al. (2005) say that there are “few other societal roles wherein an individual accepts the risk of being held accountable for decisions made with such frequency”, and that mishandling the communication of decisions can lead to stress for referees and other participants (2005, p.43). They found that elite referees communicate decisions effectively by engaging the offending player in a decision interaction, projecting confidence in the decision, and promoting perception of the decision as fair. They identified seven main interpersonal verbal and non-verbal actions that influence the quality of the communication of decisions: whistle; gaze; posture and movement; hand/arm signals; verbal explanation; control; style and composure; and time management (Mellick et al., 2005).

**Research questions**

The aim of this study was to explore the way experienced, successful football referees think about and deal with abuse and aggression. An open ended approach to gathering data was used to answer two broad research questions:

RQ1. What are the attitudes of successful referees to criticism, abuse and aggression?

RQ2. What communication strategies and techniques do successful referees use to deal with abuse and aggression?

**Method**

The author held discussions with senior refereeing officials, the NSW Referees
Development Officer (Wes Oke) and Australia’s National Refereeing Manager (Richard Lorenz), when gathering background information for the study. The findings report three subsequent in-depth interviews conducted in March 2006. Two were conducted face to face, and one on the telephone.

Three active high level referees were selected as examples of successful practitioners. Each has refereed at the lowest levels of the sport where matches are played with very small audiences, and at very high levels of football in Australia where their practices and decisions are openly accountable to large live and televised audiences. Each had officiated more than 200 professional or semi-professional games, and had been refereeing since their teenage years. Two had been refereeing more than 20 years, one for 16 years. Interviewees were all male aged in their thirties. All had a tertiary degree.

**Interview guide**

The interviewer had no previous relationship or established rapport (apart from asking permission in advance for a recorded interview) with the interviewees, and the interview guideline was structured to take the interview through several stages. Interviewees were advised that the study was about ‘referee communication and reactions to aggression’, and given assurances of confidentiality. The first questions were straightforward, non-controversial questions (Amis, 2005) about length of experience in refereeing, age, education, and employment outside refereeing (unlike elite players, elite referees are semi-professional).

The second section asked very open ended questions designed to allow interviewees to speak about general themes relating to refereeing, without tainting their responses with preconceived ideas (Amis, 2005) about abuse or referee communication strategies. (What is it about refereeing that you like? What are the worst aspects of refereeing? What makes a good referee? Tell me about poor refereeing – what makes it poor?).

The third and longest section of the interviews used a standardised open-ended interviewing approach (Amis, 2005) as the interviewer imposed, or sought to explore in greater depth, preconceived themes deriving from previous literature and relating to the research questions (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). The nature of the responses to most of these questions was still “left open to the individual being interviewed” (Amis, 2005). These started with general questions about communication strategies (What do you
think is the most effective way to communicate decisions on the field? Do you have special techniques?), followed by probing for information about perceived audiences, specific techniques, and perceived pressures on decision making. The questions then moved to questions about abuse and aggression, sources, perceived reasons, and factors that might affect abuse of referees such as the reputation and age of the referee. The last questions asked about their memories of teenage refereeing, and advice they would give to young referees.

As anticipated, many of the preconceived topics were raised by the respondents themselves in the very open ended second stage of the interview. The interviewer took care to adapt the line of questioning while covering all of the preconceived topics relating to the research questions.

Findings

RQ.1. What are the attitudes of successful referees to criticism, abuse and aggression?

Interviewees attend more to abuse and aggression from players and coaching staff, than from spectators. This is consistent with Folkesson’s finding that referees find player and coach aggression harder to cope with than spectator aggression (2002). Physical presence plays an important role in referee attitudes to abuse.

It’s a little bit easier when the people can’t get directly at you, but when you’ve got a player in front of you demanding an explanation or demanding some sort of justice you’ve got to be able to speak to them and come up with some retort that pacifies them, satisfies them, explains it to them.

Two of the referees mentioned that at lower levels of the game, where “you might be in some paddock in Pagewood and there is just a rope between you and 2,000 people”, angry spectators and parents raise security concerns that are intimidating for referees.

- **Player abuse - Frustration and disappointment**

They felt that abuse mostly arose from player frustration and disappointment. These in turn derive from their team losing or performing poorly, and important referee decisions – such as players being sent off and penalty kicks - going against their team. Important
decisions were described as catalysts for outbursts of abuse. Consequently the interviewees were very aware of the importance of ‘selling their decisions’, to promote player understanding and acceptance of the decision, and minimise disruption to the game.

They also talked about player perceptions of referee mistakes and bias, and to a lesser extent actual referee mistakes. Two referees mentioned actual and perceived non-intervention by referees, especially in instances of dangerous play, as important triggers for abuse.

*I think it comes from frustration, and it comes from the referee not intervening when they should. If there’s a late tackle that wasn’t pulled up, and it’s hurt the player, then they can get aggressive and abusive towards the referee .. Or if for example there’s two players who are getting frustrated with each other, two opponents, and the referee doesn’t intervene to draw a line somewhere and stop it.*

Some players are much more likely to be abusive than others, and abuse and pressure from players takes many forms. They described instances of players talking and criticising, yelling, swearing, waving, running at, and surrounding them.

- **Player abuse - Constant chipping away**

Two of the interviewees were quite certain that some, but not a majority of, coaches, teams and players use dissent and abuse in a deliberate way to influence the referee’s decision making in favour of their team. They maintained a general awareness of attempts to create uncertainty in the minds of referees and unsettle their confidence in decision-making. One reported instances where players had been encouraged to intimidate the referee by mobbing at critical decisions. Otherwise they had little knowledge of the extent or specifics of orchestrated attempts to undermine referees on-field.

One referee said that he seldom experienced angry outbursts of abuse directed at himself. But he, and another referee, said some players at all levels of football are “constantly chipping away” during games with comments and claims that suggest the referee is biased towards the other team, and should try to even things up.

*I think they use it to try and influence your decisions and influence future decisions. “You’re giving us nothing”, and they can say that quite aggressively,*
but the reality is that you may very well have been giving them free kicks and cautioning other players.

- Spectator abuse - Partial and ill-informed

Referees acknowledged that their own mistakes cause some of the abuse they receive from spectators, but thought most spectator abuse and criticism resulted from spectators’ partiality for their own team, poor judgement, and ignorance of the rules. Their thoughts on spectator abuse echoed the attitudes of Neave & Wolfson’s (2003) and Friman et al.’s (2004) findings in Europe.

people don’t understand the game, they don’t understand the off side rule and they can’t see it from the referee’s perspective. They’re looking from 200 metres away on an angle. The assistant referee is looking dead set straight on.

from a spectator’s point of view, abuse can come simply from the fact that you’re the referee and their team’s losing. They think, they appear to think, that their team is losing because of the referee.

One said referees have to get used to “the out of control abuse, the random abuse not directed at you from a player but maybe from somewhere in the grandstand. That’s been part of the game since the game was invented”.

you can tell your mind, ‘I’m going to shut that out, this person knows not what they are talking about. They have not a clue’. You have to tell yourself ‘I’m the man in the middle, we’re in the black, I know what I’m doing and I’m not going to listen to that’. You have to .. tell yourself that week in and week out when you go out there.

During top level games in large stadiums, they are aware of the pressure from “50000 people who are booing and whistling at you”, believing that with enough noise and protest they might influence decisions in favour of their team.

One said that spectator pressure might influence referee decisions, but all were determined that it would not affect them. Conscious that the most important measure of performance is the correctness of decisions, the referees felt they were able to shut out spectator noise and abuse by concentrating their attention on the game. One said that in a game watched by 50000 people he made several controversial decisions. After the game he realised that he had only been aware of the crowd once or twice during the 90 minute match.
Learn from mistakes

Neave & Wolfson (2003) identified experienced referees’ positive attitudes to mistakes as a skill that helps referees cope with the pressures of football. Each referee in the present study stressed the inevitability of mistakes, and the importance of having a constructive attitude to learning from them.

If you cannot accept that you’ve made a mistake you’re never going to be a good referee.

If you do have a bad game you have to come off and say yes, ‘I had a shocker’.

An average referee would come off and blame the players or the coaches.

They felt that blindness to one’s mistakes is an obstacle to improvement for all levels of official. Each referred to the value of being able to debrief openly with assistants and inspectors after the game, for the purposes of discussing and learning from match incidents. One related an incident in a very important recent game. Players on one team were very aggressive and abusive after a tackle they felt should have been called a foul. The referee said “If I’ve made a mistake, I’ve made a mistake. But from where I was I thought that the ball was touched”. The players accepted his intent and calmed down.

Personally, but not to heart

Experienced referees avoid taking criticism and abuse ‘personally’, and feel that people who take criticism personally don’t last long as referees (Friman et al., 2004; Folkesson et al., 2002). In the present study all said it was important not to take abuse during the game personally. One said his resilience to abuse and criticism had grown with experience and success as a referee.

When I first started I think I took criticism more readily and personally than I do now. Most of the time it’s water off a duck’s back.

I never take it personally, I think people that do take it personally don’t stay in the game.

Interviewees live with the accountability that comes with large audiences, TV critics and slow motion replays of critical incidents. They said they do attend to opinions after the game, and distinguished between justified and unjustified criticism. They were disappointed when they made mistakes, but, in different ways, tried not to let criticism overcome them.
I go back to see if the criticism is justified or not. And if it is I’ll say ‘Well even though I may not like it, I really did stuff that one up’. If they’re criticising just for the sake of criticising and I know that I have got it right, I couldn’t give two hoots what they say.

I tell myself it doesn’t matter. I’ve got a family to go home to, I’ve got a good job, I don’t let it worry me. I just don’t take it personally.

I take it personally in that of course I was the person that made that mistake so it’s an attack on me personally.. I take it personally but not to heart, I don’t know if there is a difference.

you know a certain type of personality will say ‘no worries, they can say what they like’. But some people do take it very personally and that’s why there’s such a high turnover of referees.

RQ.2 What communication strategies and techniques do successful referees use to deal with abuse and aggression?

Each said they consciously communicate to their assistants, the spectators, coaching staff and substitutes.

You want them to see that you’re in control, and that you’ve taken action. You want them to see that you’ve seen a foul and you’ve waved the player on, that’s a critical one. You don’t want spectators to think that you’re missing anything. So no hand signals for foul play makes people in the crowd angry, not only the players. ‘Yes the referee’s seen the foul but he’s allowing play to continue’.

- Appear to be in control

The appearance of calm and control is extremely important. They use numerous strategies to promote the perception that they are in control of themselves and the match. From first impressions to the end of the game, each referee emphasised the importance of appearing confident, but not arrogant. Before the game, referees manage their appearance and interactions in ways intended to create an impression of professionalism. Head and body positions, haircut, uniform and even shoe shine were mentioned as helping the desired impression.
A confident and approachable person. Rather than someone who is arrogant or aggressive. It certainly does help. And during the game you convey yourself as someone who is firm but fair, and not aggressive. I think that helps also.

In the emotional football atmosphere, with noisy crowds and players moving and interacting all around, referees are under constant pressure to make accurate split-second judgements and implement decisions fairly. Referees want to be seen to be confident in the decisions they make, believing that player perceptions of referee uncertainty will undermine the referee’s influence, create tensions and diminish control. Even when not entirely sure of decisions, it’s important to appear calm and confident.

*If you’re confident and seem to know what you’re doing - even if that might be the furthest thing from the truth - if you appear to know what you’re doing and you’re confident in conveying - ‘Yes that’s a free kick. That’s a yellow card’ - The players are more likely to accept it.*

*I try and make sure that those looking at me see from the outside that I’m not affected by the pressure. One of the crucial aspects of a successful referee is that no matter what’s happening in the game you must give the outward appearance that it doesn’t matter to you, that it’s still easy even if it’s the greatest drama in the world.. So it is about maintaining good body language, maintaining a good tone of voice, maintaining all of the features of a good referee when things are easy and there’s no pressure. You try and keep that calm kind of feel and that look about you even when there’s a lot of pressure on.*

- **Adapt for the situation**

When confronted by abusive and angry players, referees select from numerous verbal and non-verbal techniques to restore order to the game and player conduct. They differentiate their approaches according to the requirements of the situation, and their perceptions of players. Some players receive yellow cards of caution straight away. In other situations the referee will speak in short, sharp terms such as “that’s enough, move away now”, or, retaining his authority, give the player two alternatives “either you move away now or I’m going to caution you, the choice is yours”.

Non-verbal strategies are also used to promote player acceptance of decisions as correct interpretations of the rules of the game.
Sometimes you won’t speak at all, so you sell your decision by the tone of your whistle. If it’s a small free kick you might use a very short sharp whistle. But if it’s a really serious foul you’ll use a loud, strong elongated whistle.

I find that using open palms and a bit of a shrug to say ‘Well what do you expect me to do?’ communicates it much better than giving the signal for the direction of the free kick. .. using the open palm rather than pointing to players has more of a calming effect, a more neutral aspect.

I would maybe use some hand signals, you know, fingers pointed up and maybe patting down. Maybe push the pressure of the moment down. With one hand say ‘Just calm down a bit’.

Referees choose whether to communicate publicly, so that other players will also hear and heed the message, or single a player out. This can be done conspicuously, or discretely ‘on the run’, or during a stoppage of play.

If I can see that a player is getting a bit hot under the collar and there’s going to be a goal kick I might go over to him and say: ‘You know you’re an experienced player and you’re getting frustrated. Be careful, you don’t want to get sent off for something stupid’.

Two said that player outbursts of anger tend to go on for only a few seconds, and that the best strategy is to accept the outburst as a way of allowing the player to let off steam. One said he used to respond to player aggression by being aggressive himself, but has learnt more effective ways.

You’ve got to let them have their say, as long as they don’t go over the top and push you or swear at you or anything like that. But if they are being aggressive you’ve got to let them have their say, not stand there and argue with them ..

Once it’s off their chests - generally it will only be a burst of about 5 seconds, if that- then you deal with it. Either in a calm manner or through your facial expressions. I find that works really well.

In some situations referees pretend emotions. For example when a dangerous tackle occurs, although not feeling angry, referees will feign anger to exaggerate disapproval and add weight to their verbal threats.

Another listed a range of techniques he uses to calm players down and restore control, while staying mindful of the needs of the game.
At times I feel the game is getting a little bit out of control, but I like that. I like to feel when it’s time to bring it back, and I’ve got plenty of strategies to do that.

Free kicks, long breaks between free kicks where you stand on the ball, yellow cards, red cards – you can bring it back. A long talk to an offender wastes a minute or so, then the edge dies off the tension. There are plenty of things that you can do. Sometimes it’s good to keep the pressure up. It’s a real fine balance, I remember once we were told a game’s like a balloon, you pump it right up, the pressures right up, it’s just about to burst. You don’t want to totally spoil it by deflating it.

Discussion

Interviewees were very clearly aware of a range of pressures, including abuse from players, coaches and spectators. The greatest pressures came from themselves, and their determination to make the right decisions in accordance with the rules of the game.

The way that I class my games as good or otherwise is ‘Did I get all of the decisions right? And did I make any mistakes?’

The evaluation they focus on is the informed opinion of referee inspectors and peers, and their own reflection with the aid of match replays. They reported that the opinions of emotion-charged players and biased and uninformed spectators are largely external to what really matters to the referee. Focus on performance also helps them to ‘block out’ pressure from large crowds of spectators.

Referees require players to observe the rules of the game and respond to their directions and decisions. Referees in this study emphasised the importance of appearing calm and confident to achieve player respect for their decisions, and use numerous verbal and non-verbal techniques to manage their own presentation and body language. They articulated a large repertoire of non-verbal communication techniques used to ‘sell’ decisions, and deal with aggression and abuse. Many of their communication strategies promote perceptions of fairness, such as the preference for calm and firmness over aggression, whistle responses that are proportional to the seriousness of transgression, and explicitly linking decisions to the rules of the game. These strategies are likely to reduce aggression because they promote perceptions of procedural justice (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004) and enhance player acceptance of decisions (Mellick et al., 2005).
Their attitudes to player aggression and abuse indicated (Duxbury’s, 2002) internal, external and situational focus. They were mindful of individual differences in player propensity to abuse or ‘chip away’, but felt that most abuse was caused by external factors such as incidents that occurred during the game, including team performance and referee decisions and mistakes. The referees were also aware of the importance of their own interactions with players, this was reflected in the range of very deliberate strategies they employed to manage perceptions and communicate decisions in ways that would enhance acceptance. There were many instances mentioned where referees displayed sensitivity, proactivity and responsiveness suggestive of a situational focus in their approach to preventing and managing aggression.

Referee responses indicated that they felt spectator abuse and aggression is the product of internal spectator, and perhaps environment, variables. Although the referees deliberately communicate non-verbally with spectators in mind, they don’t interact with spectators. At the highest levels of the game, where spectators are prevented from entering the field of play, referees are able to try to ignore spectator abuse. Where referees are not physically protected it might be necessary to have superior spectator communication skills that reflect a situational focus.

**Conclusion**

The data reported here are based on the self reports of just three elite level referees and conclusions must therefore be tentative. The attitudes and skills of the interviewees have been developed through years of on-field experience, intensive training and expert reflection. Their level of mastery of situation and technique is only achieved by a few, and only after many years. However they provide insights suggestive of strategies that might aid in the development of all inexperienced referees.

The evaluation systems available to elite level referees through mentors, referee inspectors and match replays enable referees to debrief after games and learn from their own performance. By providing a performance measure the referees respect, the evaluation helps referees to externalise abuse and criticism from other sources. Such resource-intensive evaluation can’t be made available to all referees. But their value, even to referees with experience of hundreds of matches, underscores the importance of sustainable and constructive mentor, evaluation and other feedback systems for non-professional sports officiating (Cuskelly et al., 2004; Oke, 2002). Referees need
performance feedback that they trust to be neutral and informed, to help them learn from their mistakes, to separate justified from unjustified criticism, and develop confidence.

This research has not examined referee training, or alternative views of players, spectators and coaches. Players, like patients in Duxbury & Whittington’s (2005) study, may have quite different perspectives on the causes and prevention of aggression. However the findings support calls for improving education that helps referees to deal with abuse (Oke, 2002; Haynes, 2005; Cuskelly et al., 2004). Training might include assessing abuse and aggression, and practising verbal and non-verbal communication techniques.

The insights provided here by three referees suggest that referees should also be taught very explicitly:

- that a decision made by a neutral, competent and well-positioned referee is likely to be more correct than an observation made by people with an interest in one of the teams
- techniques for depersonalising abuse and criticism
- to expect to encounter, and how to recognise, player, coach and spectator behaviours that create uncertainty in the referee’s mind, or somehow deter the referee from awarding against their team by making the consequences unpleasant
- that they will make mistakes, and it’s important to learn from them.

‘Decision communication skills’ are important for reducing player and referee stress, but there is a lack of evidence to use as a basis for training programs (Mellick et al., 2005). The findings here support calls for further research (at elite and non-professional levels) that aids understanding and teaching of strategies that help referees prevent and manage abuse and aggression.

There is a paucity of research into the experiences of referees in non-professional sport. Little is known about their attitudes, skills, or the reasons they are leaving. Future research should explore referee and other perspectives, and look beyond the manuals to examine the training referees actually receive in communication skills and the management of abuse.

The projection of confidence in self, decisions and advice is a valuable communication
skill. The very deliberate strategies used by the referees in this study to promote confidence and enhance acceptance of decisions provide insights that might be transferable to teaching, medicine, customer service and other professions and situations.

**References**


2.3 Outcomes for research study 1.

Importantly, the study suggested that for elite level referees player aggression and abuse was not perceived to be as problematic as it is for many other referees at lower levels. For a start, in large stadiums with fences and police, elite level referees are not as vulnerable to physical violence as they might be in suburban matches at lower levels. The referees interviewed were confident in their own abilities and decisions and they tended to externalise the causes of abuse. Rather than blame themselves they viewed abuse as the product of the situation or the player’s temperament.

It was also clear that the elite level referees used very deliberate strategies to project calm and confidence, and to ‘sell’ their decisions. They were extremely ‘self-aware’ in their communication, carefully managing their dress and grooming to create an impression of ‘professionalism’, and using their voice, signals and facial expressions to communicate the right balance of calm, control and approachability. When I asked one referee how he might calm down a match that was starting to get out of control he quickly listed 5 or 6 strategies he draws on depending on the situation, and said he ‘could list a dozen more’.

Several factors emerged from this study that helped to shape my inquiry.

- I now viewed the elite referees as highly proficient, model communicators, and saw their communication skills as integral to reaching the highest levels of mastering the profession. I had never previously encountered the acuity of self-awareness and ability to articulate communication practices that I had witnessed and documented in my paper. This self-awareness is a cornerstone of referees’ communication expertise.

- Referees attributed their professional capabilities in part to personal qualities and experiences they brought from outside refereeing, in part to their training and mentors, but mostly to their extensive experience of refereeing practice.

- It seemed evident that elite referees develop their acute self-awareness from intense scrutiny, detailed feedback and expert reflection on their practice. Elite referees learn about themselves and their practice from mentors, referee inspectors and match replays. More than almost any professional group imaginable, they learn to see themselves as others see them, and have opportunities to reflect purposefully on their practice.
I was faced with a number of potential directions for my research. My main research interest continued to be the large numbers of referees who practice at the lower levels of the game. Three factors were deemed critical to the project:

- An important component of the proficiency that elite level referees demonstrate is an awareness of their own practices and the way others see them. This facilitates a heightened understanding of their interactions with players, which in turn enables a sense of control and confidence.
- The systematic provision of expert feedback available to elite referees is labour and resource intensive, and presently not available to the vast majority of referees.
- Referees at lower levels of the game would benefit from better understanding the way players interpret and react to their communicative displays.

The following chapter shows the way the research addressed the challenge of identifying and explaining players’ views of referees and their communicative displays.
Chapter 3. Exploring Australian player perspectives

3.1 Context for research study 2.

The first research study was in several ways an important entree to understanding referee and player interaction. The background research revealed the paucity of evidence of the effects of referees’ communicative displays, and the absence of data explaining and exploring the views of players. The process of transcribing and interpreting the interviews heightened my familiarity and facility with the referees’ perspective. The interviews yielded some important insights about refereeing including the importance of systematic feedback from respected sources, and the value of self-awareness and control over displays that communicate. In addition, the relationships I developed with the referee interviewees enabled me to return to them several times for assistance and advice on subsequent stages of the research.

Above all I was intrigued by the challenge of gathering data about the way players interpret and react to football referees’ communicative displays, that could be communicated to referees through training and dissemination of information. With a better understanding of referee/player interaction, referees could practice with greater confidence, and attain greater control over the outcomes of their interactions with players. In short, I was attracted to the challenge of using my developing knowledge and understanding to accelerate the development of referees that normally occurs through time and experience. To this end I undertook to gather data from players about the way they react to referees’ communicative displays.

Reflecting on the first study I was aware that I was largely accepting and reporting the words of the referees at face value. It bothered me that as yet I had no theory or model to help me interpret and account for the anecdotal evidence I was gathering. During 2005 and 2006 I explored different disciplinary traditions in search of insights into authority figures, communication and responses. Along the way I immersed myself in studies of persuasion and credibility, reflective practice in professions, and Western and Confucian analyses of virtue.

In reviewing previous research on the management of aggression I had encountered Chory-Assad & Paulsel’s (2004) paper on classroom aggression as a response to
perceptions of injustice. Through this paper and Mellick et al’s (2005) assertion of the importance of promoting fairness in referee decision communication, I was introduced to the research literature often referred to as ‘organisational justice’, or the ‘social psychology of organisational justice’. Although justice has always interested scholars, ‘organisational justice’ refers to a modern era of research developed since about 1950 (Colquitt, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). This newer field is concerned with people’s subjective perceptions of what is fair, rather than normative legal and moral notions of what is right (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). This body of knowledge has developed through an accretion of thousands of mostly experimental studies investigating the effects of a range of variables on perceptions of fairness and unfairness.

The focus and interpretation of the organisational justice research has been dominated at different times by shifting notions and theories of fairness. Colquitt et al. (2005) detail the history of the modern era of organisational justice studies. They describe a wave of studies focused on distributive justice between 1950 and 1975. Distributive justice refers to a focus on studying the effects of different rewards and outcomes. From 1975 a new wave of studies of procedural justice ran until the middle of the 1990s. Procedural justice refers to a focus on aspects of the formal processes used to determine allocations and outcomes, including having a voice in decisions, choice, bias, consistency and recourse to review of decisions. Two approaches have dominated since 1985, the interactional and integrative justice approaches. Interactional justice considers effects separate from the formal characteristics of procedures. It refers to the effects that the decision maker’s interpersonal treatment, including communication, have on perceptions of fairness in decision-making. In their seminal work on communication criteria in fairness, Bies & Moag (1986) argued that the important features of interpersonal treatment in decision-making include the truthfulness, respect and propriety shown by the authority figures, and their justification for decisions.

