Abstract: Recent football studies (Simmons, 2007; Mellick, Fleming, Bull, & Laugharne, 2005) support received wisdom in the football community that referee communication skills play an important part in player reactions to decisions. However little is known about the relative influence of different referee communication styles and practices on players, or differences between cultures. Referees rely on variable curricula to inform the development of effective communication strategies (Mellick et al, 2005). This working paper presents the conceptual framework for an international study of player reactions to different referee communication displays. It examines received football wisdom and research relating to referee communication, and findings from studies of the ways people perceive fairness. It is valuable in all areas of society to understand what influences perception of fairness. Studies have shown that when people perceive fairness in decisions they tend to behave more prosocially and cooperatively (van den Bos et al., 2005). Importantly, perceptions of fairness are not just based on the decision, fairness is separately influenced by the decision process and the way people are treated by the decision maker (Lind, 2001). Leung (2005) argues that perceptions of fairness have positive effects across cultures, but that the factors influencing perceptions of fairness differ across cultures. He cites a number of studies showing that styles of interpersonal treatment and decision processes influence perceptions of fairness differently across cultures (Leung 2005). Based on Leung (2005), Hall and Reed-Hall (1990) and Hofstede (1980) this study predicts that national culture will influence footballer responses to referee communication displays. The paper concludes with discussion of the quasi-experimental vignette method used to examine the effect that referee anger, explanation and age have on player perceptions of fairness in three countries characterised by distinct cultures – Australia, Malaysia and Spain.

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Abstract

Recent football studies (Simmons, 2007; Mellick, Fleming, Bull, & Laugharne, 2005) support received wisdom in the football community that referee communication skills play an important part in player reactions to decisions. However little is known about the relative influence of different referee communication styles and practices on players, or differences between cultures. Referees rely on variable curricula to inform the development of effective communication strategies (Mellick et al, 2005).

This working paper presents the conceptual framework for an international study of player reactions to different referee communication displays. It examines received football wisdom and research relating to referee communication, and findings from studies of the ways people perceive fairness.

It is valuable in all areas of society to understand what influences perception of fairness. Studies have shown that when people perceive fairness in decisions they tend to behave more prosocially and cooperatively (van den Bos et al., 2005). Importantly, perceptions of fairness are not just based on the decision, fairness is separately influenced by the decision process and the way people are treated by the decision maker (Lind, 2001). Leung (2005) argues that perceptions of fairness have positive effects across cultures, but that the factors influencing perceptions of fairness differ across cultures. He cites a number of studies showing that styles of interpersonal treatment and decision processes influence perceptions of fairness differently across cultures (Leung (2005).

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**Introduction**

The world’s governing football (soccer) body aims to have the rules “interpreted and applied with absolute consistency wherever the game is played” (FIFA, 2008), but there is little formal research into national or cultural differences that might help prepare referees and players for cross cultural encounters. In Australia (ASC, 2004) and other countries (Wolfson and Neave, 2007) there are enduring problems with the abuse of referees, but there is a lack of evidence upon which to base training in effective referee communication.

Referees are expected to perform at a very high level “irrespective of their age or the level of competition at which they officiate” (Cuskelly et al, 2006, p111). The nature of competitive football is that at any level of the game, a decision by the referee in favour of one team is against the interests of the other. As a consequence, half of the players, coaching staff and partisan onlookers experience some level of disappointment each time the referee communicates a decision.

Common sense tells us that regardless of how hard referees strive for neutrality and consistency, no two referees will officiate a match the same way. Individual referees develop their own styles and approaches in accordance with their personality, experience and reputation (Mellick et al, 2005). However studies have found that referees’ decisions are influenced by crowd noises (Balmer, Nevill, Lane, Ward, Williams & Fairclough, 2007), the context of the game (Mascarenhas et al. unpublished), referee psychology related to experience (Boyko, Boyko and Boyko, 2007), and that referees often disadvantage away teams (Bar-Eli et al, 2006, p1087) and favour in-groups (Mohr and Larsen, 1998). In the harsh and dynamic environment of the football field, referees benefit from experience and skills that help them to calm and control players and situations.

This working paper presents a study in progress that aims to improve understanding of referee/player interaction and the effects of referee communication on player perceptions of fairness. It aims to contribute to the training of referees by making them more aware of their
own communicative displays, and also more broadly to understanding of interactional and cross-cultural justice.

The study works at two levels. First it examines the reactions of football players to different referee communication behaviours – anger and explanation. Second, the study is replicated in two other countries with distinct cultures, to enable comparisons between football players in Australia, Malaysia and Spain.