The integrative approach described by Colquitt et al. (2005) refers to the development of theories and models that explain and integrate the many dimensions of justice. They detail three integrative conceptualisations of justice. First, ‘counterfactual’ conceptualisations emphasise people’s framing of justice in terms of the alternative outcomes that decision-makers and processes could have led to. Second, ‘group-oriented’ emphasises that individuals’ perceptions of justice are strongly influenced by
the perceptions they have of their acceptance by, and relations with, the groups to which they belong. Third, ‘heuristic’ conceptualisations emphasise the importance of cues and clues, the ‘mental shortcuts’, that people use to determine the fairness of decision-makers and their decisions, and in turn influence their reactions (Colquitt et al., 2005, p.42).

Research into what people find to be fair and unfair is important because perceptions of fairness generally have a positive relationship with their behaviours, reactions and levels of cooperation. Although the dimensions of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness are interrelated, my interests in this project are mostly concerned with referees’ communicative displays over which they have some control, independently of the decisions they feel they have to make. Consequently the project draws mostly from the procedural and interactional justice perceptions of fairness.

The study that follows reports discussions held with teams of players about referees. It aimed to find out the qualities that players prefer in referees, and the communicative displays they exhibit that influence players’ perceptions of these qualities in referees. The report explains the method used to explore what issues matter to players, and the process of analysis that connects the player data with the organisational justice literature.
3.2 Research study 2.

- Fair call – football player perceptions of referees’ communicative displays

A shorter version of this paper was peer reviewed by the Australia and New Zealand Communication Association and accepted for presentation at their annual conference in Melbourne 2007.


The shorter paper is available at the conference website.

Fair call – football player perceptions of referees’ communicative displays

Abstract
Focus group discussions were held with 40 football (soccer) players to identify the qualities they esteemed in a referee, and the verbal and non-verbal communicative displays of these qualities. A grounded-style analysis of data finds that players perceive referees to have important influence over outcomes for themselves and their team and that the referee should be a person worthy of this responsibility and authority. In making assessments of the worthiness of the referee they attend to displays of three meta-qualities in a referee; competence, dependability, and respectfulness.

The paper draws on findings and concepts from the study of organisational justice to interpret the emergent themes. Player perceptions of fairness are enhanced when they perceive referees to be competent to judge and decide, dependable in the face of pressures on their decisions, and respectful of players. Players are sensitive to many displays of these qualities. The study found that some verbal and nonverbal displays (such as anger, explanation, listening) can have a powerful influence on player perceptions of the fairness of the referee.

Many communicative displays are amenable to training and improvement, some are not. For example the findings suggest that referees can learn to call and signal ‘advantage’ as a display of respect for the players and a flowing game, but that even before the game starts young referees are perceived to be less physically and mentally competent, less dependable, less respectful and consequently less fair.

The study is exploratory and preliminary to further research. The findings suggest that organisational justice theories and concepts contribute to understanding of communicative displays in football and other settings, and that increased awareness and understanding of communicative displays can help referees to become more effective.
**Introduction**

In Australia’s largest football referee chat room a referee recently challenged others to referee a game without talking - with whistle, signals and cards alone – 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).

Referees consider their ‘talk’ and the manner in which cards are presented to be important influences on player behaviour, and the effective refereeing of a game. But what do players think? Conflict, anger and referee abuse abound in football. One in four referees quits in NSW each year (Oke, 2005) and the main reason is abuse (Lorenc, 2005). What provokes this behaviour and what might the referee do to prevent it? This paper explores referee communicative displays that are important to players.

To develop their communication skills referees rely on a variable ‘hidden curriculum’ based on personal experience, and advice from refereeing assessors, colleagues, and experts (Mellick et al., 2005, p.45). There has been very little evidence-based research into referee-player communication, and that which exists has generally reported from the referee, rather than the player, perspective.

The research reported here is exploratory and serves as a preliminary stage to further research. It used focus groups with male players to record perceptions of referees and their communication, and used an inductive method to codify emergent themes (Buttner, 2004). The emergent themes and communicative displays were analysed and interpreted against findings from organisational justice studies, and the communication of fairness within this literature.

It is important to understand the ways people perceive fairness and unfairness because studies in organisations and other contexts have shown that perceptions of fairness have a powerful effect on attitudes and behaviour. People who perceive fairness in their situation tend to behave more prosocially and cooperatively (Lind, 2005). To understand influences on perceptions of fairness, it is important to know that procedures and decision-maker behaviours influence perceptions of fairness separately to the outcome of decisions (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 1997). People can perceive outcomes
or decisions to be undesirable, but still fair, if they perceive the decision-maker and process are fair.

Teachers, police, customer service officers, managers, government officials and others have to make and communicate decisions frequently. They perform more effectively when people affected by the decisions are cooperative and accepting of the decision. Football is a context where player perceptions of fairness are central, and one person, the referee, has responsibility for making and communicating almost all decisions. This raises questions about what produces different player behaviours, and what might referees do to reduce frustration, anger and antisocial behaviours on the football field. This study seeks to explore referees’ communicative displays and why these are important to players. This understanding may be transferable to other professions where perceptions of fairness are essential.

Referees, decisions and communication
Football referees have “full authority to enforce the laws of the game” (ASA Soccer Rules, 2005, p.16) and make hundreds of decisions during each match about whether to stop play, which team transgressed the rules, and what punishment or restart is appropriate. Incidents requiring their adjudication can occur rapidly during a game, simultaneously in and out of view of the referee, on and off the field, and often with the pressure of ‘unrestrained and immediate feedback from audiences, players and coaches’ (Neave & Wolfson, 2003). The referee works in cooperation with assistant referees (linespeople), but there are few other societal roles that involve individual accountability for decisions with such frequency (Mellick et al., 2005).

Although most referees have an opinion about the best way to communicate decisions, there is little evidence on which to base referee communication training (Mellick et al., 2005). Two recent studies examined the communication practices of elite level referees, one focused on strategies for managing abuse and aggression (Simmons, 2006), the other on strategies for enhancing player acceptance of decisions (Mellick et al., 2005).

A small sample of elite level football referees was found to use an extensive repertoire of verbal and non-verbal techniques to ‘sell decisions’ and ‘minimise disruption to the game’ (Simmons’, 2006, p.4). Examining referees’ self reports of their communication, Simmons (2006) 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. He also suggested that referees’ ability to adapt their communication techniques and styles to different players and situations was in itself an important skill. Mellick et al. (2005) proposed that best practice elite level rugby and football communication involved seven main interpersonal actions (whistle, gaze, posture, hand/arm signals, verbal explanation, control, composure, and time management). They 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’ (p.42).

Both of these studies used the views of refereeing experts, and called for further studies that include the perspectives of other stakeholders. This author knows of no existing studies of player perceptions of referee communication.

**Fairness and communication**

Conceptualising fairness and unfairness requires accepting that ‘fair’ is subjective, at least insofar as people will disagree about what is fair. Van den Bos (2005, p.279) argues that fair process is a psychological effect, “constructed in the head of the recipient of the procedure” or situation.

For more than five decades organisational justice researchers have examined perceptions of fairness in the workplace and other contexts (Colquitt, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). Early justice research focused on perceived equity and fairness in allocation of resources and outcomes (distributive justice), but by the 1980s the emphasis had shifted to procedural justice (Schminke et al., 1997) and factors that can influence fairness perceptions without changing the decision.

**Procedural justice**

The ‘fair process effect’ has been called ‘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).
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).

If the fair process effect applies in football, players may be more accepting of referee decisions that go against their team - and respond more prosocially - if they feel that they have been treated fairly. Leventhal (1980) proffered six ‘rules’ for procedures used to allocate outcomes. These were the rules of:

- Consistency – procedures need to be implemented consistently both over time and with different people
- Bias – decision makers should be without self-interest, and unaffected by factors or considerations that lead to favouritism in allocations
- Accuracy – procedures need to be based on valid and relevant information, decision-makers need to be informed and to minimise error
- Correctability – procedures and decisions need to be reviewable, people need be able to appeal in the case of error or grievance
- Group representation – the group affected needs to feel that procedures reflect all of their interests, and not just the interests of a minority
- Ethical standards – the procedures need to reflect the standards and ethical values of those affected, for example avoiding coercion, deception, corruption (Adapted from Jordan et al., 2004; Colquitt et al., 2005; Leventhal, 1980).

Two consistent findings in procedural justice research are that allowing people an opinion about a decision enhances their judgements of the fairness of the procedure (the ‘voice effect’), and that deviations from expected procedure reduce perceived fairness (Van den Bos & Wilke, 1996). Other procedural factors relating to those who implement procedures, such as the idiosyncrasies of communication styles, have been less researched (Blader & Tyler, 2003).

Interactional justice

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 & Moag (1986) argued that communication might be the reason for people feeling unfairly treated even when describing process and outcomes to be fair. They
proffered truthfulness, respect, propriety of questions and justification as dimensions that people use to evaluate fairness in communication. A study of the effects of managers’ soft, hard and rational tactics on interactive justice perceptions, and subordinates’ resistance to requests, suggested that showing respect for subordinates can avoid unfavourable outcomes, and that hard influence tactics (which imply lack of trust in subordinate competence or motivation) were perceived as less fair, and led to greater resistance (Tepper et al., 1998). In the context of disciplinary meetings in the workplace, Cole includes a supervisor’s positive demeanour, neutrality, explanations and active listening among 10 factors found to enhance employee perceptions of fairness (Cole, 2004). Sitter (2003) found that leaders’ friendly and dominant communication styles correlated with interpersonal justice (dominant had a weak, negative correlation), and attentive and relaxed styles correlated with informational justice.

Clearly, interpersonal skills are critical contributors to interactional justice. Organizations who wish to improve employee perceptions of interactional justice should focus on improving the interpersonal communication skills of their leaders (Sitter, 2003, p.15).

Studies have shown that managers can be trained in interactional justice to produce positive outcomes for employees and organisations. Skarlicki & Latham (1997) found that union leaders trained in the administration of organisational justice principles increased members’ citizenship behaviours such as helpfulness and volunteering. Greenberg (2006), using Skarlicki and Latham’s training principles, found that nurses whose supervisors were trained in promoting interactional justice were less stressed than nurses whose supervisors were not trained. If referees were trained in interactional justice techniques, what sort of techniques would be in the curriculum? Would they differ from received referee wisdom?

**Counterfactual thinking and fairness heuristics**

‘Fairness theory’ suggests that when a negative incident occurs, those affected engage in ‘counterfactual thinking’ – ‘a process of undoing some event by imagining it otherwise’ (Colquitt et al., 2005, p.38). Some one or some thing is considered accountable, and the affected party imagines possible alternative outcomes and other ways that the event might have been handled (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). In the case of a referee sending a player off for a late tackle, teammates might imagine the
referee making a different decision, such as not adjudging the tackle late, or choosing a different discipline option with less undesirable consequences, such as a warning or yellow card. Some referee actions might thus be considered to violate normative standards (McColl Kennedy et al., 2003) and therefore diminish perceptions of fairness.

Understanding 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), 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. Veermunt and Steensma (2005) say there is a strong case to argue that injustice increases stress and that justice decreases stress in the work context, this is perhaps also the case on emotion-charged sports fields.

Recent developments in understanding the way people perceive and respond to fairness suggest the importance of a complex set of heuristics relating to the decision-maker and the outcome.

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, Meyer & Nowakowski, 2005, p.307).

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, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan, 2005, p.44). Lind et al. (2001) found a primacy heuristic ‘effect’ in some experimental conditions. The primacy effect suggests that early impressions of fairness are more important because they can guide and override subsequent events and indicators. Fairness heuristics are particularly important in situations where people are ceding authority to others (Van den Bos, Lind & Wilke, 2001).

Lind (2001) suggests that justice judgement processes, most often researched in
organisations, have implications in other human relations contexts. Jordan et al. (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.

**Research question**
The aim of this study was to explore how football referees’ communication may affect player perceptions of fairness and unfairness.

According to Tyler and Blader (2003), perceptions of fairness are central to people’s evaluation of situations. Based on literature previously discussed, a broad assumption was made at the outset of this study, that preferred refereeing and referees would approximate what players consider to be ‘fair’. This assumption led me to ask research participants general questions about what they considered to be good or poor refereeing (qualities), and how they perceived these qualities (communicative displays). ‘Communicative displays’ include verbal and non-verbal behaviours, policy, and process displays that are interpreted by at least one other person (Pace & Faules, 1994). These findings were then examined in the context of theories of organisational fairness.

There were two research questions:
**RQ 1.** What are the qualities that players prefer in football referees?
**RQ 2.** What are the communicative displays that influence player perceptions of the quality and fairness of referees?

**Method and analysis**
The method and analysis here reflect Morrison et al’s (2002, p.17) proposition that ‘.. qualitative researchers feel free to pick and choose from various research traditions and research techniques, depending on the research question and the research setting’. The setting here is the first study known to the author that focuses on understanding player perceptions of referees and their communication. It was considered important to avoid imposing language or models during the interview stage and in the first stages of the data analysis. A qualitative data gathering 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 & Taylor, 2002). To allow the emergence and transcendence of themes that reflected the players’ perspective, the
initial analysis used techniques borrowed from grounded styles (Daymon & Holloway, 2002) of data analysis.

To understand the influence of referees’ communicative displays on player perceptions, a thematic analysis was performed on the stories in the player interview data. The second phase of the data analysis uses the framework of concepts developed in the first stage, but departs from some of the central tenets of the grounded approach (Goulding, 2002). In particular a fairness framework is applied to the interpretation of the player data. Using the broad assumption that ‘ideal’ refereeing would approximate fair refereeing, the study compares this study’s findings with concepts and findings from studies in the social psychology of organisational fairness.

Focus groups and sample
Focus groups were preferred for this study because of what has been called 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 & Taylor, 2002). Three group interviews were held in December 2006 and February 2007 with a total of 40 male players from three teams. The teams all play at high levels of the sport and selection was based in part on access and availability. One was a full professional team in the National A-League. The other teams (one metropolitan and one rural) were Under 18 teams from the Super Youth league and Development Leagues in NSW, Australia.

Each interview ran for about an hour and used both grounded and impositional question strategies (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). I avoided imposing an agenda or preconceived ideas on the interviews as far as possible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I avoided using the words ‘communication’ or ‘fair’ until they were raised by players, and encouraged players to raise what was important to them in words of their choosing. In the early stages of the interviews I used general, open-ended questions about soccer and refereeing (‘tell me about a time when you thought “yes, that was good refereeing”’). Later I introduced standardised open-ended questions related to preconceived themes (‘Do you think there are better and worse ways to give a card?’) (Amis, 2005). Most of the standardised questions were not used because preconceived themes had earlier been raised spontaneously by players. Almost all themes reported here result from spontaneous player comments.
The focus groups were recorded and I transcribed them within two days of each interview.

**Analysis strategy**

There were two stages of analysis that focused on interpreting and processing data gathered from player interviews. I wanted to develop a profile of referee qualities desired by players, and to identify displays of those qualities. In the first stage of the analysis I reduced the data to small conceptual fragments and then categorised and recategorised the fragments to identify and conceptualise the referee qualities. The process is discussed below, the product is a table of referee qualities reported in the first part of the next section.

The second stage of the analysis uses the findings from the first stage with concepts from the field of organisational justice, to find out what communicative displays influence player perceptions of the quality and fairness of the referees. To achieve this I kept what players said about referees and their displays more intact, attending closely to themes in the players’ narratives (Riessman, 2008). The process is discussed below, the product is a narrative account of player perceptions of referee displays reported in the second part of the next section.

**Grounded-style analysis**

The first part of the analysis used a grounded theory style, insofar as the important themes emerged from the data, not the researcher’s preconceived notions or hypotheses (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). The grounded-style method used here was informed by several approaches including Strauss & Corbin (1998), Daymon & Holloway (2002), and Lindlof & Taylor (2002).

Immediately after the interviews I reflected on the interview and made notes or theoretical memos that included interpretations, observations, and questions for further interrogation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Holt & Dunn, 2004). For example, my first memo was made immediately after the first interview. It summarised a theme raised several times in the first interview:

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Researcher memo 1. December 12, 2007. When referees ignore, turn their backs
on or don’t answer player questions they cause players to get frustrated. Players want to be able to talk with referees.

I continued to make such notes throughout the transcription and analysis processes, with a view to making sense of the data, and organising units of text into concepts and categories.

I performed open coding on the data to identify units of text that appeared to hold meaning (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) in relation to referees, refereeing, communicative displays, and player perceptions and reactions.

The following is a coded excerpt of one transcript (my questions and utterances are in bold).

Table 1. Coded transcript sample from interview one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>In vivo</th>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Notes to self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1.4. 1</td>
<td>Q. What sort of things do they say?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.4. 2</td>
<td>Oh .. In one particular game the ref [name given] saw someone handle the ball but it didn’t really affect the play, it still went to the opposition and the game continued on … And I remember him yelling out something like ‘Get your fucking hands out of it’ … ‘let the game go on’, instead of enforcing the letter of the law. You know, his communication made the player think ‘Yeah OK he saw me ..I hand balled it’</td>
<td>‘Let the game go on’</td>
<td>Playing advantage is well regarded Ref saw the incident – player didn’t get away with it Ref is competent – saw incident Avoid stoppages for minor</td>
<td>Referees might do themselves a favour if they visibly allow a ‘play on’ – perhaps a sign of maturity or experience. Can still retain authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I1.4.3 ‘I didn’t get away with it’

I1.4.4 … yeah ‘that I didn’t get away with it ‘ but it didn’t affect the game because it went to the opposition .. the game played on, you know what I mean, and he just kept talking to the player in his sort of language..

227 concepts were identified from the first interview and put into a table (sample in Table 2). 46 of these were identified as repeats, leaving 181 distinct concepts with their own meaning (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). The level of distinction was fine, as the purpose was to open up the inquiry. For example, ‘Ref should know the game’ and ‘Ref should know where the ball is going’ and ‘Ref should understand the players’, ‘Ref should have playing experience’ were all separated. ‘Good refs let the game flow’ and ‘Bad refs stop the game unnecessarily’ were deemed duplicate concepts.

Table 2. Sample of open code concepts from interview one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Repeats</th>
<th>Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ref should know game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.2</td>
<td>2.11,7.8</td>
<td>Refs should have playing experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refs should know where the ball is going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.4</td>
<td>6.7, 6.11</td>
<td>Refs should understand the players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Getting away with things is part of the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.6</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>Players do anything to win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.7</td>
<td>6.8,20.4, 20.3</td>
<td>Players have tricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.2.1</td>
<td>6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.2, 9.5. 13.7, 13.8</td>
<td>Refs need to be consistent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second and third interviews were transcribed and coded similarly. Holt and Dunn (2004) explain a grounded analysis process they used with football players from Canada and England. Holt began coding the data collected in Canada before visiting England. The English data ‘were then coded into the existing concepts, sub-categories and categories that had been created from the Canadian data’ (Holt & Dunn, 2004, p.203).

This study used a similar approach to the data gathered first from the A-League professional team and the subsequent amateur interviews. New concepts were added as they arose, but the dataset from the three groups was gradually amalgamated as one.

It was quickly evident that players in each group talked about similar desirable and undesirable referee qualities, and noticed many similar displays. Many of the concepts were repeated across the interviews and ‘saturation’ was occurring in the final stage of transcription (Corbin & Holt, 2005).

Following Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) advice to researchers new to this process, about not becoming ‘too rigid’ (p.129) and dogmatic about placing data into discrete boxes, I reviewed the concepts for themes and organised concepts into 61 distinct sub-categories. The sub-categories were then collapsed into 14 categories. Table 3. shows the specific concepts in the centre, and sub-category and category labels on the right. The numbers to the left of the concepts refer to the location of the data constituting the concept in the transcripts. Table 4. shows the fourteen categories.

Table 3. Sample of concepts and categories from interviews one and two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First instance</th>
<th>Repeat</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II.1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ref should know game</td>
<td>Knowledge of - game rules etc - player psyche - game and tactics</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.1.2</td>
<td>2.11,7.8</td>
<td>2.125</td>
<td>Refs should have playing experience</td>
<td>Playing experience- Ex players understand</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Know what it’s like to play</td>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and what it is like to get a bad decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.134</th>
<th>Call game short because ref tired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.3</td>
<td>Refs should know where the ball is going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.4</td>
<td>Refs should understand the players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.5</td>
<td>Getting away with things is part of the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.6</td>
<td>Players do anything to win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.1.7</td>
<td>Players have tricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1.2.1</td>
<td>Refs need to be consistent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 6.7, 6.11 | |
| 6.9 | |
| 11.12 | |
| 6.8, 20.4, 20.3 | |
| 2.9 | |

Consistency – In interpretations
Consistent with cards
Reliable
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Repeat</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Sub- category</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td></td>
<td>Players want fairness, even handed treatment</td>
<td>Fairness – absence of bias – seen to be impartial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refs seek attention by giving cards</td>
<td>Cards = attention for self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Know if ref is strict or casual by speech</td>
<td>Play differently for strict/casual refs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.180</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stand by decisions</td>
<td>Stay firm</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.184-186</td>
<td>2.191-192</td>
<td>Don’t listen to players – make own mind up</td>
<td>Don’t change mind</td>
<td>Independe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.182</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence in decisions and gesture and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.183</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Make mind up</td>
<td>Decide quickly</td>
<td>Decisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.199-2.201</td>
<td></td>
<td>Talk thru captain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.202</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Talk at half-time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Fourteen categories emerging from the data

|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------|-----------|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|

Two emergent categories that were salient and related, but did not reflect the qualities of referees, were removed from the analysis at this stage. ‘Refs are lesser’ concerned the frequently expressed perception that players and their interests are more important than referees (‘people come to watch players not referees’) in football. ‘Relationship’ concerned different player attitudes to the relationship that players should have with referees on and off the field. The players’ different attitudes are not discussed here.

The remaining twelve categories were selectively coded and collapsed into seven emergent properties. Strauss & Corbin (1998) argue for a process of integration of categories that leads to the choice of a single, abstract central category that ‘represents the main theme of the research’ (p.146). This analysis reports three central categories or metathemes. Three were selected instead of the recommended one because ‘each appeared to play a critical, interacting, yet unique role’ (Holt & Dunn, 2004, p.204) in the profile of qualities desired in referees by players.

The final stage was the dimensionalisation of the properties (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through the process of coding I returned continually to the data for comparisons and explanation. The three metathemes and the positive dimensions of their properties can be viewed as the idealised composite of a ‘good ref’ gathered from the sample of players interviewed.

**Thematic analysis and reading**

The aim of the second stage of the analysis is to provide a response to research question 2, and heighten understanding of the relationship between referees’ communicative
displays and players perceptions of the referee qualities that emerged from the initial analysis.

The first stage of the analysis broke the data into fragments and then organised the fragments into the emergent categories of qualities that players attend to in referees. The product of the first stage is a hierarchically organised table of concepts of referee qualities, with the qualities organised and presented in separate cells (Table 6.). 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 hierarchical, nor in cells. They interact and overlap.

The analysis method created for the second stage borrows ideas 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, 2008), the second stage here reports and interprets whole sections of the ‘stories’ (Altrichter & Holly, 2005, p.29) provided by the players in the interviews (Riessman, 2008).

The second stage of the data analysis stays faithful to, and elucidates and contextualises, the qualities that emerged from the first stage. The main themes identified in the first stage – competence, dependability and respectfulness - are used to structure a narrative written to account for the way players perceive referees. The properties and dimensions from the first stage of the analysis (Table 6.) are interwoven into the narrative about referee displays.

The narrative also frequently refers to or quotes verbatim the players’ own stories from the interviews. In the same way that Williams’ (1984, in Riessman, 2008) used patients’ understanding of their illness as units of analysis, this study uses players’ understanding of football refereeing practices as units of analysis. The voice and players’ own explanations heighten understanding of the associations that players make.

Our understanding of the associations that players make between communicative displays and perceptions of the referees are further enriched and validated by ‘reading’ fairness into the narrative. Much is known about the way authority figures and decision-makers influence perceptions of fairness in other contexts, especially in organisations.
Before explaining the displays that influence perceptions of competence, dependability and respectfulness, the narrative situates each meta-quality within contemporary understandings of the way people perceive fairness.

**Findings**

**RQ 1. What are the qualities that players prefer in football referees?**

Given the many demands of refereeing, players have high expectations of referees to adjudge most decisions correctly. They perceive that referees have an important influence over outcomes for themselves and their team, and that the referee needs to be a person worthy of this responsibility and authority. They make assessments consciously and unconsciously about the worthiness of the referee. In making their assessments of the worthiness of the referee, players attend to meta-displays of the qualities of competence, dependability and respectfulness.

Findings for RQ 1 are summarised in table 1. Three emergent meta-display categories of desired quality were identified: Competent, Dependable and Respectful. *Competent* qualities refer mostly to the person, *Dependable* concerns the way the person reacts to game pressures and events, *Respectful* refers to their attitudes, and the way the person prefers to interact.

The emergent desired qualities (RQ 1.) and their properties and dimensions are presented as discrete phenomena in Table 1. but there is much interaction. The positive dimensions of the three meta-display categories can be viewed as the players’ idealised composite of a ‘good ref’. Important communicative displays that emerged from the data, and the way they influence player perceptions of referees (RQ 2.), are also discussed in this section. Some displays influence perceptions of more than one quality.
### Table 6. Players’ preferred referee qualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-display category</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Competent</td>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Unfit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>Oblivious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentality</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>Unintelligent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decisive</td>
<td>Indecisive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Assured</td>
<td>Insecure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Diffident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dependable</td>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Unpredictable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Uncaring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Resolute</td>
<td>Yielding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Respectful</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Answerable</td>
<td>Unanswerable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discreet</td>
<td>Attention-seeking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Firm</td>
<td>Punitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Meta-display category 1. Competent**

Competent qualities refer to the person. A referee is expected to be a person who is competent to referee in terms of physicality, mentality, and confidence.

**Meta-display category 2. Dependable**

Dependable referees react well to the many pressures they face during a game and provide a predictable environment for play. They need evenness and professionalism to make good decisions consistently, and resilience to be uninfluenced by players, coaches, spectators and other pressures. They need courage to make unpopular decisions and confront difficult situations.

**Meta-display category 3. Respectful**

Respectful refers to the referee’s attitudes to players, and preferred interaction styles. Games are played for players (and spectators in the case of professionals), and referees...
should respect players by being accountable, discreet and politely responsive.

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 (focus group 3.128).

Players are sensitive to behaviours and displays that bring the referee into the game unnecessarily and focus attention on the referee.

**Integrated qualities**

The qualities and displays have been separated and turned into a hierarchy for ease of analysis, but they interact and overlap. Diagram 1. shows a conceptualisation that integrates the players’ preferred qualities in a referee.

**Diagram 1. Players’ preferred qualities in a referee**

Players expect referees to be competent, respectful and dependable. They also prefer them to be confident, accountable and professional. The next section reports the displays of competence, dependability and respectfulness separately, but shows also how some displays influence more than one quality.
RQ 2. What are the communicative displays that influence player perceptions of the quality and fairness of referees?

Expectations and preferences were very consistent across the three groups. They appear to derive from their experiences in football perceived through a prism of the received wisdom of football norms. Players revealed strongly held views about the competencies a referee requires to be able to obtain the best information and make good decisions, as well as expectations of predictability in processes, and preferred styles of communication and interaction. These expectations are consistent with the way people perceive fairness in other contexts.

**Competence displays**

Consciously and unconsciously players perceive displays that they use as indicators of the referee’s competence to judge and decide about the play. Players expect referees to be sufficiently fit to be in a position to judge, and to have mental qualities that help them make good decisions. Such expectations are consistent with much previous research into the way people perceive fairness. Leventhal’s (1980) seminal work on the principles for fair procedures include the centrality of accuracy in the information used to make decisions. A procedure is more fair when the information upon which decisions are made is accurate and valid, the decision-maker is informed, and errors are minimised (Leventhal, 1980, in Colquitt et al., 2005). In other contexts people want decisions affecting them to be based on the best available information. Students prefer that lecturers are competent and qualified to assess, and have access to and read all parts of the assignments they submit. Job applicants want all sections of their resumes considered by selectors. It’s paramount to football players that referees have good information upon which to base their decisions. This normally means that the referee has a clear view of incidents that occur. Consequently the referee needs to be close to the incident, and positioned so that their view is not obscured. To enhance perceptions of fairness the referee as decision-maker needs to be perceived to be a person who is informed and capable of making correct decisions.

Players attend to a number of communicative displays that indicate referees’ competence to make correct decisions. They notice displays suggesting that the referee might not be sufficiently fit to keep up with play, such as overweight, frail stature, or the wrong age (too young or too old). Referees who stay close to the circle in the middle
of the field were perceived as unfit and unable to judge, and hearing aids and glasses display compromised senses that diminish ability to detect infringements and other incidents.

Players perceive that referees need to be experienced, decisive, and intelligent to make good decisions. In each group, experience was said to be necessary to referee well, and concomitant with most of the qualities players desire in a referee. Players associate experience with more flowing games, a calmer personal style, a greater willingness to communicate with players, better skills and resilience to pressure.

Players don’t normally know what playing or refereeing experience a referee has, and perceive experience through many displays. Age is perhaps the most important communicative display to football players because age is suggestive of the referee’s level of experience. Other displays of experience include staying calm, ‘talking normally’ (without anger or anxiety) to players, and explaining decisions (with the caveat that the explanations make sense).

Experienced referees were considered to understand players and read games more astutely. They avoid stopping unnecessarily for foul play, and use interpersonal strategies that minimise disruptions to the game, such as admonishing players when the ball goes out of play, and warning players ‘on the run’.

I think [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 .. (focus group 1.3).

When asked about examples of good refereeing, players in each group said they admire referees who penalise players who cheat by pretending to have been fouled. The detection and discipline of player ‘diving’ was considered a display of good refereeing based on experience, and having the acuity not to be deceived.

- 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’ (focus group 1.7).
.. 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 (focus group 3).

Players said referees need to be intelligent to avoid being fooled and justify their decisions. They display intelligence and decisiveness 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 .. (focus group 1.9).

Displays of inexperience include getting in the way of the ball or players (referee doesn’t anticipate play), panic, anger and ‘trying to stamp their authority’ early in the game by issuing lots of sanctions. Players feel that staying calm shows experience, while anger displays intimidation and inexperience.

Youth is a powerful display suggestive of inexperience, and young referees are at a disadvantage, regardless of their real experience.

- you get some young refs that
- they’re jumpy
- they start yelling
- they’re worried about what the crowd or what other people think .. it’s hard to say (focus group 3.93).

- A senior ref has got more power over the players too, like what he says is cool, but if he’s younger..
- You kind of feel like if they’re younger you don’t listen to them as much .. because they’re younger..
- There’s not the respect (focus group 3.21).

Because youth displays inexperience, young referees are perceived to be deficient in most of the valued referee qualities, including mentality, confidence, consistency, resilience, accountability and personality. Appearance of youth is likely to act as a heuristic that detracts from perceptions of competence and fairness throughout the game.

Referees require a balance of experience and confidence to establish and maintain control. They need experience to determine which behaviours and incidents require their
intervention before they become larger problems. They need confidence to assert themselves firmly and effectively when they intervene.

The most frequently mentioned displays of confidence were a calm manner and the ability to talk and explain in a ‘normal’ voice to players. The ability to maintain a sense of proportion in decisions and gesture, even under pressure, shows confidence in self and decisions. A preference for warning players before penalising or issuing cards displays confidence, while penalising early in order to ‘stamp authority’ was several times said to display a lack of confidence or maturity.

Displays of anger such as shouting, waving arms and brandishing cards were considered by players to reflect a lack of confidence. Panic, and taking player criticism personally were also thought to reflect a lack of confidence. Avoiding difficult decisions and ignoring dissent were seen as displaying a lack of confidence.

Players said they wanted referees to assert themselves effectively to deal with dangerous and deliberate foul play. Displays of effective assertion mentioned by players included a calm and confident voice, and firm, clear hand signals.

**Dependability displays**

Leventhal’s (1980) rules for fair procedures in the allocation of outcomes specify that procedures should be consistent, and should avoid bias that favours the decision maker. Procedures should be consistently applied over time, and for different people, in ways that don’t advantage some of those affected by the decisions. In the context of football, people often talk about consistency of a referee’s decisions within a game (they should be the same at the beginning, middle and end of a game), from game to game (decisions should be the same from week to week), and from referee to referee (decisions should be consistent within a league). The type of consistency most often discussed by players is the consistency of decision-making within a game. Football players want to be able to depend on referees’ decisions to be consistent across time in a game, and in the application of the rules of the game for the two teams. Players are also sensitive to displays of the referee making decisions in their own interest. These expectations refer to the meta-quality of dependability.

Referees who are dependable can be relied upon to implement decisions consistently
across time and for both teams, unaffected by self-interest, bias and other pressures. That players should prefer referees to be dependable is consistent with Leventhal’s (1980) rules for procedural justice, and other findings that perceptions of fairness are diminished when there are deviations from expected procedure (Van den Bos & Wilke, 1996). This section explains the way players discern the dependability of the referee through the interactions of a range of communicative displays suggestive of their consistency and resilience to different pressures.

Neutrality is a fundamental expectation of referees. Players expect referees to treat each team and individuals equally and consistently, and to interpret and make decisions based on the rules. When players perceive deviation from these fundamental principles, for any reason, they begin to doubt the dependability of the referee.

Players are sensitive to differences in the way referees speak and relate to individuals and teams. Referees who use the first names for one side and not the other, or otherwise appear more familiar (especially ‘home referees’), can cause players to doubt their consistency.

Some referees were said to ‘pick on certain players’ (often because the referee anticipates illegal or dirty play). The deviation from equal treatment might be justified in the referee’s mind, but to players it can be a display that shows the referee is not wholly committed to treating players equally, and casts doubt on their reliability. Sometimes a referee awards a penalty or sends a player off for one team, and then appears to make a decision to ‘even the ledger’. This displays less than complete commitment to judging each decision according to the rules, and casts doubt on his reliability.

When referees make repeated warnings but don’t carry them out, players can see the inconsistency between words and actions as a display of unpredictability.

A ‘professional’ approach to refereeing helps display dependability because it shows a commitment to propriety in the game, personal high standards, and a sort of neutral efficiency. Players said that neat attire and grooming display pride in refereeing, while old boots and poor grooming show lack of care.
Clear voice and articulation were also an indicator of 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 (focus group 2.77).

‘Staying calm’ under pressure and providing justification can help to objectify decisions, and provide a stable and predictable atmosphere.

Players want referees to make their own decisions, and be resilient when subjected to influence from players or other pressures. Displays of independent decision-making include standing firm on decisions, and giving an explanation. The explanation indicates that the decision is his 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 (focus group 3.66).

Interviewees referred to several displays that suggest the referee is yielding to pressures from players and spectators. Players and spectators often call out for the referee to stop play for a foul tackle, hand-ball or off-side. Changing the decision, or ‘taking the whistle out of his mouth before he blows’, can suggest to players that the referee’s decision has been influenced. Overruling assistant referee decisions can show referee self-confidence, but to players this can also communicate yielding to player pressure.

Courage is displayed when referees make decisions that they know will meet an angry response from players and spectators, or will change a game. Confidence and calm in the face of anger and pressure are displays of courage.

Younger players suggested that referees need courage to confront angry or abusive coaches, parents and spectators on behalf of the players.

> 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 .. showing control

> 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 .. (focus group 2.97).

Unwillingness to confront difficult situations and ignoring abuse from players displays lack of courage.
Respectfulness displays

Interactional justice refers to the effects of interpersonal treatment on perceptions of fairness (Colquitt et al., 2005). Bies & Moag (1986) posited truthfulness, justification, respect and propriety as the fairness dimensions of interpersonal treatment. Since the 1980s there have been numerous studies showing 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 et al., 1998) including positive demeanour and explanations (Cole, 2004) and attentive and relaxed style (Sitter, 2003). Bobocel & Zdanuk (2005, p.470) report numerous studies supporting their claim that in many contexts there are ‘strong normative expectations’ for organisational leaders to ‘explain controversial actions’.

Respectfulness in this study refers to referees’ attitudes to players, and their preferred interaction styles. Players expect prefer referees who show respect. They attend to communicative displays of the referee’s accountability to players, and their personality in interactions. Interviewees frequently 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 .. (focus group 3.128).

In the heat of physical competition, players prefer to concentrate on the game and not be distracted by referees.

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 (focus group 1.97).

Players are sensitive to behaviours and displays that bring the referee into the game unnecessarily and focus attention on them.
Important displays of respect for football 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 (focus group 3.244).

Player descriptions suggest good referees exercise discretion that respects players. They resist heavy sanctions, and find alternatives to stopping play and penalising, such as admonishing and warning players during ordinary stoppages, or playing advantage.

Providing justification and playing advantage were frequently mentioned as displays of respectful refereeing. Waving and calling ‘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 a firm approach, but not a punitive discipline style. Firm discipline results in players ‘knowing where they stand’, and promotes the interests of all of the players. Interviewees said punitive approaches display a lack of accountability to players, and frustrate and anger individuals and teams.

Punitive displays included frequent stopping and sanctions, heavy penalties for players swearing at themselves and a range of sharp and confrontational gestures such as waving arms and brandishing and shoving cards at players’ faces. Players generally felt that gestures should be proportional to the seriousness of the foul, but that shoving cards in player faces shows disrespect and is likely to inflame.

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 (focus group 1.25).

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’ (focus group 1).

Players prefer referees to be approachable, to talk normally without shouting and threats, and 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 (focus group 3.164).

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

Limitations of study
The study reports an exploratory stage of a larger study of communication and fairness. Several conceptual and methodological limitations need to be discussed. The paper makes an assumption that good refereeing approximates ‘fair’ refereeing in order to make conceptual links between the findings here and theories of fairness and justice. The validity of this assumption hasn’t been tested or explored. The data here suggest that organisational justice theories might help us understand player perceptions of the fairness of football referees, and strategies that enhance player acceptance of decisions. However this study has not explored the role of distributive justice (which is often the catalyst for unsocial behaviour in football) and there are some obvious differences between organisations and football. Not least is that organisations create rules and policies designed to get members to work towards the same goal, while football rules are created for teams to oppose each other.

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’ adult, who
typically plays with lower grade referees in less protected environments, was not included. The research seemed to be approaching saturation in the third group, and future studies should target amateur male and female adults.

Some players said that they would compliment a referee on a difficult decision they thought was correct, but none said they would do so if the decision was awarded in favour of the other team. Many players assume a disingenuous role on the field that possibly spills over to focus group interview settings. I did not discern, but believe it very possible that some interviewees, surrounded by their peers, could have been less than frank about some of their beliefs and motivations. That said, each of the interviews proceeded with what seemed an appropriate a mix of earnest discussion and humour.

The findings in relation to young referees lend validity to the study. Young referees are known to experience more abuse from players than older referees (Oke, 2005; Folkesson, 2002), even when they have similar levels of experience (Friman, 2004). This study found that youth is perceived to be antithetical to nearly all of the qualities players desire in referees.

**Discussion**

The findings offer new insights into the previously unexplored perceptions of football players, and possible applications for organisational justice theories.

Players believe that the referee has much influence over the outcomes of the game for individual players and teams. Players want the referee to be a person who will exercise that influence capably and responsibly. They want the referee to be a person who can provide a safe and fair game and they attend to a range of intended and unintended communicative displays in deciding the referee’s competence, respectfulness and dependability.

Players’ concern for referees to be competent and dependable appear to parallel organisational justice findings that employees perceive unfairness when there are deviations from expected procedure (Van den Bos & Wilke, 1996). One implication is that referees should take care to present themselves as confident and professional (speech, attire, grooming, preparation) and show due attention to the proper formalities and procedures. Studies in fairness heuristics suggest that this is most important during
early encounters, especially before the game when many formalities occur, as first impressions are likely to shape subsequent perceptions (Lind et al., 2001). The findings also suggest that perceptions of equal treatment for individuals and teams help promote perceptions of fairness. Use of first names by referees may suggest approachability, but unless the referee knows all the players’ names it can cause players to think the referee is too familiar with one team, and undermine perceptions of consistency. This appears to be particularly important when there is a ‘home’ referee talking to the home players.

Part of the art of good refereeing is finding the right balance in decision making, communication and discipline. Referees should be aware that players prefer the game to be free-flowing, and often see frequent stoppages as an indication of poor or inexperienced refereeing. Players can engage in counterfactual thinking (Colquitt et al., 2005) which leads them to believe that a referee had player-friendly alternatives to stopping the play or issuing harsh punishments, but chose not to use them. Players interviewed in this study so frequently mentioned problems of frequent stoppages that counterfactual thinking might be a fruitful model for improving understanding of player responses to referee decisions. Based on player comments here, referees would be well advised to master the practices of waving and calling ‘advantage’, and issuing warnings ‘on the run’, as displays of experience and respect for players.

The importance of respectful treatment has frequently been claimed in interactional fairness (Buttner, 2004; Tepper et al., 1998; Bies & Moag, 1986). Players expect referees to be firm and confident and to be able to assert themselves, but dislike arrogance and aggression. Players feel that they are entitled to answers to ‘reasonable’ questions, and explanation. Justification is well known to enhance perceptions of fairness in many situations (Bobocel & Zdanjuk, 2005) and clear and calm explanations were considered displays of respect to players.

Referees’ widespread belief in the importance of a calm manner was supported by the findings here. Calm manner was thought to be a calming influence on the players, and a display of experience and confidence. Sitter (2003) found that a relaxed style correlates with informational justice.

By contrast, displays of anger by referees appeared to have little or no place. Based on these interviews referees would be advised to avoid showing anger. Anger displays a
range of qualities oppositional to notions of fairness and good refereeing including lack of confidence, inexperience, intimidation, fear, aggression, and inconsistency.

The findings may help to account for the high levels of abuse experienced by young players. The centrality of experience to many of the qualities desired in referees, makes the appearance of youth a potentially very harmful heuristic (Lind et al., 2001). In addition to their real inexperience and smaller stature, young referees may be battling a range of negative player perceptions that deserve fuller investigation. The findings suggest that young referees should practice the display of a range of preparations, attitudes and behaviours.

In the emotion-charged environment of a football field there will always be accidents and mistakes that can be misinterpreted. And some players arrive at the game malicious or intoxicated or vengeful. But this study suggests that football referees might benefit from a better understanding of their communicative displays, and that organisational justice theories can make a valuable contribution to that understanding.
References


3.3 Outcomes for research study 2.

The main findings of research study 2 have been presented several times to practicing referees. Anecdotally I can report that referees are fascinated to hear, for the first time, data that explores the way players interpret different displays. Many referees express new insights from this data that are akin to empathy with players.

The study makes some important contributions to understanding referees and their communication. For the first time the opinions of amateur players have been systematically reported, and a profile of an ideal referee, based on players’ preferences has been developed. The report shows that players prefer referees who are ‘competent, dependable and respectful’. These qualities are readily communicated to referees, and can be explained with illustrative quotes from the interviews.

The words of the players clearly explain the associations they make between various displays and the qualities they value. For example, referees’ clothing and grooming are suggestive of their commitment to professionalism, and in turn their dependability. The players’ explanations provide a rich account of the way they interpret different displays, and the data yielded numerous insights that suggest strategies for purposefully managing referees’ communication. In this instance, referees can help to influence players’ perceptions of their dependability by paying careful attention to their appearance.

The use of concepts from the highly quantified organisational justice literature to interpret and account for qualitative data is unusual, but enriches the project. The juxtaposition of the findings and the literature suggest that many principles of fairness as they are understood in organisations and other contexts, are transferable to the interactions between referees and players. The concepts of competence, dependability and respectfulness are very consistent with organisational justice literature about what people find to be fair in the people and processes they experience in organisations.

Players said they prefer referees who explain decisions and remain calm, but to what extent do these qualities influence players’ cooperation and acceptance of decisions in a real match? Although the data provide a compelling guide to players’ reported preferences, which are largely consistent with the opinions expressed by the referees in the first study, it is possible that players might simply be articulating commonly
understood orthodoxies concerning better and worse refereeing. Both studies suggest that the way the referee communicates influences player attitudes and reactions, but neither study shows how the extent to which referees meet with players’ preferences influences player reactions to the referee on the field. Nor do they suggest the relative effects of different communicative displays.

The data for this study were obtained from a sample in New South Wales, one state in Australia. The challenge set for the next stage of the project was to test and quantify the influence of communicative displays on player reactions to the referee, with a larger and more generalisable sample.
Chapter 4. Testing the effects internationally

4.1 Context for research study 3.

The focus group study provided a framework for labelling the qualities that players prefer in referees, and clear insights to help explain the way players interpret referees’ communicative displays of those qualities. Because the findings were shown to be consistent with the way people perceive fairness in other contexts, the application of organisational justice principles to aid understanding of referee/player interactions was generally supported by the study. This contributed to a stronger conceptual framework for understanding and future research.

Although player accounts captured in the second study provide a compelling contribution to understanding referee/player interactions, for several reasons it was important to develop a more comprehensive understanding with further research. Players’ expressed preferences in interviews do not necessarily reflect their interactions with referees and their reactions to communicative displays. It was considered important to ‘test’ or measure some of the findings of the second study, to empirically find out the effects of referee communication displays on players’ behavioural and attitudinal reactions.

The nature of the interpretive methods used in the first two studies determined that the findings provided important insights into referee/player interaction, and suggested explanation, but could not be generalised to other samples and populations. In study 2 a number of checking processes were used and recorded to ensure the report authentically reflected the perspective of the player participants. Nonetheless the thematic narrative developed in the latter stages of study 2 to present the findings was an interpretation and construction of the players’ stories. Although the accounts are unified in a narrative that reflects the dominant themes, there were of course a range of player attitudes and beliefs expressed (Riessman, 2008). There were isolated minority views expressed during the interviews that were not captured in the report of dominant themes. For example, one player said he didn’t want referees to speak to players at all, another said he preferred young referees because they’re not set in their ways. These isolated views are not supported by conventional wisdom or other research, but it’s conceivable that many others share them. Because the exploratory methods used in study 2 were not intended
to measure the number of players who share the different views expressed by players, and there is limited existing research in the field, it was considered important that the next stage of the project be developed with a view to generalising findings to larger samples of players.

The third research stage of the project aimed to gather empirical evidence concerning the effects of different communicative displays on player attitudes and reactions. The findings from studies 1 and 2 were used to inform the selection of the displays and reactions to be measured. A quantitative approach was selected to help to triangulate the findings of the first two studies. This would also improve the credibility of the data for a broader network of administrators and referees.

An experimental survey design was developed to measure a large sample of players’ reactions to different communicative displays. The use of an experimental method enabled the measurement of causal relationships between referee displays and reactions, but necessitated the reduction of the complex phenomenon, hitherto called referee/player interaction, to a small number of display and reaction variables that could be operationalised.

An international study was designed as an experiment and proposed to FIFA, football’s peak world body in Switzerland. The study was approved and funded through their João Havelange Research Scholarship program, and the Centre International d'Etude du Sport (CIES). The third research study details the rationale, design, implementation and findings of an experimental study of player reactions in Australia, Great Britain, Malaysia, Singapore and Spain.
4.2 Research study 3.

- Justice, Culture and Football Referee Communication: Final scholarship report to Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Centre for Sports Studies (CIES).

In the process of developing and implementing this research study, two shorter papers were written and presented at international conferences.

The first focused on the conceptual framework for a study of fairness across cultures. The full paper (7631 words) was peer reviewed and accepted for presentation at the I-Come International Communication and Media Conference in Malaysia. It is included in that conference’s proceedings and is available on request from the author.


The second focused on the methodology for the study, in particular the development of an online experiment using written vignettes. The abstract was peer-reviewed and accepted for presentation at the III European Congress of Methodology in Spain.

- Simmons P. (July, 2008). Measuring football player reactions to different referee communication behaviours. Paper presented to the III European Congress of Methodology, held in conjunction with the Society for Multivariate Analysis in the Behavioural and Social Sciences (SMABS) Oviedo, Spain.

In conducting study 3 I received the following assistance:
- Survey translations (English to Malay language; English to Spanish)
  SBS translation services (paid)
- Data gathering
  Max Simmons and Lee Kuok Tiung helped survey players in Malaysia (unpaid)
- Data processing
  Patrick Forman designed a website to collect and automatically collate data collected from online surveys. He and Janine McCarthy helped to maintain the website (paid)
  Michael O’Neill ran t-tests for hypotheses 1-9 and chi square tests using SPSS (paid)
Summary

This study has shown that referee communication styles influence player perceptions of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of decisions that go against them. Player perceptions of fairness and correctness in decisions are influenced by the referee’s displays of procedural correctness and fair treatment. In the emotion-charged uncertainty of competitive football, referees should deliberately communicate their ability and intention to provide a fair, safe and predictable playing environment.

A quasi-experimental between-subject study of football player reactions to different referee communication behaviors was conducted with players from Australia (n=675), Great Britain (n=365), Malaysia (n=153), Spain (n=537) and Singapore (n=166) between January and August 2008. Adult male football players each read one of eight vignettes describing a scene from a match where a decision is unexpectedly awarded against them. The age of the referee, and referee displays of anger and explanation were manipulated in the vignette scenarios. The dependent variables were the effects on player perceptions of the fairness of the referee, the correctness of the decision, and players’ intention to argue the decision.