The paper presents the background to the study, reviewing previous research into football referee communication, and literature from social psychology of justice and cultural communication. The literature helps to account for findings from previous research, and provides a conceptual framework for the present study. The paper explains and reflects on the quasi-experimental method for the study that records player reactions to match scene vignettes delivered online.

**Referee communication, decisions and the “hidden curriculum”**

Football referees have “full authority to enforce the laws of the game” (FIFA Rules of the Game, 2008, p23) 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 negative feedback” from spectators, players and coaches (Wolfson and Neave, 2007, p232). 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).

A study of 80 elite ball game players’ perceptions of referee behaviours during games found what seems to be evident to most involved with sport, that referee decisions can have a profound impact on player arousal and behaviours. The study found that referee calls can have substantial influence on athletes’ psychological states, and that “unnecessary words or actions” can amplify “negative, crisis-related” performance consequences for players (Bar-Eli et al, 1995 p.77). Importantly, 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. A reduction in such conflict
would reduce pressures on referees, and improve the quality of sporting contests (Bar-Eli et al., 1995).

Although most referees have an opinion about the best way to communicate decisions, there is little evidence on which to base referee communication skills training (Mellick et al., 2005) and referees frequently debate the most effective techniques. For example, recently in Australia’s largest online football referee chat room there was a discussion of tactics for effectively presenting yellow cards (formal displays of sanction) to players. The posts here are from different referees, and show individual communication tactics that reveal differences in style, beliefs about communication, and strategic focus.

1. When there is a card 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 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).

The first emphasises the non-verbal movement as a display of the referee’s decisiveness and authority in the situation. The second also emphasises the non-verbal, but focuses on communicating the proportionate seriousness of the foul. The third stresses the importance of 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”. One says talk will take the heat out of the game, the other says referees should avoid talking because it’s likely to incite players.

The different approaches reflect the complexity of human interaction, contextual factors, and individual differences in referees’ personalities and beliefs. They also exemplify what Mellick et al (2005, p45) 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. There is a conventional wisdom in football that referees’ most important learning occurs through practice or “experience” in 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). 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, Helsen, Starkes & Weston, 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.

No amount of communicative skill will have an effect on a small number of vengeful, enraged and intoxicated players. Some are beyond the referee’s persuasive influence. However there may also be some referee behaviours likely to anger players unnecessarily, and other behaviours that help to calm or promote perceptions of fairness. Improving referees’ awareness of these displays would benefit all involved in football. This study assumes that a greater understanding of the effects and effectiveness of certain referee skills and attitudes will enable 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.

**Football referee communication research**

Mascarenhas, Collins and Mortimer (2005) report a review of empirical literature related to refereeing and officiating performance. They found 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). A study of elite level soccer referees reported that the various demands of football officiating are difficult to accurately simulate in a training environment, and that referees perceive refereeing league games to be the best form of practice for acquiring and developing skills. The researchers noted that in most endeavours, with deliberate practice and expert feedback, expertise can be acquired in around 10 years. Their small sample of referees took 16 years on average to reach the elite level of the sport, and they suggested that the relatively slow professional progress of referees may in part be due to “lack of feedback from practice” (MacMahon et al, 2007, p.77).

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 linking referee communication techniques and player acceptance of decisions (Mellick et al., 2005).

Simmons’ 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” (2006, p4). Examining referees’ self reports of their communication, Simmons 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 noted that elite level referees draw very consciously on an extensive repertoire of techniques for influencing players and the mood of the game. He also suggested that referees’ ability to adapt their communication techniques and styles to different players and contexts was in itself an important skill (2006).

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” (2005, p42).

The small number of studies of referee performance, and the smaller number of studies focused on referee communication, have generally used the perspective of referees and refereeing experts as their main source of data. Given the inherent interactivity in any communication encounter, the perceptions of players need to be included to develop understanding of referee behaviours (Bar-Eli et al, 1995).

Simmons (2007) is the only known peer-reviewed study of player attitudes to, and perceptions of, football referee communication. The study recorded discussions with players about football referees and used justice theories to interpret the emergent themes. The study identified three interrelated meta-characteristics in referees that influence players’ perceptions of fairness. Players perceive fairness when they believe the referee is “competent” to judge and decide, “dependable” under various match pressures, and “respectful” and accountable to players. The study found that players are sensitive to many displays of these three qualities, and that some verbal and nonverbal displays (such as attire, anger, explanation, listening, and the age of the referee) can have a powerful influence on player perceptions of the fairness of the referee (Simmons, 2007).