The findings suggest some different effects internationally, but that players of the world game will generally react more favorably to referees who explain decisions and communicate calmly. Explaining the decision had a significant (p<0.01) positive effect on player ratings of the fairness of the referee, and the correctness of the decision in each country except Malaysia. Explanation was most beneficial in Great Britain. Anger in the referee’s communication had a significant negative effect (p<0.01) on player ratings of the fairness of the referee in each country, except Singapore where there was no significant effect (p<0.1). Anger in the referee’s communication had a significant negative effect on player ratings of the correctness of the decision in Great Britain (p<0.05) and Malaysia (p<0.01), but not in the other countries (p<0.05). Player reactions to referee anger were most negative in Malaysia. Neither explanation nor anger had a significant effect on player intentions to argue. In all countries studied the
referee’s communication influenced judgements of the correctness of the decision. Some support is offered for Triandis’ (2009) assertion that people in Eastern cultures attend more to *how* things are said, while Western cultures attend more to *what* is said. Further research with other countries and cultures is warranted.

The main implication for referee training is that to complement a sound knowledge of the rules of the game referees will benefit from training in the way players perceive fairness, and increased awareness of the influence of their communication displays on players.
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Acknowledgements

The project was made possible with financial support from FIFA through CIES and the Joao Havelange Research Scholarship, 2008, and from Charles Sturt University.

For their assistance in matters related to refereeing I thank for their generous and expert assistance:

- Richard Lorenc, Football Federation of Australia
- Matthew Breeze, FIFA Referee, Australia
- Manuel López Fernández, FIFA Referee Psychologist, Spain

I also thank the following people who advised on the design of the study:

- Professor John Carroll
- Associate Professor Michael Gard
- Professor Frank Marino
- Associate Professor Graham Tyson

The project required the cooperation of many people. I make special thanks to the following who helped me access and process data from players, teams, associations and federations in 5 different countries:

- Mohd’ Nazri Abdullah, FIFA Referee Instructor, Malaysia
- Pilar Alonso, Public Relations Officer, Federacion Castilla y Leon de Futbol, Valladolid, Spain
- Saifuddin Abu Bakar, Assistant General Secretary, Football Association of Malaysia
- Julian Bauer, Football Mitoo, Great Britain
- Richard Beazley, Operations Manager, Football Federation of Northern Territory, Australia
- Carlos Garcia Conde, Administration, Federacion de Principado Asturias de Futbol, Gijon, Spain
- Matthew Cream, Referee Development Officer, FIFA Assistant Referee, Football South Australia
- Patrick Forman, Charles Sturt University, Australia
- Robert Freke, Football Development Manager, Football Federation of Tasmania, Australia
- Fiona Green, Charles Sturt University, Australia
- Francesco Menéndez Gutiérrez, General Secretary, Federacion Castilla y Leon de Futbol, Spain
- Francesco Garcia Jimenez, Licensing department, Federation Futbol de Madrid, Spain
- Alan Kibbler, Referee Development Officer, Football Queensland, Spain
- Edward Lennie, Referee Development Manager, Football West, Perth, Spain
- Jaiarajo Letchumanan, Chief of Sport, Bernama News Agency, Malaysia
- Carla Lim, Charles Sturt University, Singapore
- Pepe Lopez, Competitions Organiser, Federacion Castilla y Leon de Futbol, Valladolid, Spain
- Janine McCarthy, Charles Sturt University, Australia
- Francesc Falcó Monton, FIFA Referee Psychologist, Spain
- Carlo Nohra, Assistant General Secretary, Asian Football Confederation
- Yoshimi Ogawa, Director of Referees Department, Asian Football Confederation
- Michael O’Neill, Charles Sturt University, Australia
- Chris Orme, Bathurst District Referees, Australia
- Richard Overton, President Kuala Lumpur Social Soccer League, Malaysia
- Dato’ Paul Mony Samuel, General Secretary, Asian Football Confederation
- Brendan Schwab, Chairman Australian Professional Footballers Association
- Andrew Short, Bathurst District Referees, Australia
- Max Simmons, Charles Sturt University, Australia
- Mark Stavroulakis, Media Manager, Football NSW, Australia
- Lee Taylor, Director, ESPZEN, Singapore
- Lee Kuok Tiung, University of Malaysia, Sabah, Malaysia
- Miguel Gallan Torres, Head of International Relations, Real Federacion Espana Futbol, Spain
- Stuart Watts, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Tony Wilde, Bathurst District Referees, Australia
- Mohamad Rodzali Yacob, Head of Referees, Football Association of Malaysia
### Abbreviations

Abbreviations used are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>AUS</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESP</td>
<td>Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBR</td>
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1. Introduction

A decision by the referee in favour of one team is against the interests of the other. Each time the referee communicates a decision, half of the players, coaching staff and spectators experience some level of disappointment. This is the nature of competitive football at all levels.

But when a decision goes against our team, what difference does it make how we’re told? To what extent does the referee’s communication style influence the feelings and reactions?

The world football community know that communication and ‘player-management’ are central to effective refereeing and quality football. One study of elite ball game players found that referee calls can have substantial influence on athletes’ psychological states, and that ‘unnecessary words or actions’ can amplify negative performance consequences for players (Bar-Eli et al., 1995 p.77). The researchers argued that if referees had greater awareness of the influence their communication has on players’ performance, and better communication skills, conflicts between referees and players may be prevented (Bar-Eli et al., 1995).

Although countless millions of people focus on and talk about football and referees each day, research on referee communication and interaction with players is scant internationally, and there is little scientific evidence on which to base referee training (Mellick et. al., 2005; Simmons, 2007). The small amount of research that has been conducted on referee communication has tended to focus on the perspective of expert referees at the elite level. The perspective of players, and the experiences of the large majority of footballers who are amateur, are underresearched.

The project reported here targeted adult male footballers at all amateur and professional levels of the full pitch game in 5 different countries. It examined the effect that certain referee communication behaviours and characteristics have on player reactions to a decision that goes against their team.

The effects of communication style on players will differ depending on the situation and the people involved. But this study hypothesised that there are some referee behaviours likely to anger players unnecessarily, and other behaviours that help to calm or promote perceptions of fairness.

The study proceeded with two important assumptions: first is that some referee behaviours and styles will more generally have a positive influence on player reactions, and that some behaviours and styles are more likely to cause players to react negatively. Second is that when referees become aware of influential styles, attitudes and behaviours, they can develop greater confidence in, and control over, their interactions with players. If we could improve referees’ awareness of influential displays, all involved in football would benefit.

By measuring trends and patterns in communication display and effect, this study aimed to contribute to the development of training programs that heighten referee self awareness, and accelerate the acquisition of some communication skills and attitudes referees normally acquire through experience.
Referees are entrusted with full authority to enforce the laws of the game and deliver equal treatment of participants (Pawlenka, 2005, p.56). They are expected to perform at a very high level of proficiency, ‘irrespective of their age or the level of competition at which they officiate’ (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006, p.111). Incidents requiring their adjudication can occur rapidly during a game, simultaneously in and out of view of the referee, on and off the field, and often with the pressure of ‘unrestrained negative feedback’ from spectators, players and coaches (Wolfson and Neave, 2007, p.232). The referee works in cooperation with assistant referees (linespeople), but there are few other societal roles that involve individual accountability for decisions with such frequency (Mellick et al., 2005).

There is a conventional wisdom in football that referees’ most important learning occurs through ‘experience’ of refereeing. Simmons’ (2007) sample of football players frequently discussed the quality of refereeing as if it were an indicator of the referee’s level of experience. Youthful referees were assumed to be inexperienced, and in turn less competent, dependable and fair (Simmons, 2007). Referee coaching has tended to emphasise acquisition of the knowledge of the rules of the game (Mellick et al., 2005) and strength and conditioning, largely overlooking skills in decision-making and responding to players (MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes & Weston, 2007). A recent study of the development and training of elite level referees found that skills required to apply the laws of the game are mostly acquired ‘through refereeing matches, rather than perceptual-cognitive training with feedback’ (MacMahon et al., 2007, p.77). At the lower levels of the sport where there are fewer opportunities for formal feedback and training, experience is likely to play an even larger part in the development of referees.

Most referees have an opinion about the best way to communicate their many decisions, but there is little evidence on which to base referee communication skills training (Mellick et al., 2005). Mascarenhas, Collins & Mortimer (2005) report a review of empirical literature related to refereeing and officiating performance. They found just 58 articles between 1985 and 2003 and said that they failed to find ‘empirical research that specifically examined communication skills in sports officials’ (2005, p.370). The lack of empirical data helps to explain the lack of communication practice in formal curricula (Mellick et al., 2005) and a shortage of evidence-based training tasks available for development of referees’ interpersonal skills (Mascarenhas et al., 2005).

Referees frequently debate the most effective techniques for communicating decisions. An example of such a debate occurred recently in Australia’s largest online football referee chat room, where referees discussed tactics for effectively presenting yellow cards to players. The posts quoted here are from different referees and reveal differences in style, beliefs about communication, and strategic focus.

1. When there is a card there to be given, it comes out of my pocket like a bolt of lightning. It stays up for about 2-3 seconds ... Then if there is anything to say, I will say it.

2. I tend to vary the "flick" of my arm depending on the severity of the card. Yeah yeah, I know a yellow is a yellow, but if its soft (like removing a shirt during a goal celebration) it'll just be a casual arm-raise, but if they almost made the other guy a quadriplegic it'll be a strong flick.
3. I mean you can't issue a card unless you have a very good reason for giving one. Some referees just issue them like confetti and it can get frustrating for players when they don't know what they get it for. By saying to a player "your being cautioned for this" your explaining you know the LOTG [laws of the game] and that his actions are unacceptable and all players are warned that if it occurs again they will receive the same punishment!

4... a simple one line when issuing a card is sufficient, it gives understanding and complete openness ... trust me if a player has a go at you and asks you a question, those referee who don't respond or completely ignore players often struggle to control games ... communication is such a big thing in any sport and it is paramount that, as referees, we keep communication lines open and don't just "pick and choose" when we communicate with players using our tongues! By doing this it slows the match down and takes the heat out of the situation.

5. Personally, the less you say the better in my opinion. They've committed a foul worthy of a Yellow Card so they know what they've done. Anything you say will incite them, especially if you manage to say the wrong thing. I show the card as I’m walking in from where I was (run to about 4-5 metres away). Simple technique. (Ausref, 2007)

There are clearly some substantial differences in belief about technique. The first emphasises non-verbal movement as a display of the referee’s decisiveness and authority in the situation. The tone suggests belief in a dictatorial approach to communicating with players. The second also emphasises the non-verbal display, but like a prosecution lawyer it focuses on communicating the proportionate seriousness of the foul. The third is more like a sentencing judge, using verbal communication to justify the decision and establish a benchmark to warn others. Four and five focus on player perceptions and reactions to the referees’ verbal communication, but they convey opposite beliefs about the effect of “talk”. Four uses talk to take the heat out of the game in the manner of a teacher, the fifth is detached and robot-like, concerned that ‘talk’ is likely to incite players.

The different approaches reflect the complexity of human interaction, contextual factors, and individual differences in referees’ personalities, experiences, and beliefs. It could reasonably be argued of course that in different circumstances each approach might be the best or the worst to adopt. But the different approaches also illustrate what Mellick et al. (2005, p.45) called the variable ‘hidden curriculum’ referees rely on to develop their communication skills. The hidden curriculum is based on personal experience in and outside football, and advice from refereeing assessors, colleagues, and mentors (Mellick et al., 2005), not all of whom are experts. The advice referees receive about appropriate use of tone, gesture and talking with players is largely based on hearsay, and often conflicted. Some referees advise a personable style with a focus on respect for players, others recommend a terse style with a focus on detachment and maintaining authority (Simmons, 2008).

**Referees and perceptions of fairness**

Mellick et al. (2005) worked with elite level rugby and football referee experts to study the most effective strategies for communicating decisions to players. They proposed that best practice decision communication involved seven main interpersonal actions (whistle, gaze, posture, hand/arm signals, verbal explanation, control, composure, and time management). They 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’ (2005, p.42).

The perception of fairness has been found to be an important determinant of reactions to decisions in a range of contexts. The ‘fair process effect’ has been called ‘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). ‘Treatment’ refers to formal aspects of the procedure such as adherence to rules and established norms of behaviour, and also the style and behaviours of the decision maker.

Simmons (2007) interviewed teams of Australian football players in focus groups. The interviews focused on football referees, and the displays that influence player perceptions of referees. It used a grounded-style analysis (Daymon & Holloway, 2002) to identify the salient themes that emerged from the discussion data. It assumed that fairness is paramount in refereeing (Mellick et al., 2005; Pawlenka, 2005) and used fairness theories to interpret the salient themes. Simmons (2007) found that player perceptions of the fairness of the referee were based on their perception of the extent to which the referee displayed three interrelated meta-characteristics, ‘competence’, ‘dependability’, and ‘respectfulness’. He described competence as the referee quality of having the physical capacity to be in the right place to make decisions and the mental capacity to judge and decide well, and dependability as the capacity to resist influence on their decisions from players, spectators, fear and fatigue. Respectfulness was described as a preference for accountability to players and personable interactions. He found that some verbal and nonverbal displays (such as attire, voice, anger, explanation, listening, and the age of the referee) can have a powerful influence on player perceptions of the fairness of the referee. Players also frequently linked certain referee displays (such as anger and ignoring players’ reasonable requests) with perceptions of unfairness and increasing player frustration and anger towards the referee (Simmons, 2007).

Simmons’ (2007) finding that players use verbal and non-verbal displays as guides to the fairness of the referee may be explained by notions of fairness perception as uncertainty management. Some researchers have argued that people form perceptions of the fairness of authority figures to manage or compensate for uncertainty in situations (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). Important here is the notion that people want to lessen uncertainty about fairness and they use whatever information is available to substitute for information about which they are uncertain. Researchers argue 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).

When people are confronted with uncertainty in their environment, they turn to their impressions of fair or unfair treatment to help them decide how to react. If they are uncertain about their fairness judgments they 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).
Research has also shown that displays of fairness are most important when uncertainty is greatest, and that early displays of fairness or unfairness tend to be more important in perception formation than later displays (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). Factors and cognitive processes that influence perceptions of fairness are complex and have seldom been systematically studied in the emotion-charged sportsfield context. But some processes and communication styles (such as politeness, respectfulness and justification of decisions) are known to influence perceptions of fairness in a range of contexts, separately to the decision outcome. Bies (2005) reports ‘streams’ of research in interactional justice showing that social accounts and ‘respectful and socially sensitive treatment’ (2005, p.87) are important variables for understanding reactions to decisions and actions in a range of workplace and other organisational contexts. Interestingly, when delivering bad news, and interpersonal treatment is most important, many managers (in the organisation context) are prone to using insensitive communication strategies (Patient & Skarlicki, n.d). If referees are also prone to using insensitive strategies when delivering bad news, we might expect players’ reactions to be more negative than is necessary. Skarlicki & Latham (2005) have suggested that leaders should be trained in fairness to enhance perceptions of organizations, increase acceptance of organization decisions, and consequently improve the performance of organizations. They suggest that the ‘training is framed as designed to increase their understanding of how perceptions are formed’ (2005, p.506).

Referees have control over the way they communicate with and treat players, but some contextual and other factors are beyond the control of the referee. Individual player differences influence ratings of fairness. De Cremer (2003) found that consistent leaders were perceived to be more fair than inconsistent leaders, but that inconsistency had a more powerful negative influence on ratings of fairness when the person doing the rating had lower self esteem. Fairness perceptions have also been linked to demographic factors such as the gender and ethnicity of recipients of decisions (Cropanzano et al., 2002). While noting that situational factors are the most commonly manipulated variables in fairness research, De Cremer (2003) argues that a fuller understanding of fairness will require research into the moderating effects of individual differences.

It has been argued that people are more sensitive to procedures that they evaluate as unfair than procedures they evaluate as fair (Van Prooijen et al., 2006). It is conceivable that studying negative referee behaviours and displays might contribute very usefully to the training of referees and this study is concerned with variables that both improve and diminish perceptions of the fairness of referees and their decisions.

This study was designed to examine referee characteristics that positively and negatively influence player perceptions of fairness when communicating a negative decision.

**Independent referee variables**

Three referee variables were selected for examination, the provision of an explanation when communicating the decision, the display of anger when communicating the decision, and the age of the referee.

Explanations are one way to show concern and respect for the receivers of bad news (Patient & Skarlicki, n.d.). According to Bobocel & Zdanuk (2005, p.470) there are ‘strong normative expectations’ in a range of societal contexts for leaders to explain controversial decisions, and that explanations are likely to have stronger effects on recipients when the outcomes being explained are negative. One reason offered for the
positive effects of explanation is the recipient of the explanation feels they have been ‘treated according to social expectations for respect and sensitivity’ (Weaver & Conlon, 2003, p. 2223).

The effects of explanations on receiver reactions are influenced by characteristics of the explanation, the sender, the receiver and the context (Bobocel & Zdanuk, 2005), and predicting the role of explanations in football referee communication is not straightforward. Among referees there are wide ranging beliefs and practices. Some referees prefer not to get involved in discussion with players (Simmons, 2007), while others talk a lot on the field. FIFA referee Matthew Breeze says that young referees are often taught not to get involved in explaining decisions to players (Breeze, personal communication, 2007). Some decisions are more controversial depending on the nature and consequences of the incident, the real and perceived discretion of the referee, and the personalities of those involved and affected. Referees make judgements about all of these factors.

Players interviewed for Simmons (2007) study expressed strong preference for referees who show accountability to players by explaining their decisions, and answering players’ questions. They reported getting frustrated and angry when referees ignored player questions, turned their backs on players, or didn’t explain important decisions. One player said that an explanation indicated the decision was the referee’s own decision, rather than a response to pressure from players or spectators (Simmons, 2007). According to Simmons (2007) the use of explanation contributed to player perceptions of referee competence (they see and judge for themselves), dependability (they are uninfluenced by players or spectators), and respect for players (they are accountable to players). Several aspects of the quality of the explanation are likely to influence the effect on players. Players in Simmons (2007) sample said that the quality of the content of the explanation (it needs to make sense), and the referee’s voice, were used as indicators of the referee’s intelligence, and therefore competence to judge and decide.

This study tests for the effects of giving a short explanation when the referee communicates a negative decision, versus not explaining the same decision (the ‘ignore’ condition). The study uses different vignettes, short stories of a scene from a match, to manipulate the explanation variable (the ‘vignette’ method is discussed in the ‘Method’ section). In all vignettes the referee signals a decision against the player, who then asks;

“What’s that for ref?”

In the explanation conditions (Vignettes 1 and 3) the referee explains the decision with an implied reference to Football law 12 which prevents a player from contacting an opponent before and in the act of contacting the ball:

He says “It’s a free kick” and explains “you got the ball alright, but there was contact with the player before the contact with the ball.”

In the ignore conditions (Vignettes 2 and 4) the referee answers but does not explain the decision. The reason for the free kick is therefore open to speculation:

He says “It’s a free kick. Just get on with the game”.

The hypotheses predicted positive effects when the referee provides an explanation:
Hypothesis 1. Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

Hypothesis 2. Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

Hypothesis 3. Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

The display of anger by the referee was chosen as a communication variable for this study because players interviewed for Simmons (2007) study said referees frequently display anger, and that players generally perceive anger very negatively. Anger displays a range of qualities oppositional to notions of fairness and good refereeing including lack of confidence, inexperience, intimidation, fear, aggression, and inconsistency. Displays of anger by the referee detracted from player perceptions of the referee’s competence, dependability and respect for players (Simmons, 2007, p.19).

In contrast, players in Simmons (2007) study reported that they prefer referees to remain calm; ‘Calm manner was thought to be a calming influence on the players, and a display of experience and confidence’ (p.19). This finding was consistent with conventional refereeing wisdom that says the referee ‘should always appear to be cool, calm and confident’ (ASA, 2005, p.92), and findings from studies in other contexts that a ‘relaxed’ style correlates with informational justice (Sitter, 2003).

Boucher (1979) has cautioned cross cultural researchers on the difficulty of using language to distinguish emotions. There are many ways humans convey and perceive anger (tone, gesture, facial expression, timing etc), and some displays will be interpreted differently in different cultures. This presented a problem for the design of written vignettes for use across cultures. It was decided that the vignette should both describe the referee as ‘angry’, and show the subject that the referee is angry by describing the referee as blowing the whistle ‘loud’, signalling ‘sharply’, and ‘running toward you with a yellow card’;

The 18 year old referee is obviously angry. He blows his whistle loud and sharply signals a free kick in favour of the opposition. He runs toward you waving a yellow card.

You ask him “What’s that for ref?”
He says angrily: “You contacted the player before you got the ball. If you do that again it will have to be a red card”.

To test that subjects are in fact perceiving anger in the referee, item 6 in the questionnaire presents a statement ‘The referee is angry’, and subjects indicate their level of agreement on a 9-point Likert-style scale.

Hypothesis 4. Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

Hypothesis 5. Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

Hypothesis 6. Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be increased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)
The third independent variable is age. Simmons’ (2007) study found that youth in referees acts as a powerful, negative heuristic. ‘Youth’ was not defined as a specific point when referees come of age, but the sample of players interviewed were almost all aged under 35. These players generally perceived young referees to be inexperienced, less mentally and physically competent to judge and decide, more vulnerable to various match pressures, and overly punitive in their approach to controlling games. The finding that Australian players have negative perceptions of young referees is consistent with Australian referee experts’ belief that young referees experience more abuse (Oke, 2005; Lorenc, 2005), and the findings of a Swedish study that young referees are victims of more threats and aggression than older referees of similar experience (Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer & Norlander, 2002). In this study the age of the referee is specified in each vignette. For each of the four explain and anger conditions there is both an 18 year old and a 35 year old referee version.

Hypothesis 7. Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

Hypothesis 8. Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

Hypothesis 9. Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

**Dependent variables – player perceptions of referee performance**

Mascarenhas et al. (2005) criticise a trend in previous empirical studies of referees to focus on physiological and psychological demands of referees, and causes of stress and bias, rather than factors most likely to influence refereeing performance. They report that much research has ‘used refereeing as the medium through which to explore psychological phenomena, rather than examining the factors that directly affect refereeing performance’ (2005, p.370).

There are numerous ways to conceptualise referee performance (eg ‘accuracy’ of decisions, technique, player discipline, safety of play, flow of play, satisfaction) and different stakeholder perspectives (eg self, referee experts, player, coach, spectator, media etc) from which to judge. This study operationalised referee performance, as the dependent variable, using player (respondent) assessments of the referee and their decision. It used findings from Simmons’ (2007) study of player attitudes to referees to guide development of the dependent variables – player perceptions of the competence, dependability and respectfulness of referees.

After reading the vignette, subjects indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements using 9 point Likert –style scales.

The main dependent variables are respondent (player) ratings of referee performance:

- Fairness of the referee was measured with 4 items (“The referee is fair”, “The referee is respectful of players”, “The referee is competent” “The referee is dependable”)
- Correctness of the referee’s decision was a single item (“The referee made the correct decision”)
Intentions towards the referee were measured with two items (“You argue with the referee”, “You say nothing and get on with the game” (item reversed).

**Studying fairness and communication across cultures**

Perceptions of fairness have positive effects across cultures, but the factors that influence perceptions of fairness are not necessarily generalisable across cultures (Leung, 2005). Leung (2005) cites a number of studies showing that styles of interpersonal treatment and decision implementation processes influence perceptions of fairness differently across cultures. Just as culture affects perceptions of fairness in other contexts (Mattila & Patterson, 2004), culture is likely to influence perceptions of fairness in football.

Although individuals vary within cultures, there are many ways of categorising cultures that show general differences in preferences, practices and beliefs. Leung (2005) says that most cross cultural studies of fairness have used Hofstede’s power-distance and individualism–collectivism scales to differentiate cultures. The five countries selected for this study are Australia, Malaysia, Spain, Great Britain and Singapore. They were selected in part for convenience of access to footballers, and in part because of substantial differences on Hofstede’s (1980) power distance and other culture dimensions. On the power-distance dimension Singapore is at the higher end, Spain is just above the middle, Australia and Great Britain are together at the lower end of the power distance scale (Hofstede, 1980). Malaysia ranks highest on the power-distance scale at 1.

Leung (2005) argues that where cultures more readily accept differences in power (high power-distance), lower levels of interpersonal treatment (such as insult, anger, and not listening) by authority figures are more expected, and result in less anger and fewer negative consequences (Leung, 2005). Mattila & Patterson (2004) used an experimental method to measure customer reactions to service failure. They found that perceptions of fairness increased when an explanation was offered, but that the reactions of people from the United States to explanation were different to people from Thailand and Malaysia.

The direction of impact of causal accounts was uniformly positive, but the magnitude seemed to depend on the participant’s cultural background. In particular, East Asian consumers had higher perceptions of interactional and distributive justice than their U.S. counterparts both before and after being provided with a causal explanation (Mattila & Patterson, 2004, p.343).

Australia is at the lower end of Hofstede’s power–distance scale. Consistent with this standing on the power-distance scale, Australian football players show a strong preference for referees who treat them with respect and talk to them ‘normally’. Referee displays of anger were variously, but always negatively, interpreted by players as a sign of disrespect, intimidation or inexperience, which often lead to player anger (Simmons, 2007). This dislike of referee anger is consistent with low power-distance cultures’ preference for more equal relations with authority figures.

Player perception of unfairness doesn’t always lead to negative reactions such as aggression, withdrawal or cheating. People make judgements about the costs and benefits associated with different courses of action (van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001). But based on available evidence from cross-cultural organisational justice studies, and assuming that the referee is perceived to be an authority figure, we would expect that
players from Malaysia, a country that scores very high on Hofstede’s power-distance index, would perceive and react less negatively to referee displays of anger and disrespect, than players from Australia and Great Britain, which have much lower power-distance scores. Spain and Singapore are in between Australia/Great Britain and Malaysia on Hofstede’s (1980) index.

Hall & Reed-Hall (1990) say that communication in cultures differs in terms of ‘context’, the amount of information and explanation people desire from people and situations. ‘Low-context’ cultures such as the US and Great Britain expect more direct and explicit communication than high-context cultures, such as those found typically in Latin and Eastern Asian countries, where less explicit information and explanation is required for effective communication (Koeszegi, Vetschera, & Kersten, 2004). Football can be conceptualised as a high-context life situation, where rules and patterns of interaction are well understood by participants, and don’t need explanation. At the same time we would expect that players from high and low-context cultures bring different expectations of communication to the football field. Malaysia and Singapore are situated in East Asia and would be considered high-context (Koeszegi et al., 2004), Spain is considered in-between high and low-context (Dozier et al., 1998). Triandis (2009) contends that conflict can arise between people from Western individualist cultures, who attend and react more to the content of communication, and people from Eastern collectivist cultures who attend more to the context of the communication. He argues that people from collectivist cultures will react more to how people talk than to what people say. We might therefore expect that players from Malaysia and Singapore will react more strongly to referee displays of anger and calm than players from Australia and Great Britain. This contrasts with predictions relating to player responses to anger and calm based on Hofstede’s (1980) concept of power distance.

Simmons’ (2007) study of players from Australia, generally a low-context culture, found a strong preference for referees who provide a short explanation and justification for their decisions. One interpretation of this finding is that it is consistent with a low-context culture’s preference for information. Data about the preferences of players from high-context cultures is not presently available, so it is not known whether they have a similar preference for referees who explain decisions. However we might predict that explanation would have a more positive effect on player attitudes and behaviours in low-context cultures such as Australia and Great Britain than in high-context cultures such as Singapore and Malaysia. Spain should fall somewhere in between.

It is also conceivable that ‘football’ has its own ‘culture’, somehow transcending national and cultural boundaries, and that referees and players have similar expectations of their interactions in all countries.
2. Hypotheses

The study tests the effects of three communicative referee displays – anger, explanation and the age of the referee - that previous research with players (Simmons, 2007) and elite referees (Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2006) has reported to be influential.

H1 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

H2 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

H3 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

H4 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

H5 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

H6 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be increased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

H7 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

H8 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

H9 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)
3. Method

Data was collected between 16 January and 14 August 2008. The study used two between-subjects factorial designs (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003): a 5 (country of residence) x 2 (explanation: present or absent) x 2 (age of referee: 18 or 35) design to measure the effect of explanation and referee age, and a 5 (country of residence) x 2 (display of anger or display of calm) x 2 (age of referee: 18 or 35) design to measure the effect of anger and referee age.

Materials
The survey instrument (see appendix 1) was developed and administered in paper and electronic form in English, Malay language and Spanish. Eight versions of a match scene (vignette) were developed and included in a survey format. The experiment randomly assigned the vignettes (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). Each vignette was about 140 words. Each respondent read, and was only shown the existence of, just one vignette.

The independent variables were:
- the presence or absence of an explanation when the referee communicates the decision
- the display of anger or calm when the referee communicates the decision
- the age of the referee (18 or 35).

In all vignettes the respondent is required to imagine playing in a match. The match scene and incident are always the same, the referee’s decision is always negative, and the respondent always asks: ‘What’s that for ref?’

In the explanation-present condition the referee justifies the decision by briefly describing the illegality of the play he saw that warranted the decision, whereas in the explanation-absent condition the referee says ‘It’s a free kick. Just get on with the game.’

In the anger condition the referee communicates angrily as he explains the decision, and threatens a more serious punishment if it happens again, whereas in the calm condition the referee communicates calmly as he explains the decision and threatens a more serious punishment if it happens again.

To test the effect of the age of the referee, the four explanation and the anger conditions were each produced with both an 18 year old and a 35 year old referee.

After reading the vignette, respondents indicated their level of agreement with a series of statements using a 9-point Likert–style scale.

The dependent variables were:
- Perceptions of the fairness of the referee, calculated as a mean of the total scores for responses to items a + b + c + d (score range = 4 - 36)
- Perceptions of the correctness of the decision, calculated as a mean of the scores for item e (score range = 1 - 9)
- Intention to argue with the referee, calculated as a mean of the scores for items j + (10-i) (score range = 2 - 18).
At the end of the questionnaire respondents gave information about themselves including; their relationship to football (player, coach, referee etc), gender, age and country of residence. Respondents were required to tick a total of 21 boxes and the survey could generally be completed in around 5 minutes.

**Online version**

A website [http://wsww01.csumain.csu.edu.au/psysurveys/ps%5Fsurvey/](http://wsww01.csumain.csu.edu.au/psysurveys/ps%5Fsurvey/) was built by the Charles Sturt University psychology department to host the questionnaire instrument and automatically record all data.

Respondents click through a sequence of webpages. On page one subjects select their preferred language (English, Malay language or Spanish). Page two includes a brief description of the study that was carefully worded not to influence subjects’ expectations and confound the experiment (Kiess, 1989). Participants are told they are answering questions about a typical scene from a football match, and that their answers are confidential. To avoid leading the focus of respondents, the introduction and preamble do not mention that the study is about referees, or use the words ‘communication’ and ‘fairness’. When the ‘click to start’ button is hit, the program randomly assigns one of the vignettes which appears on page three. Because subjects are not aware that there are different vignette conditions, and the random assignment is done by a computer program, the online experiment procedure can be considered double-blind (Kiess, 1989). Respondents read the vignette and respond to the statements about the referee and the decision. Once the ‘continue’ button is clicked at the end of the page, their responses are entered into the database and cannot be changed.

A separate url enabled the researcher access to data as soon as they had been input, including the time of posting and the IP address of the subject. This enabled the researcher to monitor responses to e-mailouts and new website postings of the link, and also to watch out for any breakdowns in the website.

The online medium enables flexibility not normally available with written surveys, and larger sample sizes than is often practical for experiments. The instrument and question wording can be changed at short notice and for minimal cost. The introductions to link to and complete the survey can be modified to help increase response and completion rates.

**Vignettes**

MacMahon et al. (2007) have reported that football refereeing, like surgery or soldiering, is difficult to simulate for training purposes. In research also, practical and ethical constraints apply when simulating the real life pressures of onfield interactions between players and referees.

Vignettes are a convenient and inexpensive method for exposing respondents to situations that would be difficult to simulate in real life (Sleed et al., 2002). Importantly, they are useful in experimental designs because they enable control of extraneous variables (Sleed et al., 2002, p.27) and manipulation of independent variables in ways that enable causal analysis (de Vaus, 1995). When used in causal analysis:

.. a set of related vignettes is developed in which there are standard features in each story. But other parts of the story are systematically varied between vignettes. We can then focus on the way in which changing parts of the story affect the way people answer questions about it. (de Vaus, 1995, p.91)
Vignettes can be used to measure reactions to situations and stimuli that the respondent may not be able or willing to articulate. According to Collins & Brief (1995), descriptions of people’s characteristics in vignettes can have ‘a profound impact on the subject-observer’s inferences about and behaviour toward the target person’ (p.93) although they will not always acknowledge this if asked the reasons for their assessments.

The presentation and content of the vignettes were planned to avoid leading respondents to any particular focus or attitude before they encountered the questions about the vignette. The subjects were not told in advance that the research was designed to study referee communication, nor that there were other versions of the vignette. Subjects were told that the survey asks for their attitudes to onfield match incidents.

The footballer subjects respond to a situation where a referee decision goes against their team (a ‘negative decision’). A negative decision, rather than positive, was used because the study, and referees generally, are more concerned with the mitigating effects of referee behaviours on players receiving negative decisions, than players receiving favourable decisions!

Development of vignettes is complicated by the various needs of the experiment or survey. In this experiment the two main needs were to create a scenario that footballers in different countries would accept, and to isolate the key variables under study. It was considered important that the vignette be short to enable rapid completion by large numbers of players at football grounds and training venues, and that it should use plain language to facilitate comprehension and translation into other languages.

Winners and losers in the low-scoring sport of soccer football are frequently determined by a single goal resulting from one player mistake, an unlucky bounce, or a disputed referee decision. The high stake that a goal or goal opportunity represents in football elevates the normal tensions of competitive sport. The vignette scene was designed to evoke the tension of close and hard fought competition. Apart from the systematic variation of the referee’s age and communication style, little information is provided about the referee. Subjects are expected to apply their own stereotypes (Sleed et al., 2002) based on the systematically manipulated independent variables.

The challenge set here was to create a context that could evoke some emotional aspects of the reality of playing a football match, including the following elements:

- the exhilaration of competing hard against another team playing hard
- the tension of an even and low scoring game nearing the end, where one goal would be likely to win the game
- the frustration of having a negative and unexpected referee decision go against you, as described by Bar-Eli (1995), with the added disadvantage of the free kick being awarded within scoring range.

The vignettes were written to include these elements, without providing information that might make players feel they were victims of referee prejudice or blatant error, and thus lead respondents’ attitudes to the referee and the referee’s behaviours. The aim was to create an incident where the respondents feel they are probably acting within the rules of the game, but the referee awards the decision against them. Each vignette starts as follows:
Imagine you are playing in a competition football match and it’s midway through the second half. The game has been played hard by both teams and it’s been a very even and physical contest.

Both teams have hit the goalposts but no goals have been scored.

An opponent is several metres outside your penalty area dribbling towards goal. You slide in from the side and clear the ball away. You feel the tackle is probably legal.

The referee then intervenes to award a decision in favour of the opposing team. One of eight combinations of the age of the referee and the behaviours used to communicate the decision is randomly assigned to each subject. All eight vignette conditions in the 3 languages are displayed at Appendices 2, 3 and 4.

Pretests
The English language version of the vignettes and questionnaire was developed and refined in consultation with a FIFA referee, footballers, and in pilot testing with students in Australia. Vignettes were developed in consultation with footballers and a FIFA referee, and then tested for understanding with the students. Although sometimes confusing to non-footballers, the match scene was designed for and understood by footballers.

A four-item scale was created to measure the perceived fairness of the referee, based on items measuring perceptions of referee fairness, competence, dependability and respectfulness. These were the main dimensions of referee fairness reported by Simmons (2007). In pretest with a sample of undergraduate human-movement and communication students (n = 80) strong internal consistency was found for this scale (Cronbach alpha coefficient 0.87).

Cross-cultural research issues
Duda & Allison (1990) have argued that quantitative methods such as fixed item questionnaires can be effective in identifying ethnic/racial differences in values and perceptions, as long as researchers take care that ‘surveys and scales used in comparative sport/exercise psychology research are valid in the cultural contexts being investigated’ (p.125). Although vignettes are well known to researchers in a range of disciplines there is little published information to aid in their construction (Jeffries & Maeder, 2005), and less information about their use across languages and cultures. Cross cultural research requires awareness of the perils of translation, especially language used to distinguish different emotions (Boucher, 1979). For example there are many ways humans convey and perceive anger (tone, gesture, facial expression, timing etc), and some displays will be interpreted differently in different cultures. This presented a challenge for the design of written vignettes for use across cultures. It was decided that the vignette should both describe the referee as ‘angry’, and show subjects that the referee is angry by describing the referee as blowing the whistle ‘loud and sharply’, and ‘running toward you with a yellow card’.

The vignette method allows researchers to standardise aspects of the context, but because translation is likely to alter the meaning in at least some small way, the researcher avoided providing more detail than was necessary to establish a context comprising the normal tensions of a competitive game, wherein the player (respondent)
receives an unanticipated negative decision from the referee. Instrument equivalence for the Australian-developed questionnaire was checked by translation and back translation into both Spanish and Malay language by bilingual natives in both languages (Mattila & Patterson, 2004). Differences between the original and back translation English versions were then scrutinised with reference to the translated version and the intended meaning. Translations were amended where appropriate, with the aim of maintaining consistency of meaning, and experimental control of stimuli. The final translations were tested for understanding with small samples of native speakers, mostly by email.

**Distribution of instrument**
Participants were obtained through football associations and organisations in each country. In Malaysia the researcher was introduced to teams of players by the Football Association of Malaysia and the Kuala Lumpur Social Soccer League, and data was gathered using hard copies of the survey completed by players at training and matches. The Malaysian sample reported here (n=153) includes only the surveys completed in the Malay language. Surveys completed by Malaysian residents in English (some were foreign nationals living in Malaysia) have been removed to capture a sample more representative of Malaysian culture.

In Australia and Spain emails with hot links to the survey were sent to clubs and associations, and hot links to the internet version of the study were posted on state and regional football federation websites. The majority of respondents from Australia responded to large email distributions, the majority of respondents from Spain were recruited though large football Federations in Madrid, Asturias and Castilla y Leon. The Australian sample includes 80 surveys completed in person by players from 4 clubs in regional NSW and 6 clubs from metropolitan Victoria.

In Great Britain and Singapore the sample were accessed with the aid of leading amateur competition organisers, Football Mitoo and Espzen respectively. See appendix 5 for examples of website promotion of the study to players.

**Sample**
More than 4500 footballers from over 30 countries have completed the study. The sample reported here was controlled for age, gender, country of residence and relationship to football (player, coach, referee etc). Responses for qualified referees, females and respondents aged 18 and under will be reported elsewhere.

The sample reported here comprises 1861 male players and coaches aged 19 and over from Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Great Britain and Spain. The total sample for each country and for each vignette condition is included as a table at appendix 6.

Vignettes 1,2,5 and 6 were identical to the corresponding 3,4,7 and 8, vignettes, except that the age of the referee is 18 in the first group, and 35 in the second group. The age of the referee generally did not affect player ratings of the fairness of the referee, the correctness of the decision or their intention to argue with the referee (the effect of age is discussed in a later section). Because few effects were found for the age of the referee, the analysis and the report that follows is based on the combined responses for vignettes 1 and 3 (explain condition), 2 and 4 (no explain condition), 5 and 7 (anger condition), and 6 and 8 (calm condition), see table 1.
Table 1. Sample by country and vignette condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Vignette Condition</th>
<th>Vignette Condition</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain n=</td>
<td>No explain n=</td>
<td>Angry n=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Sample by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>n=</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 plus</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Relationship to football

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>n=</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amateur player</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi professional player</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full professional player</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents were amateur players. Column totals are greater than the sample size and 100% because many respondents nominated more than one playing level and coaching role.

**Analysis**

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

The hypotheses were tested using single-tail t-tests to compare the differences between means. Hypotheses were tested separately for each country.

In the second stage of the analysis, chi square tests were used to test the independence of the relationship between the intention to argue (single item measure), and the age, playing level and place of residence of the player subjects. The ‘high intention to argue’ group comprised all players who answered 7, 8, or 9 at the ‘strongly agree’ end of the scale for item I (‘You argue with the referee’). The ‘low intention to argue with the referee’ group comprised all players who answered 1, 2, or 3 at the ‘strongly disagree’ end of the scale.

Intercorrelations of the subject ratings of the referee and the decision were examined for the whole sample (n=1861). Regression analyses were then performed to investigate influential variables and the main predictors of player perceptions of fairness and correctness.

Mean scores for responses to seven items were tabled to aid the creation of profiles of the player samples from each country (see Appendix 7).
Limitations of method

Online method and sample
The use of online survey method in Australia, Great Britain, Spain and Singapore means that players who don’t use the internet, or don’t frequent football sites, were not included in the sample. That these large samples were gathered online suggests they’re likely to be a different socio-demographic mix to the Malaysians who completed their survey forms in Bahasa Malaysian at training grounds. Some care should be taken when generalising the findings to the populations of players in all the countries. The large samples from Australia, Spain and the UK were gathered using links from football sites, but because they were gathered anonymously online the only controls possible were based on the limited, unverifiable data subjects reported about themselves.

The English version of the online survey instrument originally asked just for the country of residence. In Singapore, there are a large number of foreign nationals playing football in the ESPZEN league that provided access to the sample. It is possible that the sample comprises a large proportion of non Singaporeans. Consequently the sample should be considered more representative of people who play football in Singapore than of Singaporean nationals or Singaporean culture. An extra question asking for the respondent’s nationality was added to the English version of the survey in July, after the majority of the Singaporean data was captured.

The online experiment method involves trading some controls over the process for a larger sample and flexibility not normally available to such research. The use of the online experimental survey method resulted in larger samples from Australia and Spain than would have been practical using a face to face experiment design, and the inclusion of Great Britain and Singapore for little extra cost. The anonymous online method records the IP address of the computer the subject is working from, which can help identify any attempts to “stack” the results, but otherwise the researcher must trust that the subjects are who they report they are.

The use of hypothetical vignettes raises questions about the validity of the findings. Real-world football generates extremes of emotion and irrationality in behaviour, and interactions that are complex, dynamic, and difficult to replicate in a hypothetical. Vignettes delivered by video might enhance emotion-evoking aspects of the reality of football but close attention would have to be paid to eliminating extraneous variables.

In the first weeks of the study there were several technical problems encountered, and about 10 per cent of the responses did not include respondents’ personal details. This data is not reported here. A programming problem was assumed but never discovered. The problem persisted through the study but the frequency decreased to less than 5 percent after other changes were made to the site. The fault is assumed not to have biased the findings but the effect is not known.

Design
The study reported here used two factorial experiment designs (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003), each 2 x 2 x 5. The first tested explanation versus no explanation x age 18 versus 35 x the 5 countries. The second tested anger versus calm x age 18 versus 35 x the 5 countries. A small but potentially important difference in the vignette conditions meant that the design was not completely crossed (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). In the explanation conditions the referee awards a free kick, in the anger conditions the referee awards a free kick and issues a yellow card. This prevents direct comparison between the effects
of explanation and calm, and analysis of interactions between anger, calm, age, explanation and no explanation. The design used in the study focused on the interactions between age and explanation, and age and anger. It was selected because anticipated sample sizes were much smaller than those obtained from Spain and Australia and Great Britain. Future designs should explore the interactions between no explanation/explanation and anger/calm.

The study measured the effects of a single, isolated encounter between a player and a referee. In a real game encounters are multifold and perceptions of the referee are likely to develop dynamically and diachronically. First impressions will be modified, reversed, complicated or reinforced by subsequent interactions and events. Consequently the design used here does not capture the cumulative effects of multiple interactions, which are likely to be more enduring and profoundly influential on player attitudes and behaviours. Nor does it make repeated measures to test for the endurance of effects.

A between-subject method was used with random assignment of conditions. The use of a between-subject method in an experimental design adds credibility to the findings concerning the differential responses to the independent variables. Future studies using within-subject design with controls for order bias might effectively test more variables within different scenario conditions.

**Instrument**

A short survey was preferred because it enabled the researcher to promote the study as a ‘5-minute survey’ and thus increase participation rates and sample size. Further questions could have been used to more fully operationalise the notions of ‘competence’, ‘dependability’, ‘respectfulness’ and ‘correct’. This would enable more precise definition of these concepts, and insight into the variables that influence and distinguish them. Jordan et al. (2008) contend that while multiple-item scales are generally preferred as measures of complex psychological constructs, recent evidence indicates that in addition to the practical benefits of shorter survey time and length, single-items can have psychometric benefits. Single-items can sometimes be more efficacious measures of global constructs such as satisfaction, and can be more readily applied to different populations (Jordan et al., 2008). Johnson et al. (2005) report that some cultural characteristics influence survey response styles. Power distance for example has been positively associated with extreme response style and negatively associated with acquiescent responses. A larger number of questions would have permitted more extensive use of reversed items and different response formats (Johnson et al., 2005).

**Analysis**

The analysis has not explored differences between the scores of different national sub groups, independent of the effects. For example the range of scores for the fairness scale in the explanation vignette condition was 20.16 in Malaysia (lowest) to 24.98 in Great Britain (highest).

The analysis reported here focuses on the different effects of the communication displays on the sub samples, and the differences between the effects on the sub samples.
4. Findings

4.1 Summary of main findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>AUS n=675</th>
<th>MYS n=153</th>
<th>SGP n=131</th>
<th>ESP n=537</th>
<th>GBR n=365</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>H1 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H2 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H3 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>H4 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H5 Players’ ratings of correctness of the decision will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H6 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be increased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee age</td>
<td>H7 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗ ✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H8 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H9 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

✓ = supported p < 0.05
✗ = not supported p < 0.05
✗✓ = supported for some conditions p < 0.05

Intention to argue with referee
The study found that explanation, anger and the age of the referee had no significant effect on player intentions to argue with the referee. Subsequent analyses found that player variables, rather than referee variables, influenced intention to argue. Analysis by age, level of play and country of residence, and overrepresentation in the ‘high intention to argue’ category found that:

- Younger players are more likely to argue
- Professional players are more likely to argue
- Players from Great Britain and Malaysia are more likely to argue
4.2 The effects of the referee explaining a negative decision to players

- H1 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

**H1 was supported in each country except Malaysia.** Players’ (Australia, Spain, UK, Singapore) ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly higher (p<0.05) when they received an explanation for the decision than when they did not receive an explanation, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Explanation and perception of fairness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>AUS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>MLY</th>
<th>GBR</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>22.95</td>
<td>17.92</td>
<td>22.63</td>
<td>18.55</td>
<td>20.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>7.21</td>
<td>6.98</td>
<td>9.77</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>7.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t - Equal variance assumed</td>
<td>6.492</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>9.767</td>
<td>3.985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P = significant &lt;0.05</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. shows that players in Great Britain are the most sensitive to the provision of an explanation. Ratings of the fairness referee on a scale of 4-36 increased by more than 10 points when an explanation was provided. In Malaysia there was no significant difference.

**Graph 1. Mean effects of explanation on perception of the fairness of the referee by country**

Graph 1. shows that when the referee explained the decision, player ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly increased, except in Malaysia.
Hypothesis 2 was supported in each country except Malaysia. Players’ (Australia, Spain, Great Britain, Singapore) ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly higher (p<0.05) when they received an explanation for the decision than when they did not receive an explanation, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Explanation and perception of correctness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>AUS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>MLY</th>
<th>GBR</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>Explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t - Equal variance assumed</td>
<td>4.851</td>
<td>-0.567</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t – Equal variance not assumed</td>
<td>3.289</td>
<td>7.289</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P = significant &lt;0.05</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
<td>0.286</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. shows that players in Great Britain are the most sensitive to the provision of an explanation. Ratings of the correctness of the decision on a scale of 1-9 increased by more than 2.5 points when an explanation was provided. In Malaysia there was no significant difference.

Graph 2. Mean effects of explanation on player perceptions of the correctness of the decision by country
Graph 2. shows that when the referee explained the decision, player ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly increased, except in Malaysia where explanation had no significant effect.

Player perceptions of the correctness of the decision are positively influenced by the provision of an explanation.
H3 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee explains a negative decision (versus no explanation)

**H3 was not supported.** Explanation had no significant effect on intentions to argue in any of the countries (p<0.1).
4.3 The effects of referee displays of anger in communicating a negative decision

- H4 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

Hypothesis 4 was supported in each country except Singapore.

Item 6. ‘The referee is angry’ tested that players perceived anger in the anger vignette conditions. The mean score in the anger vignette conditions (n=849) was 6.08. The mean score in the calm condition (n=829) was 3.05 showing that subjects did perceive the referee to be significantly more angry in the anger conditions.

Table 6. shows that players’ (Australia, Spain, Great Britain, Malaysia) ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly higher when the referee communicated the decision calmly, than when the decision was communicated angrily.

Table 6. Anger and perception of fairness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>AUS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>MLY</th>
<th>GBR</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>21.47</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>20.95</td>
<td>17.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>8.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t - Equal variance assumed</td>
<td>-5.869</td>
<td>-3.346</td>
<td>-2.627</td>
<td>-4.531</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t – Equal variance not assumed</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.399</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 3. Mean effects of display of anger on perception of the fairness of the referee by country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Calm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>21.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>22.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>20.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBR</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>19.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graph 3 shows that players in Malaysia are the most sensitive to the display of anger. Ratings of the fairness of the referee on a scale of 4-36 decreased by more than 5 points when the referee displayed anger. Player ratings of the fairness of the referee were significantly lower when the referee communicated angrily, except in Singapore, where anger had no significant effect.

- H5 Players’ ratings of the correctness of the decision will be decreased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

**Hypothesis 5 was supported in Malaysia and the UK, but not in the other countries.**

Table 7 shows that player attitudes to the correctness of the decision were significantly higher (p<0.05) in Malaysia and the UK when the referee communicated the decision calmly, than when the decision was communicated angrily. The effect was not significant in the other countries (p<0.05).

**Table 7. Anger and perception of correctness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>AUS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>MLY</th>
<th>GBR</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t - Equal variance assumed</td>
<td>-0.809</td>
<td>-1.488</td>
<td>-2.771</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>-1.853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P = significant &lt;0.05</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.0035</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows that players in Malaysia are the most sensitive to the display of anger. Ratings of the correctness of the decision on a scale of 1-9 decreased by more than 1.5 points when the referee displayed anger. In Singapore, Australia and Spain there was no significant difference.
Graph 4. Mean effects of display of anger on perception of the correctness of the decision by country

Graph 4. shows that player ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly lower in GBR and Malaysia when the referee communicated angrily. In Spain, Singapore and Australia the display of anger had no significant effect on player perceptions of the correctness of the decision.

These effects contrast with the effects of explanation in Australia, Singapore and Spain. In these countries both explanation and anger had a negative influence on perceptions of the referee, but only explanation had a negative influence on perception of the correctness of the decision.

Although explanation had no effect on Malaysian perceptions of fairness and correctness, the display of anger had a significant negative effect on both the perceived fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision.
• H6 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be increased when the referee communicates a negative decision angrily (versus calmly)

**H6 was not supported.** Anger had no significant effect on intentions to argue in any of the countries (p<0.1).
4.4 The effects of the age of the referee on player perceptions

The age of the referee generally had little significant effect on player ratings of the referee and their decision. Where all other things were equal, player ratings were similar for referees aged 18 and 35. Malaysian players were the most sensitive to the age of the referee, but as the following section indicates, they were sensitive to age in combination with certain communication displays, rather than age alone.

- H7 Players’ ratings of the fairness of the referee will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

**H7 was not supported in Australia, Great Britain and Singapore.**

Player ratings of the fairness of the referee were tested for four different vignette conditions (rotating the age of the referee), in each country, making 20 comparison tests in total. There were 4 significant results, two comparisons showed the 35 year old referee was rated higher on fairness (one each in Spain and Malaysia).

Spanish player ratings of the fairness of the referee, when the decision was not explained, were significantly lower for the 18 year old referee than the 35 year old referee. There was no significant difference for age when the referee explained the decision. This suggests that Spanish players are less accepting of young referees who ignore player requests for an explanation of their decisions.

In Malaysia the 35 year old referee was rated as significantly more fair when communicating angrily than the 18 year old referee communicating angrily. There was no significant difference for age when the referees communicated calmly. This suggests that Malaysian players are less accepting of displays of anger from younger referees.

Malaysian player ratings of the fairness of 18 year old referees in the 4 vignette conditions were consistently higher than 22 out of a possible 36, except when they communicated angrily and the rating fell to 14.6.

Two comparisons showed the 18 year old referee was rated higher on fairness (one in each of Malaysia and Singapore).

In Malaysia the players’ ratings of the referee, when the decision was explained, were significantly higher for the 18 year old referee, than the 35 year old referee.

In Singapore the players’ ratings of the referee, when the decision was communicated calmly, were significantly higher for the 18 year old referee, than the 35 year old referee.
H8 Players ratings of the correctness of the decision will be increased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

H8 was not supported in Australia, Great Britain, Malaysia or Spain.

The older age of the referee did not increase the ratings of the correctness of the decision. Player ratings of the correctness of the decision were tested for four different vignette conditions (rotating the age of the referee), in each country, making 20 comparison tests in total.

There were 3 significant results, two in Malaysia and one in Singapore. In each of these the players rated the 18 year old referee’s decision as more correct than the 35 year old’s decision. Malaysian players rated the 18 year old’s decision as significantly more correct, whether he explained the decision or not.
• H9 Players’ intentions to argue with the referee will be decreased when the referee is aged 35 (versus 18)

H9 was not supported in Australia, Malaysia, Great Britain or Spain.

Players’ intentions to argue with the referee were not decreased by the age of the referee. Player ratings of their intention to argue with the referee were tested for four different vignette conditions (rotating the age of the referee), in each country, making 20 comparison tests in total. There were 2 significant results (one in each of Malaysia and Singapore), both were for vignettes 5 and 7 where the referee displays anger. When the referee communicated angrily, Malaysian players were more likely to argue with the 35 year old referee, Singaporeans were more likely to argue with the 18 year old referee.

The intention to argue with the referee was not generally found to be related to the age or communication style of the referee.
4.5 Players who intend to argue with the referee

The independent variables (explanation v no explanation, anger v calm, age of the referee) had no significant effect on players’ intentions to argue with the referee. The data was reanalysed to explore for factors that influence intention to argue.

Although not hypothesised, chi square tests were used to test the independence of the relationship between the intention to argue (single item measure), and the age, playing level and place of residence of the player subjects. The ‘high intention to argue’ group comprised all players who answered 7,8, or 9 at the ‘strongly agree’ end of the scale for item I (‘You argue with the referee’). The ‘low intention to argue with the referee’ group comprised all players who answered 1,2, or 3 at the ‘strongly disagree’ end of the scale. Those who answered 4,5 or 6 are not included in the analyses presented here.

The data in this section indicate that when receiving a negative decision:

- younger players are more likely to argue with referees than older players
- players from Malaysia and Great Britain are more likely to argue with referees than players from Spain, Australia and Singapore
- professional players are more likely to argue with referees than amateur and semi-professional players.
Age of the player and intention to argue
Table 8. shows the expected number of players for each age category against the actual count, and that there are significant differences between the age groups. Younger players were more likely to argue with the referee than older players.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>19-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55 plus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High intention to argue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>132.2</td>
<td>163.6</td>
<td>120.3</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>-4.2</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low intention to argue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>267.8</td>
<td>331.4</td>
<td>243.7</td>
<td>111.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi square value = 62.703 (p<0.001)
n= 1480 (respondents who answered 4, 5 or 6 at question I are not included in this analysis)

Graph 5. Low intention to argue with referee and player age
Graph 5. shows that older players (35-44; 45-54; 55 plus) are overrepresented in the ‘low intention to argue with referee’ category and younger players (19-24; 25-34) are underrepresented.

Graph 6. High intention to argue with referee and player age
Graph 6 shows that younger players (19-24; 25-34) are proportionately overrepresented in the ‘high intention to argue with referee’ category, and older players (35-44; 45-54; 55 plus) are underrepresented in the ‘high intention to argue with referee’ category. When receiving a negative decision, younger players are more likely to argue with referees than older players.
Country of residence and intention to argue

Table 9. shows the expected number of players for each country of residence against the actual count. It shows that there are significant differences between the counties. Players from Malaysia and Great Britain were more likely to argue with the referee than players from Australia, Spain and Singapore.

### Table 9. Intention to argue with referee and country of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>AUS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>GBR</th>
<th>MYS</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High intention to argue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>156.1</td>
<td>115.9</td>
<td>120.4</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low intention to argue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>328.9</td>
<td>244.1</td>
<td>253.6</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>78.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi square value = 59.511 (p<0.001)  
n= 1420 (respondents who answered 4, 5 or 6 at question I are not included in this analysis)

Graph 7. Low intention to argue with referee and country of residence

Graph 7. shows that among the ‘low intention to argue with the referee’ group players from Malaysia and the Great Britain were underrepresented, and players from Australia, Spain and Singapore were overrepresented.

Graph 8. High intention to argue with referee and country of residence
Graph 8. shows that among the ‘high intention to argue with the referee’ group players from Malaysia and the Great Britain were overrepresents, and players from Australia, Spain and Singapore were underrepresented.
Level of play and intention to argue

Table 10. shows the expected number of players at amateur, semi-professional and professional level against the actual count. It shows that there are significant differences between players at different levels of the game. Professional players were more likely to argue with the referee than amateur and semi professional players.

Table 10. Intention to argue with referee and level of player

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player level</th>
<th>Amateur</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Semi-Professional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High intention to argue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>326.4</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low intention to argue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>575.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>134.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard residual</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi square value = 30.799 (p<0.001)
n= 1169 (coaches and respondents who answered 4,5 or 6 at question I are not included in this analysis)

Graph 9. Low intention to argue with referee and level of player

Graph 9. shows that among the ‘low intention to argue with the referee’ group, amateur players are overrepresented and professional players are underrepresented.

Graph 10. High intention to argue with referee and level of player
Graph 10. shows that among the ‘high intention to argue with the referee’ group, professional players are overrepresented. The actual number is almost twice as high as the expected number.
4.6 Interactions of the variables - correlations and regression analyses

The large number of responses enable analysis of interaction of independent and dependent variables and their predictors. In particular this analysis sought to understand the interrelationship between an overall player assessment of the referee - player satisfaction - and other perceptions of the referee and the decision. Subject responses for the 8 vignettes were first grouped (N=1861) and then correlated as shown in table X.

Table X suggests strong, significant correlations between a number of the variables, especially the dimensions of Fairness, perceptions of Correctness, and Player Satisfaction with the referee. It suggests that Player Satisfaction with the referee correlates most strongly with perceptions of Correctness (0.69). Player perceptions of Fairness (0.71) and Dependability (0.67) are the strongest predictors of Correctness. Competence (0.72) and Dependability (0.71) are the most effective predictors of referee Fairness. Respectfulness is highly correlated as well, but more highly with referee Fairness (.59) than decision Correctness (.45). The highest correlation was between Dependability and Competence (.83).

Table 11. Intercorrelation matrix (N=1861)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referee fair</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee respectful</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee competent</td>
<td>.72**</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee dependable</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision is correct</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee is angry</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player satisfaction</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player angry</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player will argue</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player says nothing</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** correlation significant (p<0.01) (2-tailed)

Multiple regression analyses were performed to investigate influential variables and interrelationships. The regression variables investigated were drawn from the response variables in Table 11 (especially player perceptions of referee Fairness [single item measure], Respectfulness, Competence and Dependability, as well as Player Satisfaction and perceptions of Correctness. After initial analyses, non-significant variables were deleted, and analyses were repeated. Observing due consideration for multicollinearity distortions, highly correlated variables were generally deleted (Harrison & Tamaschke, 1993).

The main findings are presented below. They show strong cross-prediction between Player Satisfaction with the referee, perceptions of Correctness, and the dimensions of the fairness scale used to test the main hypotheses, Fairness, Competence, Respectfulness, and Dependability.

**Player satisfaction with referee**

Analyses were performed for player satisfaction as the dependent variable. After removing non-significant variables, including the constant, 89% of the variance of players’ satisfaction with the referee was predicted by perception of Fairness, Competence, Respectfulness, Dependability and Correctness. These predictor variables
correlate highly and it is important to note that the maximum VIF = 22 and the maximum condition index = 13. The unstandardised coefficients remained constant after other variables had been removed from the model.

Player satisfaction = 0.366 x Correctness of decision + 0.133 x Fair + 0.075 x Respectful + 0.160 x Competent + 0.156 x Dependable. (R Square = 0.893) F= 3076

This means that an increase of 1 point on a 1-9 scale for correctness predicts a 0.366 increase on the score for Player Satisfaction with the referee. An increase of 1 point on a 1-9 scale for Fairness predicts a 0.133 increase on the score for satisfaction with the referee.

The analyses consistently showed that perception of the correctness of the decision was the highest predictor of player satisfaction. This was followed in descending order of prediction size by perception of referee competence, dependability, fairness and respectfulness.

**Perception of the correctness of the decision**
The perception that the referee has made a correct decision is central to player perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the referee. Regression analyses were performed to identify variables that predict perceptions of the correctness of the decision. These analyses showed that, among the variables representing perceptions of the referee, the largest predictors of player perception of correctness in the decision were player perceptions of the Fairness, Dependability and Competence of the referee. Perception of referee Respectfulness was a significant, but small negative predictor of Correctness.

Perception of correctness of decision = 0.082 (Constant) + 0.472 x Fairness + 0.333 x Dependable + 0.170 Competent - 0.111 x Respectful (R Square = 0.569) F = 611299.

The Constant (non-significant at p<0.1) was deleted from the model. The predictor variables correlate highly and in assessing any multicollinearity distortion it is important to note that the maximum VIF = 22, and the maximum condition index = 12. The unstandardised coefficients remained constant when other variables had been removed from the model.

Perception of Correctness of decision = 0.475 x Fairness + 0.337 x Dependable + 0.1702 x Competent -0.106 x Respectful (R Square = 0.890) F = 3734000.

The analyses consistently showed that player perceptions of the fairness of the referee were the main predictor of the Correctness of the decision, followed by perception of Dependability and Competence. The perception of the referee’s respectfulness of players was consistently negatively related to perception of Correctness. This means that an increase of 1 point on a 1-9 scale for Respectfulness predicts a 0.106 decrease on the score for Player Satisfaction with the referee. The relationship is small but significant (p<0.01).

**Perception of referee fairness (4 items)**
Regression analyses were performed using the four item Fairness scale (Fair, Competent, Respectful, Dependable) as the dependent variable. The sample (n=922) were the respondents for the vignette conditions 1-4. One of the predictor variables of interest was the provision of an explanation (present in vignettes 1 and 3, and absent in vignettes 2 and 4).
Referee Fairness = 10.801 (constant) + 2.180 Explain + 1.261 x Correct + 1.180 x Player satisfaction -0.315 x Referee Angry (item 6) – 0.250 x Player Argues (R Square = 0.622) F = 300964.

The presence or absence of an explanation predicted an increase in the rating of fairness on the scale (1-36) of 2.18. An increase in perception of player intention to argue, or perception of referee anger, predicted a small decline in fairness. A further analysis using just Correct and Explain as predictor variables accounted for 54% of variance in perception of referee fairness.

Referee Fairness = 9.664 (constant) + 2.597 Explain + 2.181 x Correct (R Square = 0.538) F = 536506.

A third analysis used explanation as the sole predictor variable.

Referee Fairness = 17.684 (constant) + 5.45 Explain (R Square = 0.113) F = 117208.

This means that the provision of an explanation predicts 11% of the variance in the perception of referee fairness. The constant is 17.684, and the model predicts an additional 5.45 is added when the referee provides an explanation. This regression very closely matches the figures in Table 4 and Graph 1 showing the effects of an explanation on perceptions of referee fairness, where the constant (17.684) approximates the scores for the ignore (no explanation) vignette conditions.

**Perception of referee competence**

A regression analysis was performed for competence as the dependent variable with Dependable and Respectful as predictors. The analysis showed that 72% of variance in perception of referee Competence was predicted by Respectfullness and Dependability.

Competence = 0.426 (constant) + 0.191 x Respectful + 0.722 x Dependable. (R Square = 0.72) F=2325, p<0.01

This means that an increase of 1 point on a 1-9 scale for Dependability predicts a 0.722 increase on the score for Competence. A 1 point increase on a 1-9 scale for Respectfulness would predict a 0.191 increase for Competence. Competence and Dependability had high correlation.
4.7 Profile of players by country of residence

This section outlines the main findings in relation to each country and makes some comparisons. It draws on data presented throughout the report including the table at appendix 7 which shows the mean scores for individual items in each vignette condition, for each country of residence. The rows in the bottom ‘total’ section show the total of the mean scores for the 8 different vignette conditions, for each country, for each of the seven items.

Appendix 7 shows that the range of the total mean scores across the 5 countries, for each vignette condition, is less than 1.09 (on scales of 1-9) in all but one column. The range of mean scores for player intentions to argue is 1.71 (3.94 in Spain to 5.65 in Malaysia). Although there are differences between countries that will be discussed, the results overall suggest that players rate and react to referees similarly in different countries. The data generally support the notion of football as a ‘world game’.

**Australia**

Table 9. and Appendix 7. show that Australian players were very similar to Spanish players both in terms of the pattern of their reactions to different referee communication displays, and in terms of the actual ratings of the referee and the decision. Australian and Spanish players were the least likely to say they intended to argue with the referee.

Australians responded positively to the referee explaining the decision, and to a calm style of communication. When the referee explained the decision players rated the referee as significantly more fair, and the decision as significantly more correct, than when they didn’t explain. They also rated the referee as more respectful, competent and dependable, and players were more satisfied with the referee. They responded negatively to the referee ignoring their request for an explanation. However the effects of not explaining were not as powerfully negative with Australian players as they were for players from Great Britain.

The display of anger had almost the opposite effect of explanation for Australian players. When the referee displayed anger, Australian players rated the referee as significantly less fair, less respectful, less competent and less dependable. However, unlike explanation, the display of anger had no significant effect on the perception of the correctness of the decision. Players were also less satisfied when the referee displayed anger.

Australian players were less likely to express an intention to argue with the referee than the average for the 5 countries. They were underrepresented in the group with a high intention to argue, and overrepresented in the group with a low intention to argue.

**Great Britain**

Players from Great Britain were the most sensitive to communicative displays, indicating different expectations and interpretations of referee communication to the other countries. The use of an explanation by the referee had a particularly positive effect on player perceptions of fairness and correctness. When the referee did not explain, player ratings of the referee’s competence, dependability, fairness and respectfulness were much lower. They were also less satisfied with the referee and rated the correctness of the decision much lower when there was no explanation.
A calm communication style also results in more positive player perceptions in Great Britain. When the referee communicated calmly players rated the referee as more fair, competent, dependable and respectful. They were also more satisfied with the referee. Only players from Malaysia and Great Britain were significantly influenced by the display of anger when rating the correctness of the decision. They perceived the decision to be less correct when the referee communicated the decision angrily and more correct when communicated calmly.

A larger proportion of players from Great Britain intend to argue with the referee, than Australia, Spain and Singapore. The Chi square analyses in Table 9. show that players from Great Britain are overrepresented in the group with high intention to argue, and underrepresented in the low intention to argue group.

**Malaysia**

Malaysian players were the most sensitive to the tone of the communication, and the least sensitive to the presence or absence of an explanation for the decision. Appendix 7. shows that when the referee displayed anger the Malaysian players rated the referee as less fair, less respectful, less competent and less dependable. It was only in Malaysia and Great Britain that ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly influenced by the display of anger.

When the referee explained the decision there was little effect on Malaysian ratings of the referee and the decision. Malaysia was the only country where player ratings of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision were not significantly affected by the referee explaining the decision.

In all vignette conditions Malaysian players expressed the highest intention to argue with the referee. They were overrepresented in the group with a high intention to argue, and underrepresented in the group with a low intention to argue.

**Singapore**

Players residing in Singapore responded positively to the referee explaining the decision. The use of an explanation by the referee had a positive effect on player perceptions of fairness and correctness. When the referee explained the decision, player ratings of the referee’s competence, dependability, fairness and respectfulness were higher. They were also more satisfied with the referee and rated the correctness of the decision higher when it was explained.

Singaporean players were less affected by the tone of the communication than players from other countries. Players from Australia, Malaysia, Spain and Great Britain rated the referee as less fair when the decision was communicated angrily, but Singaporean players’ ratings of the referee were not significantly affected by the display of anger. Singaporean players’ perceptions of the correctness of the decision were also not affected significantly by the display of anger.

Singaporean players were slightly overrepresented in the group of players with low intention to argue and slightly underrepresented in the group with high intention to argue.

**Spain**

Appendix 7. shows that Spanish players responded positively to the referee explaining the decision, and to a calm style of communication. They respond negatively to the
referee ignoring their request for an explanation, and to displays of anger. In all vignette conditions the Spanish players rated the correctness of the decision slightly lower than Australian players, but the pattern of responses to the communication vignettes for Spanish players was very similar to Australia.

When the referee explained the decision Spanish players rated the referee as significantly more fair, and the decision as significantly more correct, than when they didn’t explain. They also rated the referee as more respectful, competent and dependable, and players were more satisfied with the referee when the decision was explained.

In Spain the display of anger had almost the opposite effect to explanation. When the referee displayed anger players rated the referee as significantly less fair, less respectful, less competent and less dependable. However, unlike explanation, the display of anger had no significant effect on the perception of the correctness of the decision. Players were also less satisfied when the referee displayed anger.

Spanish players were less likely to express an intention to argue with the referee than the average for the 5 countries. They were underrepresented in the group with a high intention to argue, and overrepresented in the group with a low intention to argue.
5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings provide empirical support for the contention that player reactions to the awarding of a negative decision are significantly affected by the referee’s style of communication, in all five countries studied. The conventional football wisdom that referees should communicate decisions calmly, and that a brief explanation improves player reactions to negative decisions, is generally supported.

The notion of football as ‘the world game’ is generally supported by the striking similarities in the patterns of footballer reactions to different stimuli across countries and cultures. However the study found that the tone of referee communication is most important to players in Malaysia, while explanation was most important to players in Australia, Great Britain, Singapore and Spain. The manipulation of the age of the referee (18 or 35) was found not to have a significant effect on player reactions.

The study found evidence of the ‘substitutability’ effect (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002) in cognitive processing of fairness information. Information provided to players about process (content and tone of communication) was used to substitute for uncertainty in outcome judgments about the correctness of the decision and the fairness of the decision-maker (the referee).

The results support the contention that referees should promote perceptions of the fairness of their decisions (Mellick et al., 2005) and that player perceptions of the fairness of the referee are influenced by their communication style (Simmons, 2007). Each footballer responded to one match incident where a referee communicates a decision against them. The provision of an explanation and the display of anger both, separately, influenced player perceptions of the referee and the decision but did not significantly influence their intention to argue with the referee. This is possibly because the study used a single incident simulation in a survey as the stimulus, when in a real match it might normally require a cumulation of frustrating and disappointing incidents to cause players to argue. This study found that intention to argue with the referee was better predicted by characteristics of the player – age, country of residence and level of play - than by characteristics and communication style of the referee. This is discussed further below.

The study has broken new ground in football research by examining, from the players’ viewpoint, the effect of several variables among the infinite array of contextual and other factors that influence referee/player interactions. This section discusses the main findings and their implications for football refereeing.

The importance of being correct

Importantly, the results show that the way the referee communicates the decision influences player perceptions of whether or not the decision is ‘correct’. The study found that perception of correctness in the decision was the strongest predictor of player satisfaction with the referee. It can be argued that players ultimately prioritise ‘correctness’ in decision outcome over referee style and other attributes. Correctness in the decision was a stronger predictor of satisfaction with the referee than perception of the referee as fair, competent, dependable or respectful. This is perhaps not surprising. But perception of correctness in football is influenced by perspective, it’s very frequently contested, and it’s often unresolved or unresolvable. Bar Eli et al. (1995) argued that many conflicts could be prevented if referees were more aware of the influence their communication has on players. This study suggests that many involved
in football could benefit if referees can become more skilled at, and aware of,
communication that enhances perceptions of the ‘correctness’ of their decisions.

An important question raised and to some extent answered by this study is ‘what can
referees do to increase player perception of the correctness of their decisions?’
Regression analysis showed that 89 percent of the variance in player perceptions of the
correctness of decisions was predicted by, in descending order of importance,
perceptions of fairness (single item), dependability, competence, and respectfulness.
Player ratings of the fairness of the referee were the strongest predictor of the
correctness of the decision. Player perceptions of the dependability and competence of
the referee also positively predicted perceptions of correctness, while respectfulness
showed a small but significant negative relationship. Although respectfulness is
considered by players to be a desirable quality in referees (Simmons, 2007), perception
of the correctness of the decision appears to be more strongly influenced by perceptions
of the referee’s competence and dependability. Players like referees to be personable
and approachable, but it’s more important that they’re the sort of people who make and
carry out correct decisions.

Cultural differences
This study found that referees influence perception of correctness differently in some
countries. In Australia, Great Britain, Singapore and Spain, perceptions of the
correctness of the referee’s decision were significantly and positively influenced when
the referee gave a short explanation of the decision. This was not the case in Malaysia
where explanation did not affect ratings of correctness. This difference is partially
consistent with Mattila & Patterson’s (2004) consumer justice study in both Western
(USA) and East Asian (Malaysia and Thailand) cultures. They found that explaining the
bad news of a service failure had a positive effect in both, but the effect was more
powerful in the Western culture. The present study found that explanation had no
significant effect with footballers in Malaysia. (Although Singapore neighbours
Malaysia, the suspected high number of foreign nationals in the Singaporean sample, as
previously discussed, warrants a cautious approach to their inclusion here as
representative of East Asian culture). The lesser effect of explanation in Malaysia might
be accounted for by Hall & Reed-Hall’s (1990) notion of context. In high-context
cultures such as Malaysia, people expect less direct explication in interactions where
rules and patterns of behavior are understood.

In all the countries except Singapore the display of anger decreased footballer ratings of
the fairness of the referee. However it was only in Malaysia and Great Britain that the
display of anger significantly affected ratings of the correctness of the decision.
Australian, Spanish and Singaporean footballer ratings of decision correctness were
influenced by the content of the communication (explanation), but were not influenced
by the tone of the referee’s communication (anger and calm).

The negative effects of anger are consistent with Simmons’ (2007) findings. Simmons
(2007) reported that displays of anger by the referee were interpreted in various ways by
players, and nearly always negatively. ‘Anger displays a range of qualities oppositional
to notions of fairness and good refereeing including lack of confidence, inexperience,
imimidation, fear, aggression and inconsistency’ (Simmons, 2007, p.11).

The negative effects of anger on player reactions were strongest in Malaysia. This was
somewhat surprising insofar as Malaysia scores highest on Hofstede’s (1980) power
distance index and Leung (2005) asserts that where cultures more readily accept
differences in power distance, lower levels of interpersonal treatment (such as anger) from authority figures are more expected, and have fewer negative consequences. However the finding may be explained in two ways. First is that although football referees in Malaysia have authority on the football field, it might be incorrect to assume that players’ expectations of their interactions with referees parallel their expectations with other ‘authority figures’. Malaysian society has a pervasive and visible system of status titles that does not necessarily afford a high status for football referees. Consequently displays of anger are no more acceptable from referees than anyone else.

A second explanation is that the findings in this study more generally support Triandis’ (2009) assertion that people in Eastern collectivist cultures attend more to how things are said, while people from Western individualist cultures attend more to what is being said. In the anger/calm vignette conditions the only difference is the tone the referee uses to communicate the decision. What the referee says, the content, is unchanged. When the effects of the display of anger are compared across countries, perceptions of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision are most powerfully influenced in Malaysia.

In the explanation/no explanation vignette conditions, the tone of the communication is the same, only the content changes. When the effects are compared across countries, the most powerful effect for the change in the content (the explanation) was in Great Britain. The change in the content had no significant effect on Malaysian players’ perceptions of the fairness of the referee or the correctness of the decision, but was significant for players in all of the other countries. The strong effects of explanation in Singapore are somewhat confounding because Singapore is also an Eastern, collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1980). The shortcomings of the Singapore cohort as a representative sample of Singaporean culture have been discussed above.

**Explanation**
The study underscores the importance of referees promoting themselves and their decisions as fair. It found that perception of fairness (single item) was the strongest predictor of correctness, which in turn was the strongest predictor of footballer satisfaction with the referee. Regression analysis showed that an increase in perception of fairness (4 items) also predicted a small but significant decrease in player intention to argue with the referee. The mean responses showed that player ratings of the fairness (4 items) of the referee were positively influenced when the referee explained the decision (except in Malaysia), and negatively when the referee displayed anger (except for Singapore). The explanation referred to here was a short justification for the decision, using an indirect reference to the player’s transgression of one of the laws of the game, ‘there was contact with the player before the contact with the ball’. Both the regression and mean variance analyses showed that when the referee gave this explanation, all other things being equal, the average rating of the fairness of the referee, on a scale of 1-36, increased by around 5.5 (except for Malaysia, which is discussed below).

In football, like many other social contexts, the present study shows that participants expect negative decisions to be explained (Bobocel & Zdanuk, 2005). So why does an explanation have such a positive effect on player perceptions of the referee and their decision? Simmons (2007) explored the qualities that players prefer in referees and found that players want referees to be competent, dependable and respectful. He argued that when referees explain decisions effectively, they enhance player perceptions of their competence to referee well, their dependability, and also their respectfulness towards players. An explanation for a decision promotes perception of the mental
competence of the referee because the referee is perceived to be sufficiently intelligent to articulate the transgression they have seen, and players believe referees need to be intelligent to judge and decide well. The explanation also indicates that the decision is the referee’s own decision, and not one that has been prompted by players or spectators. Referees who make their own minds up are considered more dependable in the face of the many pressures they are subjected to. Players also valued explanations as a display of accountability to players. Referees who talk and explain decisions to players are considered less arrogant, and more personable and approachable. Simmons (2007) described these qualities as ‘respectfulness’. The data here suggest that the ability to explain decisions is indeed a valuable skill for referees to master because it enhances perceptions of competence, dependability and respectfulness.

Referee’s age
The referee’s age and communication behaviours had no significant effect on players’ attitudes to the intention to argue. This study found no evidence supporting the contention from Folkesson et al. (2002), and Australian refereeing experts (Lorenc, 2005; Oke, 2005), that young referees are subjected to more aggression from players than older referees. Simmons (2007) reported that players prefer older referees, and that age is used as an indicator of experience. It seems likely that it is experience (which might be assumed to come with age) that players prefer, rather than older age, per se. Younger referees might be subjected to more aggression, but for reasons related to their performance and perceived lower levels of experience rather than their age. Future, similar, studies might provide detail of the referee’s experience instead of providing the age of the referee.

Player intention to argue
Other analyses showed that characteristics of the player were better predictors of players’ intention to argue than variables related to the referee. The present study created profiles of the respondents with high and low intention to argue. The profiles showed that some categories of players are more inclined to argue than others. Fairness perceptions have been linked to demographic factors such as the gender and ethnicity of recipients of decisions (Cropanzano et al., 2002). This study found that players from Malaysia and Great Britain were more likely to report that they intended to argue with the referee than players from Australia, Spain and Singapore, and that younger players were more likely to argue than older players. It also found that professional players were more likely to argue than amateur and semi professionals. These findings are consistent with De Cremer’s (2003) contention that perceptions of fairness are moderated by self-esteem and other individual differences in the receivers of decisions. All involved in football, and other social contexts, know that perceptions of fairness are subjective, insofar as players react differently to disappointing and frustrating events and referee decisions. The data presented here shows clear patterns of response to referee factors, it also shows a need for studies that focus on understanding the characteristics of players and coaches, especially those who repeatedly argue with referees. Future studies should consider controlling for respondents’ propensity to argue with referees, and identifying preferences, dislikes and triggers for anger and aggression.

Weighing the evidence
The differences reported here are statistically significant, but how significant in practical terms? To what extent might referee communication promote positive and prevent negative player reactions in real matches. To answer this question it is important to reflect again on the method and the findings. The participants in the present
study responded to just a single hypothetical. It is important to remember that they were given limited information about the scene and the interactants, and were not told what exactly was being researched. They were required to imagine themselves involved in the scene, which meant responding to a short story in words on a computer screen or survey form. On one hand we would not expect this simulation to evoke sensations as strong as those experienced routinely in real matches, yet significant differences were found in this study. 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 as negligible.

Participants in vignette experiments are expected to apply their own stereotypes based on the manipulated variables (Sleed et al., 2002). Thus the different ratings of the referee observed in this experiment can be conceptualised as player ‘stereotyping’ of referees, based on the presence or absence of a short explanation, and the display of anger and calm. These variables produced strong patterns of response across the five countries (including the differences between the countries previously noted), suggesting that these displays can trigger profound inferences about and attitudes toward the referee (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.

**Implications for football refereeing**

The importance of communication skills in refereeing has been underscored by this study. Communication influences perceptions of fairness and correctness in decisions. Explaining, ignoring, anger and calm were shown here to evoke strong patterns of player response, and referees will benefit from their understanding and mastery.

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 & 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.

Many referees understand the importance of managing impressions and ‘selling’ decisions, but many don’t. Leading referees are often masterful in their self awareness and control over communicative displays. But elite referees often have the advantages of natural abilities and aptitudes compounded by experience of hundreds or even thousands of games, and rigorous, regular and expert mentoring and feedback. Most amateur referees are committed and tenacious and willing, but don’t have these advantages.

As MacMahon et al. (2007) have identified, there are few exercises available for helping referees to develop more effective communication and interaction 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 over important communicative displays.
Football is enhanced if referees understand the way players perceive fairness and the way their communication influences players. Referees should learn about the way players develop perceptions of fairness in the referee and their decisions. The cognitive process of substitutability is a particularly important concept for referees to understand. In deciding whether to trust authority figures and accept their decisions people take information about fairness from wherever they can. The way referees manage procedures and treat players influence player perceptions and acceptance of them and their decisions.

With some international differences, this study found that referees who can learn to explain decisions appropriately are likely to be advantaged by enhanced perceptions of fairness and correctness. The display of calm was also found to consistently enhance perceptions of fairness. Previous research by Simmons (2007) found that the referees’ voice, grooming, attire, athleticism, response times and other displays are used by players to form perceptions of fairness. He referred to referee fairness as a composite of perceived competence, dependability and respectfulness. Referees will benefit from awareness of displays that influence player perceptions of these three important qualities.

Other research has found that early impressions of fairness are most formative, and that fairness is most important when uncertainty is greatest. Referees will benefit from strategies that conspicuously display equal treatment, professionalism and calm early in their encounters with players, and at times when emotions are running high such as important decisions. Ultimately players will judge referees on their decisions, but this study has shown that referees can purposefully influence player perceptions of those decisions.
6. References


Breeze, M. (2007). Personal communication, records held by author.


7. Appendices

Appendix I. Survey instrument

FIFA

Charles Sturt University

CIES

Peter Simmons is a recipient of FIFA’s Joao Havelange Research Scholarship 2008

5 minute survey

Footballer attitudes to match events

Dear footballer,
This short survey takes about 5 minutes. It asks players for opinions about a typical scene from a football match.

Most questions ask you to tick boxes. Information gathered will be used in reports and papers.

Every effort will be taken to ensure that your confidentiality is protected. You will not be asked for your name or details that might identify you. Completion of the questionnaire will imply consent to participate.

If you have any questions you can contact Peter Simmons the principal researcher at:

Faculty of Arts,
Charles Sturt University,
Bathurst, 2795, Australia
ph 61 2 63384521 or psimmons@csu.edu.au

Many thanks for taking the time to participate in this project.

NOTE:
Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, contact the committee through the Executive Officer:

Executive officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
Academic Secretariat
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst PMB 49 NSW 2795,
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Start ►
Please read the following and answer the questions. There are no right or wrong answers.

Vignette scenario goes here

For each statement please tick the box that best applies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The referee is fair</td>
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<td>b. The referee is respectful of players</td>
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<td>c. The referee is competent</td>
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<td>d. The referee is dependable</td>
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<td>e. The referee made the correct decision</td>
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<td>f. The referee is angry</td>
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<tr>
<td>g. You are satisfied with the referee</td>
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<tr>
<td>h. You are angry with the referee</td>
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<tr>
<td>i. You argue with the referee</td>
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<tr>
<td>j. You say nothing and get on with the game</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Section 2. These questions are about your attitudes to referees in general

For each statement please tick the box that best applies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Referees get most decisions right</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Referees should explain their decisions to players</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Players should not argue with referees’ decisions</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. It is frequently necessary for referees to use power and authority when dealing with players</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. The best referees are friendly</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Referees should avoid off-the-field relations with players</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. The best referees are the most experienced</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Section 3. *These questions are about you.*

In relation to football (soccer) you are:

*Tick as many as apply*

- Player (amateur club) □
- Player (semi professional) □
- Player (full professional) □
- Qualified referee □
- Coach □
- None of the above □

Your gender  
- Male □
- Female □

Which country do you live in?  
- ..........................................

Your age  
- 18 or under □
- 19-24 □
- 25-34 □
- 35-44 □
- 45-54 □
- 55 or over □

Other comment  
Is there anything else about referees that you would like to comment on?

- ........................................................................................................
- ........................................................................................................

◄The end. Thank you for your time►
Appendix 2. English language vignettes

Introduction (all Vignettes)

Imagine you are playing in a competition football match and it’s midway through the second half. The game has been played hard by both teams and it’s been a very even and physical contest. Both teams have hit the goalposts but no goals have been scored. An opponent is several metres outside your penalty area dribbling towards goal. You slide in from the side and clear the ball away. You feel the tackle is probably legal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V1 – 18 year old explains</th>
<th>V2 – 18 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 18 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of your opponents. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says “It’s a free kick” and explains “you got the ball alright, but there was contact with the player before the contact with the ball.”</td>
<td>The 18 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of your opponents. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says “It’s a free kick. Just get on with the game”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V3 – 35 year old explains</th>
<th>V4 – 35 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 35 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of your opponents. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says “It’s a free kick” and explains “you got the ball alright, but there was contact with the player before the contact with the ball.”</td>
<td>The 35 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of your opponents. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says “It’s a free kick. Just get on with the game”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V5 – 18 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V6 – 18 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 18 year old referee is obviously angry. He blows his whistle loud and sharply signals a free kick in favour of the opposition. He runs toward you waving a yellow card. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says angrily: “You contacted the player before you got the ball. If you do that again it will have to be a red card”.</td>
<td>The 18 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of the opposition. He shows you a yellow card. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says calmly “You contacted the player before you got the ball. If you do that again it will have to be a red card”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V7 – 35 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V8 – 35 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 35 year old referee is obviously angry. He blows his whistle loud and sharply signals a free kick in favour of the opposition. He runs toward you waving a yellow card. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says angrily: “You contacted the player before you got the ball. If you do that again it will have to be a red card”.</td>
<td>The 35 year old referee blows his whistle and signals a free kick in favour of the opposition. He shows you a yellow card. You ask him “What’s that for ref?” He says calmly “You contacted the player before you got the ball. If you do that again it will have to be a red card”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 3. Malay language vignettes

### Introduction (all Vignettes)

Bayangkan anda sedang bermain dalam pertandingan bola sepak dan sampai paruh masa dalam paruh kedua. Kedua-dua pasukan bertanding dengan hebat dan pertandingan ini sangat sepadan dan fizikal.

Kedua-dua pasukan mengena tiang gol tetapi belum mencatatkan gol.

Seorang pemain dari pasukan lawan yang berada beberapa metre di luar kotak penalti anda mengelecek ke arah gol. Anda masuk dari tepi dan mencuri bola. Anda rasa bahawa rebutan ini kemungkinan sekali sah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V1 - 18 year old explains</th>
<th>V2 – 18 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pengadil yang berumur 18 tahun meniup wisel dan mengisyaratkan tendangan bebas untuk pasukan lawan.</td>
<td>Pengadil yang berumur 18 tahun meniup wisel dan mengisyaratkan tendangan bebas untuk pasukan lawan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anda bertanya “Mengapa begitu?”</td>
<td>Anda bertanya “Mengapa begitu?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dia menjawab “Tendangan bebas” dan menjelaskan “kamu mendapatkan bola, tetapi kamu menyentuh pemain sebelum menyentuh bola.”</td>
<td>Dia menjawab “Tendangan bebas. Teruskan saja.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V3 - 35 year old explains</th>
<th>V4 – 35 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pengadil yang berumur 35 tahun meniup wisel dan mengisyaratkan tendangan bebas untuk pasukan lawan.</td>
<td>Pengadil yang berumur 35 tahun meniup wisel dan mengisyaratkan tendangan bebas untuk pasukan lawan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anda bertanya “Mengapa begitu?”</td>
<td>Anda bertanya “Mengapa begitu?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dia menjawab “Tendangan bebas” dan menjelaskan “kamu mendapatkan bola, tetapi kamu menyentuh pemain sebelum menyentuh bola.”</td>
<td>Dia menjawab “Tendangan bebas. Teruskan saja.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V5 - 18 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V6 - 18 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V7 - 35 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V8 - 35 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix 4. Spanish language vignettes

**Introduction (all Vignettes)**

Imagínese que está jugando un partido de fútbol de competición y está en el medio del segundo tiempo. Los dos equipos han jugado un partido duro y ha sido un encuentro muy parejo y físico.

Ambos equipos pegaron disparos en los postes pero no se marcaron goles.

Un oponente se encuentra varios metros fuera de su área de penalti regateando hacia la meta. Usted se desliza desde el costado y despeja el balón. Usted considera que la entrada es probablemente legal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V1 - 18 year old explains</th>
<th>V2 – 18 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El árbitro de 18 años toca el silbato e indica un tiro libre a favor de sus oponentes.</td>
<td>El árbitro de 18 años toca el silbato e indica un tiro libre a favor de sus oponentes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Él dice “Es un tiro libre” y explica “usted despejó el balón, pero tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de tener contacto con el balón.”</td>
<td>Él dice “Es un tiro libre. Siga jugando el partido”.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>V3 - 35 year old explains</th>
<th>V4 – 35 year old does not explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>El árbitro de 35 años toca el silbato e indica un tiro libre a favor de sus oponentes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Él dice “Es un tiro libre” y explica “usted despejó el balón, pero tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de tener contacto con el balón.”</td>
<td>Él dice “Es un tiro libre. Siga jugando el partido”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V5 - 18 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V6 - 18 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El árbitro de 18 años está obviamente enojado. Toca el silbato fuerte e indica bruscamente un tiro libre a favor de los oponentes. Corre hacia usted mostrando una tarjeta amarilla.</td>
<td>El árbitro de 18 años toca el silbato e indica un tiro libre a favor de los contrarios. Le muestra la tarjeta amarilla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Él responde enojado: “Tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de despejar el balón. Si lo hace otra vez le tendré que mostrar la tarjeta roja”.</td>
<td>Le responde con calma “Tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de despejar el balón. Si lo hace otra vez le tendré que mostrar la tarjeta roja”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V7 - 35 year old referee communicates decision angrily</th>
<th>V8 - 35 year old referee communicates decision calmly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El árbitro de 35 años está obviamente enojado. Toca el silbato fuerte e indica bruscamente un tiro libre a favor de los oponentes. Corre hacia usted mostrando una tarjeta amarilla.</td>
<td>El árbitro de 35 años toca el silbato e indica un tiro libre a favor de los contrarios. Le muestra la tarjeta amarilla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
<td>Usted le pregunta “¿Por qué ha pitado eso?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Él responde enojado: “Tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de despejar el balón. Si lo hace otra vez le tendré que mostrar la tarjeta roja”.</td>
<td>Le responde con calma “Tuvo contacto con el jugador antes de despejar el balón. Si lo hace otra vez le tendré que mostrar la tarjeta roja”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5. Examples of website promotion of survey

Football Federation of Madrid, Spain

Football Mitoo Great Britain
Appendix 5. Examples of website promotion of survey

Football Queensland, Australia

Kuala Lumpur Social Soccer League, Malaysia

EspZen Singapore
Appendix 6.

Sample size by vignette condition and country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Vignette Condition</th>
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<td>N=</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>Malaysia</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>537</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>34</td>
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## Appendix 7.

### Mean item scores by vignette condition and country of residence

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Vignette condition</th>
<th>Country of residence</th>
<th>Referee is Fair</th>
<th>Referee is Respectful</th>
<th>Referee is Competent</th>
<th>Referee is Dependable</th>
<th>Decision is Correct</th>
<th>Player satisfied</th>
<th>Player will argue</th>
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<td>2.421</td>
<td>2.338</td>
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</table>
Outcomes for research study 3.

The final stage of data-gathering for this project provided several new perspectives for understanding referee/player interaction, and the role of the referee’s communication. About half of the main hypotheses were supported, showing that communicative displays affect important dimensions of player reactions, separately to the outcome of the decision. Another important outcome was that players’ expressed intentions to argue were better predicted by characteristics of the player than by the referee’s communicative displays, and the study will help to guide future researchers in this area. The nature of the research method and sample supports some generalisation of the findings, within and across players living in the countries involved, and is suggestive of differences influenced by broader culture-based dimensions such as individual and collective orientations.

The outcomes for the ‘numerical/quantitative’ study 3, when compared with the outcomes for the previous ‘narrative/qualitative’ study (Greene, Kreider & Mayer, 2005, p.274), reflect the emphases of the methods used, and illustrate the ‘trade-off’ that necessarily occurs when one chooses one method over another. The first two studies emphasised particularity, an ‘in-depth understanding of the particular contexts and people studied’ (Greene, et al., 2005, p.274). They used in-depth exchanges with small samples and captured some of the complexity of the thoughts and processes in the interactions that occur between referees and players. The experimental survey stage aimed for a greater degree of generalisability, to extend ‘the findings to other sites and populations’ (Greene, et al., 2005, p.274). It used very brief exchanges with large samples, rigid structures, and standardised definitions and processes. Standardisation necessarily involves reduction, and therefore loss, of some of the complexity of human interaction. In this case referee/player interactions were reduced to a handful of the infinite communicative displays that occur.

Reflecting on the project I can report my own changing and developing feelings in the conduct of the three studies. The first study with elite referees was an important orientation to the field. I felt that I was learning about the conventional wisdom concerning referees in football from people highly practiced in evaluating and reflecting from an important but particular viewpoint. The first study stimulated questions and posed challenges and choices. The second study produced the most exhilarating feelings of discovery. In particular the long process of coding and selection of categories in the
analysis of player stories, although systematic and logical, was unique, subjective and creative. Qualitative research is frequently described as exploratory and concerned with ‘a journey of discovery rather than one of verification’ (Bryman, 1984, in Goulding, 2002, p.16). My final study was concerned with verification, but feelings of discovery continued through to the end, comparing, confirming, and also searching the data for evidence and patterns.

The final chapter reports on the accumulated and integrated findings for the three project studies, and the implications for referee training and future research.
Chapter 5. Conclusions and implications

Each game and situation is unique and anything can happen on the day. Moments of madness, passion and inspiration can confound the most rational predictions and analyses. But there are patterns of interaction between referees and players that, when understood and reflected on, can help referees to be more aware of their communication, and thus more deliberately and effectively influence player reactions.

Positive judgements of fairness lead to prosocial behaviours, and negative judgments of fairness lead to antisocial behaviours (Lind, 2001). Because the communicative practices of decision-makers influence peoples’ perceptions of fairness in their decisions, it is important to develop our understanding of the influence of communication practices on perceptions of fairness.

This mixed method research project identified communicative displays that influence players’ perceptions of fairness, and found that players mitigate uncertainty about referees and their decisions by using displays of procedural and interactional fairness to establish more generalised feelings of fair conditions. Understanding of procedural and interactional justice has been extended to the context of sport, in particular to the interactions that occur between football referees and players, and across several different cultural contexts.

This conclusion section explains and synthesises contributions the project makes to understanding player perceptions of fairness in referees and their decisions, and recommends principles for referee training and future research in football.

5.1 Objective 1.
To improve understanding of communicative displays that influence perceptions of fairness

It could be argued that people are attracted to football mainly for the suspense and excitement caused by heightened uncertainty. The exhilaration of competition. An individual inspired to perform the miraculous. A late winning goal on the counter. Or a defeat at the hand of God. Football thrives on the unpredictable.
It is perhaps paradoxical then that football passions run as high for fairness and equal treatment, as they do for the uncertainty of artistry and chance in football. At even the lowest levels of the game, footballers have high expectations of impartiality and accuracy in the referee’s decisions. Pawlenka (2005) says the equal opportunity and impartiality we demand in competitive sports provides an ideal that ‘real life’ outside sport seldom attains. She argues that our everyday notions of what is ‘fair’ derive substantially from ‘the kind of equal treatment that the logic of competitive sports calls for and that the umpire as an institution attempts to guarantee’ (Pawlenka, 2005, p.56).

An explanation for this paradox can be found in uncertainty management theory, and the notion that fairness is important because it helps people to manage uncertainty. To understand the way the project has improved understanding of the influence that communicative displays have on perceptions of fairness, it is important to first explain the conceptualisation of fairness judgements as strategies for reducing uncertainty.

It is necessary here to accept that football is a life situation where uncertainty is present. Van den Bos & Lind (2002, p.4) provide a broad definition of uncertainty. They say that uncertainty ‘occurs either when a person confronts an inability to predict the future or when a person confronts an incompatibility between different cognitions, between cognitions and experiences, or between cognitions and behavior’. Beugre (2007) criticises the lack of clear definition of ‘uncertainty’ in uncertainty management theory and proposes a focus on authority figures, including uncertainty about what another ‘person is thinking or might do in the future’ (Beugre, 2007, p.47). By all the above criteria football is uncertain for players. Players try to influence but can’t predict the outcome of incidents and games, they experience incompatibility between cognitions (when taking an important penalty kick they most need to feel calm, but are often at their most nervous). They experience incompatibility between cognitive beliefs about which team is superior and their experience of who wins the game, and incompatibility between cognitive beliefs about what should be done, and the behaviours of themselves, their coaches, opponents and referees.

Hargie (2007) describes the need for uncertainty reduction as generic in social encounters. Van den Bos & Lind (2002) proposed that reduction of uncertainty is a basic motivation in most situations and that people seek and use fairness judgments to
manage uncertainty. They say that people have a fundamental need for certainty and security in their lives. Uncertainty causes ‘discomfort’ (2002, p.3), and reduces one’s sense of control over life (2002, p.5). People’s perceptions of fairness determine the extent to which they need to focus on and protect themselves against that which they perceive to be uncertain. Perception of fairness enhances certainty and confidence in one’s situation, and relieves the discomfort of uncertainty. Consequently uncertainty in a situation provides ‘the stimulus for seeking and using fairness judgements’ (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, p.3).

Important here is that even in situations where uncertainty is sought (such as gambling and football), some aspects of the uncertainty are managed and controlled (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Lind & Van den Bos (2002) make the point that stock traders work with remuneration policies that drive extreme levels of competition, and high potential for uncertainty and lack of trust in colleagues. They argue that clear and visible displays of fairness by the organisation would help to reduce unwanted stress for the traders. Football is a life situation where the uncertainty of competitive team play is sought, but like gambling or stock trading, it is important to the participants that the uncertainty of the competition occurs within the predictable management of rules and conventions. To maximise their focus on the competition, participants require a predictable environment where they can expect fair treatment. Footballers want to be able to trust the referee and their decisions. They want to play without the distraction of uncertainty about the referee.

To understand the influence of referees’ communicative displays on player perceptions of fairness, it is important to reflect on players’ perceptions of the authority vested in the referee, high expectations of referee performance and players’ need to judge the referee, and the imperfect nature of the information available to aid players’ judgments of the referee.

Players feel that the referee can and frequently does play a very important role in the outcomes and rewards of the game, for individuals and for teams. They perceive considerable discretionary authority in the referee which in turn leads them to hold referees somewhat responsible for their fortunes in the game. This discretion and responsibility is reflected frequently in players blaming referees for negative match outcomes, and the language that many players use when talking with and about referees.
For example when players appeal to the fairness of the referee to encourage more decisions in their team’s favour, they often say ‘... you’re not giving us anything ref’. When players speak of the referee ‘giving’ or ‘not giving’ to players and teams, they distance the referee’s actions from the rules and from players’ responsibility for the outcomes.

Among theories of fairness, ‘fairness theory’ is most concerned with the roles of blame and responsibility in perceiving outcome fairness (Colquitt et al., 2005). ‘People interpret the meaning of their outcomes by determining the extent to which the other party is responsible, and procedural fairness information helps them to determine the other party’s responsibility’ (Brockner & Wiesenfield, 2005, p.534). Consistency in decision implementation, explanation for decisions, and treating recipients with dignity and respect are known to enhance perceptions of procedural fairness (Brockner & Wiesenfield, 2005). The main cognitive procedure emphasised by fairness theory is ‘counterfactual thinking’, which involves imagining the way things might have been if the authority responsible for a judgement had made a different judgement (Blader & Tyler, 2005). Players interviewed in study 2, for example, reported negative feelings towards referees when they perceive that the referee chooses a more severe level of punishment, such as a red ‘send-off’ card, when a yellow ‘caution’ card is an option. Counterfactual thinking occurs mainly for negative events, and is generally not stimulated by positive events (Blader & Tyler, 2005). Consequently fairness theory helps us to understand perceived unfairness in discernible referee decisions and behaviours that leads to blaming referees. It is not so helpful in accounting for positive perceptions of fairness.

Tasked with administering the rules of the game, referees are expected to judge events and decide transgressions and punishments equally for both sides, in accordance with each team’s conduct in relation to the rules of the game. The referee’s tasks of judging and deciding are complicated by the frequency of incidents, and the speed at which they occur. They have little time to decide what occurred, whether or not the rules have been broken, and by whom. Further complicating the tasks of judging and deciding is the uniqueness of every event, and that the angles and distances from which events are viewed differ. There are patterns and similarities in events, but no two decisions are exactly the same. Combined, these factors determine that people differ in their perceptions of match events, and in their opinions about the correctness of decisions and
punishments. Despite the complex intersubjectivities, expectations of referees are generally very high at all levels of the game (Cuskelley, Hoye & Auld, 2006), and tolerance of perceived inconsistency and errors is often low. Consequently, referees also deal frequently with ‘unrestrained negative feedback’ (Wolfson & Neave, 2007, p.232).

Fairness heuristics provide a framework for understanding the way players use distinct displays to establish general feelings of the legitimacy and fairness of the referee. Van den Bos, Lind & Wilke (2001) report that fairness heuristics are particularly important in situations where people feel they have ceded control to an authority. In the absence of knowledge about the person, and particularly in early encounters, people use mental shortcuts, heuristics, to make these fairness judgements (Lind, 2001). Lind’s (2001) fairness heuristic theory argues that people use distinct experiences of fairness to create a perception of general or overall fairness that ‘drives subsequent fairness judgements as well as other outcomes (e.g., prosocial behaviour, trust, identification)’ (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005, p.69). Lind (2001, p.81) argued that perceivers grab ‘any justice-relevant information that is handy’, to quickly form fairness judgements and then move beyond the processing stage to use the judgements ‘more than they are revised’ (Lind, 2001, p.69). This notion implies that judgements of fairness are more open to influence in early processing stages, and that some stability in judgement of fairness is established. People desire stability in their judgement of fairness because revising their judgements of fairness distracts them from aspects of their situation that they want to focus on (such as traders wanting to focus on moneymaking deals, and footballers wanting to concentrate on their play).

When uncertain about the referee in control of their game, football players are particularly sensitive to displays that the referee is a person worthy of the considerable authority vested in them. Consciously and unconsciously players form judgements about the fairness of the decision-maker to decide whether to accept and cooperate with their decisions. This conceptualisation of the development of player perceptions of the referee is consistent with heuristic approaches to understanding perceptions of fairness when ceding authority (Van den Bos, Lind & Wilke, 2001).

Lind’s (2001) articulation of fairness heuristic theory is founded on relational and group value understandings of the importance of fairness. He argues that when individuals cooperate and compromise for the benefit of belonging to a group, they submit to the
risk of being exploited by the group. Therefore individuals attend to heuristics as guides to the trustworthiness and fairness of the authorities with the capacity to exploit them (Lind, 2001). Although footballers use heuristics, and groups or teams are logically important in the football context, fear of exploitation by the group or authority figure does not sufficiently account for the data gathered in this project.

‘Uncertainty management theory’ is another heuristic conceptualisation of fairness. It views trust in the authority figure as just one factor causing uncertainty. ‘Although the fairness heuristic can serve as a proxy for trust, it can also help individuals deal with more general sources of uncertainty’ (Colquitt et al., 2005, p.44). As one of the professional footballers indicated in a focus group, the referee is just one of many causes of uncertainty during play:

*The last thing you want to worry about is the ref. 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 .. and good refs, they don’t get in the way or ruin the game .. they let the game flow and that (study 2., focus group 1).*

Although uncertainty can derive from many social and non-social aspects of context (Van den Bos and Lind, 2002), Beugre (2007) provides a useful focus for understanding player perceptions of fairness in football. She says that uncertainty is related to the trustworthiness of authority figures and the fairness of outcomes (Beugre, 2007). In football players interpret information about the referee (authority figure) and their decisions (outcomes) to judge the fairness of their situation. ‘Information about the referee’ here includes all the referee’s communicative displays, procedural and interactional, that are not the outcome of the decision, including the perceived nature, such as the severity, of the referee’s ‘decisions’. (The perceived severity and consistency of decisions communicate about the ‘fairness’ of the referee.)

Players want to be able to trust the referee to judge and decide with accuracy and integrity, and they want referees to provide a stable and predictable environment for play. Players use whatever outcome and procedural fairness information is available to judge the worthiness of the referee for the job, and the overall fairness of the game.

Lind & Van den Bos (2002) argue that people prefer to be confident in the fairness
judgments they use to manage the uncertainty in their environments. They seek distinct experiences of fairness in order to make their judgements with confidence, and move past the judgement stage and into the use stage (Lind, 2001). Distinct experiences of outcome fairness will normally be more influential than experiences of procedure and interaction, but in football, as in many environments, distinct interactional and procedural fairness heuristics are often more available for interpretation than outcomes heuristics, when forming fairness judgements (Van den Bos et al., 1997). From the start of the game, referees begin to make decisions, and players experience the outcomes of their decisions. However, as discussed above, the complex intersubjectivities and nuances involved in many referee decisions contribute to uncertainty about fairness.

Accuracy and integrity are much desired qualities in referees, but objective reality is elusive. By contrast, procedural and interactional information is readily available and relatively easy to interpret. The rules, procedures and conventions are well understood in football, and players have strong normative expectations of referees and procedural propriety they associate with fairness.

In uncertainty management theory the primacy effect, and the substitutability effect are two important concepts that help to explain the way people use information from their environment to judge the fairness of the their situation and manage uncertainty. Studies that have manipulated the order of information received about procedure and outcome have reported a primacy effect for heuristics, where the first information about fairness has a stronger influence on subsequent fairness judgements (Van den Bos et al., 1997; Lind, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2005). The second study in this project found that players attend to many communicative displays indicating the interactional and procedural fairness of the referee. Players were able to articulate impressions they form about the referee from the first moment of sighting or contact. Players use verbal and non-verbal displays as clues, or heuristics, to help them judge the worthiness of the referee for their authority and responsibility. The primacy effect suggests that the communicative displays first encountered by players are indeed important in the process of making judgements about the fairness of the referee. The initial communicative displays will influence players’ perceptions of decision outcomes, and vice versa.

Other studies have shown that when people are uncertain, manipulations of procedural fairness [such as allowing decision recipients a voice in the decision] have a greater effect. Fairness can mitigate effects of uncertainty that have ‘.. nothing to do with
authority relationships whatsoever’ (Colquitt et al., 2005, p.44-5). Findings from the second study suggest that the benefits of perceived procedural and interactional fairness extend beyond trust in the referee to a more general lessening of uncertainty. Players value integrity and accuracy in decision-making, but the most distinct of the qualities desired in referees are those that contribute to a stable and predictable playing environment.

Research also ‘shows 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).

When people are confronted with uncertainty in their environment, they turn to their impressions of fair or unfair treatment to help them decide how to react. If they are uncertain about their fairness judgments they 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).

The substitutability effect aids interpretation of some of the findings from studies 2 and 3. For example players in focus groups in study 2 reported that they attend to professionalism in the referee’s appearance and procedural displays as a guide to the referee’s commitment to professionalism and propriety in decision-making. Study 3 established a scenario with incomplete information and an inherent uncertainty. The study found some differences internationally, but when the referee used an explanation in their decision communication procedure, most players in most countries rated the outcome (decision) as more correct, and the referee as more fair. When the referee was calm in their communication of the decision, players in most countries rated the referee as more fair, and players from Malaysia and Great Britain rated the decision as more correct. Procedural and interactional fairness substituted for uncertainty in perceptions of outcome fairness.

Van den Bos & Lind (2002) report that when people are less certain about the trustworthiness of the authority responsible for decisions, they are more responsive to
procedural fairness information. When people are more certain about the trustworthiness of the authority they are less reliant on procedural information. ‘In other words, people seem much more likely to use fairness judgments as heuristic substitutes for trust when they are uncertain about authority’s trustworthiness’ (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002, p.13). Because there is so much cause for uncertainty in football, relating to outcomes and to the trustworthiness of the referee, the referee’s interactional and procedural displays are very influential in players’ judgements about fairness. In football the referee is the focus of uncertainty, and the focus for judgements about fairness. Players use the referee’s communicative displays – verbal, non-verbal, intentional and unintentional – as heuristic guides to the fairness of the referee, the game situation they are in, and their outcomes.

Traditionally the training of referees has focused on teaching and interpreting the rules of the game (Mellick et al., 2005) as a fundamental competency, and there have been too few communication training exercises to help prepare referees for onfield interactions (MacMahon et al., 2007). The next section synthesises the project findings and the implications of fairness theories to provide guidance for underdeveloped areas of football referee communication training. In particular the next section articulates patterns of player interpretations of referee communication and cognitive associations and processes. The intention behind making these interpretations and associations explicit is to improve referee’s ability to reflect on experiences and heighten their awareness of players’ formation of fairness perceptions and influential communication.

5.2 Objective 2.  
To develop recommendations for training football referees in effective communication.

To complement a sound knowledge of the rules of the game, referees can benefit from reflection on the expectations and preferences of players, and heightened awareness of the way their own communication is likely to be interpreted by players. Skarlicki and Latham (2005, p.506) have suggested that when leaders are trained to enhance perceptions of fairness in organisations that the training is ‘designed to increase their understanding of how perceptions are formed’. The findings from this project suggest and underscore empowering principles for strategic referee communication. The recommendations that follow are less concerned with the ‘tools’ of communication –
whistle, cards, rules – than insights into and attitudes toward the perspective of players that help referees to become more deliberate and effective in their communication. The overarching themes, related to the player’s perspective, that deserve explicit emphasis in the training and development of football referees are that:

- Referees should deliberately communicate their ability and intention to provide a fair, safe and predictable playing environment.
- Players’ perceptions of correctness and fairness are entwined with their perceptions of normalcy and propriety in procedure and treatment. Referees have control over numerous procedural and interactional displays that help them to influence perceptions of correctness and fairness.

Players generally hold the referee responsible for providing a fair playing environment that is safe and predictable. Because the referee is perceived to hold substantial responsibility and authority, it is important to players that the referee is someone worthy of their responsibility, someone they can trust to be fair.

Players cannot be certain of the abilities and intentions of the referee, and often cannot be certain of the correctness of their decisions. To help deal with their uncertainty players consciously and unconsciously attend to the referee’s decisions, behaviours and other displays as indicators of the ability of the referee and fairness of conditions for play. In forming perceptions about the fairness of their situation, players to some extent substitute uncertainty about the referee and outcome fairness with certainty concerning procedural and interactional fairness. Players’ judgements of the fairness of their situation are influenced by judgements of the fairness of the referee, which are in turn influenced by their perceptions of interactional and procedural fairness.

There are limits to the influence of procedural fairness on players’ perceptions and judgements. Fair process and treatment may have little effect on player perceptions when referees are perceived unambiguously to be wrong or impartial in their outcome decisions.

When solid social comparison information about performance and outcomes is available, however, procedural justice judgments have little effect on outcome evaluations (Van den Bos, Lind et al., 1997, in Lind, 2001, p.75).
In football the disappointment of an important negative decision often outweighs any amount of fairness in treatment, and players’ perceptions and reactions are beyond the referee’s influence. But referees will benefit from understanding that much is uncertain in football, and players use whatever fairness information is available. Unclear match incidents and the integrity and intentions of the referee are very difficult to judge, so players use whatever interactional and procedural fairness displays are available to help them judge fairness. In an organisational context, managers are urged to use communicative fairness strategies such as listening, explaining and behaving respectfully, ‘.. trusting in substitutability effects to bring perceptions of distributive and procedural fairness along’ (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002, p.209). For example, in studies 2 and 3 this study found compelling evidence that providing an explanation can influence perceptions of both fairness and decision correctness.

Because players want to focus on their play they would prefer to be able to trust the referee, and not to have to concern themselves with thoughts about fairness and correctness in decisions. From their first exposure to the referee players begin to form judgements about their competence, dependability and respectfulness. The primacy effect suggests that early displays and impressions are likely to be very influential in perception formation (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002, p.209). The implication of the primacy effect is that referees judged to be procedurally fair will find players react more favourably to negative outcome decisions. It suggests that referees should focus on displaying procedural fairness while players are forming judgements about the referee.

Refereeing can learn from the principles Lind (2001) advanced for the organisational context. He states;

The practical implication is that instead of trying to discover empirical relationships of the form “procedural justice promotes acceptance of authority” or “ distributive justice decreases turnover”, we should be focusing on how to teach people to provide all the positive justice experiences they can early on in a person’s experience with an organization, supervisor or co-worker (Lind, 2001, p.81).

Players in study 2 said they formed impressions about referees based on attire, voice and other displays from their earliest encounters. Study 3 found that single communicative displays (anger, explanation etc) influenced a range of judgements about the referee and decisions. There is a clear implication here that early in football
games referees should display professionalism and ‘clear, unambiguous acts of fairness’ (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002, p.209), such as conspicuous acts of equal interpersonal treatment and strict adherence to boot and card check procedures.

Players’ judgements of football referees can be influenced at all times during the game. Lind & Van den Bos (2002) assert that in organisations fair treatment is most important when uncertainty is greatest, and that unfair treatment is also most dangerous at these times. Borrowing again from the organisational context, referees’ fairness displays should also be visible at emotional highpoints in the game. This project found strong support for the conventional wisdom that referees should remain calm. Staying calm is one way of displaying fair and respectful treatment. This is perhaps most important at the times it is most difficult for referees, when making high-pressure decisions or resolving conflict.

The cognitive processes of substitutability, primacy and counterfactual thinking have been shown to be important for football players in forming perceptions about the fairness of referees and decisions. The project found players have high expectations of referees to display a number of skills and qualities that parallel studies of fairness in other contexts, and principles for fairness, such as Leventhal (1980) (explanation, accuracy, consistency, bias suppression, correctability, representativeness and ethicality). In forming perceptions of the referee and their ability and readiness to provide a fair, safe and predictable playing environment, players are sensitive to and influenced by displays of competence, dependability and respectfulness. As the following section shows, players attend to communicative displays as indicators of the presence or absence of these qualities. Some displays such as age or stature are beyond the control of individual referees. But if referees are made aware of their influence on players, most displays are amenable to training and some level of adoption or avoidance.

- Players prefer and expect referees to be competent to judge events accurately and make correct decisions about rules, processes and punishments. Players perceive competence through different displays of the referee’s physical and mental capability to judge and decide. Speech and voice are very important to players. Players use the quality of speech and explanations, accents and the speed of speech as clues to the referee’s intelligence, and tones and inflexion as clues to their
confidence and self-assurance. Referees need to be in a position to see and judge events accurately, and players use body size, age and shape as clues to their athleticism and ability to keep up with play. Hearing aids and glasses detract from players’ perceptions of the sensory acuity required for effectively discerning events during play.

- It is important to players that referees make decisions consistently during the game, that they are dependable regardless of the different pressures they experience on their judgements and decision-making.

Everyone wants referees to be ‘consistent’. Players are aware that many situational factors can influence referees to make partial and incorrect decisions, and that often the correct decision is a more difficult decision to make. Opposing players and home crowds try to pre-empt referee decisions with calls for ‘off-side’ and ‘hand-ball’, and fatigue or driving rain sometimes make referees finish games early.

Perhaps the most important finding from this project is that players substitute or apply the certainty of their perceptions of procedural and interactional fairness when they are uncertain about the referee or decisions. Many incidents in football are somewhat ambiguous and players are unable to read the thoughts of referees. So players attend to displays that suggest they can rely on the referee to be consistent, unaffected by partiality or the pressures of the match. Players attend to displays of professionalism, resilience, resolve and courage as proxies for consistency and impartiality. Displays of professionalism and adherence to the rules build players’ confidence that the referee is dependable. Although referees can irritate players if they are overly fastidious, players generally prefer referees to adhere strictly to procedures and rules. If a referee is lax about any aspect of the conventions and procedures, such as kick-off time or boot inspections, players wonder if the referee is lax about other aspects of refereeing. Such displays can cause doubt about the referee’s commitment to the rules and impartiality. Conversely, when referees insist that players remove all jewellery (in accordance with Law 4) before taking the field, they communicate a commitment to the rules. Such a commitment can act as a clue to the referee’s professionalism and commitment to the rules more generally.

The grooming and appearance of the referee is important as a display of
professionalism, and in turn their dependability. Untidy clothing and dirty boots can cause players to question referees’ standards and commitment to their job. Players interviewed for study 2 said that a lack of care in appearance raised questions about the referee’s care for detail and propriety in other aspects of refereeing. Players use certain displays to infer and generalise about the dependability of the referee.

Players are very sensitive to displays suggesting partiality in the referee. They can perceive impartiality in the number of free-kicks or the severity of punishments awarded to the teams, irrespective of the behavioural justification for the decisions. Important here is that referees can influence perceptions of partiality whenever they display differential procedural and interactional treatment of individuals and teams. Displays of familiarity with one player or team, or singling individuals out for special attention display inconsistency that can cause players to question the even-handedness of the referee and increase perceptions of impartiality.

- Players prefer referees to show respectfulness towards players. This is consistent with findings from fairness studies that have shown the importance of accountability to, and polite and respectful treatment for, people receiving negative decisions. Players in study 2 frequently mentioned their aversion to arrogance and aggression, and their preference for referees who talk to players in a normal voice and respond to their questions. Study 3 found that anger detracts from perceptions of the fairness of the referee, especially in Malaysia.

Although respectfulness is a quality that players prefer referees to display, statistical analyses in study 3 suggest that correctness is the strongest predictor of player satisfaction, and that perceptions of competence and dependability better predict correctness than perceptions of respectfulness. Players generally prefer referees to be personable, but ultimately for players it is more important that referees are perceived to be people who will make correct decisions and provide a stable and predictable playing environment.

Players perceive referees to have substantial discretionary authority and responsibility for the outcomes of the game, and it is important to players that the referee is worthy of the authority and responsibility entrusted to them. They want to be able to trust the referee to judge and decide with accuracy and integrity, and they want referees to
provide a stable and predictable environment for play. Players use whatever outcome and procedural fairness information is available to judge the worthiness of the referee for the role, and the overall fairness of the game. Rules, procedures and conventions are well understood in football, and players have strong normative expectations of referees and propriety they associate with fairness. Information about procedural and interactional fairness is always available, consciously and unconsciously this information influences player responses to referees and their decisions.

Referees have different training needs depending on their experience, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. The sophisticated skills, sensitivities and attitudes of elite level referees provided inspiration for this project’s focus on the perspective of players. Many referees are already aware of the importance of impression management and strategies for enhancing the credibility of their decisions. The evidence, theory and principles discussed in this section provide a guide to understanding player perception formation and the development of strategies for purposeful communication.

5.3 Future
This project has focused on exploring and developing new knowledge about referees’ communicative displays and player perceptions of fairness. Future studies should work towards two main goals. First is the development of effective strategies for helping referees to communicate as best they can. As MacMahon et al. (2007) reported, there are few training exercises available that enable referees to practice for onfield communicative interactions with players. Second is a focus on improving understanding of behaviours in real world games.

Studies 2 and 3 found links between the referee’s communication and perceptions of fairness and other aspects of the referee, and perceptions of the correctness of the decision. Some players in study 2 said that referee behaviours added to their anger or frustration. But neither study can report clear links to players’ intentions to argue or other cooperative and uncooperative behaviours. Although theories of fairness heuristics and uncertainty management do not link fairness and cooperative behaviour (Blader & Tyler, 2005; Beugre, 2007), Beugre (2007, p.47) argues that ‘their assumptions can be extended to make such a link’. The effects of referees’ communication behaviours on cooperation deserve focus in future research.
From this project we learnt that a single incident and communicative display influenced perceptions but did not cause a significant difference in players’ expressed intentions to argue. This project found that the intention to argue with the referee was better predicted by the characteristics of the player. This in itself is useful for referees to understand as it helps them to externalise the causes of dissent and abuse. To better understand player argument, future simulation studies should explore the effects on behaviour of multiple incidents and different displays, and more closely profile the player respondents to identify traits that predict cooperative and uncooperative behaviours.

Real-world football experiences generate extremes of emotion and irrationality in behaviour, and interactions that are complex, dynamic, and difficult to replicate in a hypothetical. As Mattila & Patterson (2004) suggest it may be more useful to view people’s justice perceptions as situation specific and dynamic. Referees in study 1 and players in study 2 were found to be very capable of articulating and explaining their feelings and attitudes. Qualitative interview studies promise rich understanding of on-field interactions. The combination of micro-analytic reviews of match videos, such as those used by Mellick et al. (2005) and Mellick et al. (2007), and qualitative discussions with players and referees involved in the games under review, promise the greatest improvements in understanding. Experimental simulations are ideal for testing the roles of substitutability and primacy in fairness and uncertainty management.

The project has implications for fairness research in other contexts. Perceptions of competence and dependability were found to more closely correlate with perceptions of fairness and correctness, than respectfulness correlated with fairness and correctness. Many referees appear to manage players and games effectively without being visibly accountable or personable (displays of respectfulness). The relative importance and influence of displays of competence, dependability and respectfulness is likely to change in different contexts. It could be hypothesised that in classrooms, workplaces and sport contexts where the threats of intimidation and chaos are greatest, the qualities most desired are those suggestive of the ability to provide stability and reduce uncertainty. In life and death environments such as emergency health care, decision-makers’ competence might be relatively more important. In sports, classrooms and other situations where loss of control is less of a threat, respectfulness might be relatively more important. The use of competence, dependability and respectfulness as a
conceptual framework for understanding fairness warrants further development, operationalisation and testing in different contexts.
References