Communication and fairness
Researchers have suggested that justice judgement processes, most often researched in organisations, have implications in other human relations contexts (Lind, 2001) including classrooms (Buttner, 2004) and sports teams (Jordan et al, 2004). Simmons (2007) reported that football players’ perceptions of the competence, dependability and respectfulness of referees were likely to influence players’ reactions to referees decisions, and that some displays – such as anger and youth – were likely to strongly influence player reactions.

This section reviews notions of procedural justice, interactional justice, fairness theory and fairness heuristics that provide differing accounts of the way people perceive fairness.
It is important to understand the way people perceive fairness, and decision-makers’ influence on these perceptions, because perceptions of fairness influence attitudes and behaviours. Studies in organisations and other social contexts have shown that when people perceive fairness in decisions they tend to behave more prosocially and cooperatively (van den Bos et al., 2005).

Understanding perception of unfairness is perhaps more important than understanding fairness because unfair events affect “cognitions and reactions stronger than fair events” (van den Bos, 2005 p.280). Perceptions of unfairness have been linked to a wide range of antisocial cognitions and behaviours in the workplace (Lind, 2001), and hostility, indirect aggression, and resistance to instructor requests among college students (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Van den Bos suggests that “fair” may be what is expected, that unfairness violates the expectation, and thus leads to strong reaction (2005). Veermunt and Steensma say there is a strong case to argue that injustice increases stress and that justice decreases stress in the work context (2005), Bar Eli’s (1995) study suggests a similar phenomenon on emotion-charged sports fields. It may be logical to focus examination of referee communication on the displays that lead to players perceiving unfairness. Simmons (2007) found that players were acutely sensitive to a range of referee displays. Anger, youth and ignoring player questions were all considered displays of incompetence or undependability or disrespect to players, and therefore displays suggesting unfairness. This study tests player reactions to referee anger, youth and ignoring player questions.

Perceptions of fairness in decision-making are central to concepts of sports refereeing. According to Pawlenka (2005) the meticulous attention competitive sports pay to instituting equal opportunity and impartiality provide a model or ideal that “real life” outside competitive sports 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, p56). But perception of fairness is influenced by factors other than “equal treatment” and the outcomes of decisions.

Studies in the social psychology of justice have for more than two decades shown that perceptions of fairness are not just based on the decision and equity, fairness is separately
influenced by the way people are treated by the decision maker, and the implementation of process (Lind, 2001).

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.

If the fair process effect applies in football, players will be more accepting of referee decisions that go against their team if they feel that they have been treated fairly. 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, Veermunt & Wilke, 1996). Simmons’ (2007) sample of Australian players frequently reported that they preferred referees who listened to them, and answered players’ (reasonable) questions, even if they didn’t expect the referee to change their decision. Players reported getting angry with referees who ignored their questions or turned their backs on them. These findings are consistent with ‘noninstrumental’ explanations of the voice effect, which suggest that perception of fairness is enhanced, even when voice has no impact on the decision, because the decision-maker is perceived to be interpersonally responsive, or that the “opportunity to voice affirms disputants’ status with the decision-maker” (Shapiro & Brett, 2005, p.162).

Football (soccer) continually wrestles with the problem of players dissenting the decisions of referees at all levels of the game. To those inside and outside the sport, referees often appear to tolerate seemingly intolerable levels of player dissent. Simmons (2006) reported that a highly experienced elite level referee deliberately tolerates a certain level of dissent from players.

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. (Simmons 2006, p11).
It may be that individual referees’ and the sport’s acceptance of players disputing the referees’ decisions - allowing players a “voice”- serve to enhance player perceptions of justice.

Interactional justice has been described as “aspects of the context involving the treatment of individuals during an interaction”, such as courtesy and respect (Cole, 2002, p.545). Bies and Moag 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 (1986). Sitter found that leaders’ friendly, relaxed and attentive styles correlated positively with perceptions of justice, and dominant communication styles had a weak, negative correlation. “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” (2003, p15).

Studies have shown that managers can be trained in interactional justice to produce positive outcomes for employees and organisations. Skarlicki and Latham found that union leaders trained in the administration of organisational justice principles increased members’ citizenship behaviours such as helpfulness and volunteering (1997). Greenberg, 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 (2006). If referees were trained in interactional justice techniques, what sort of techniques would be in the curriculum? Would they differ from received wisdom about the best ways to referee?

“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). Someone or some entity is considered accountable, and people affected imagine possible alternative outcomes and other ways that the event might have been handled (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). In the world of football, players, coaches and fans frequently engage in counterfactual thinking, lamenting the dubious penalty awarded, the player sent-off or the goal disallowed, and imagining a different decision or less severe punishment.
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. When a person 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 “… and then subsequently to decide if the authority should be obeyed” (Conlon, Meyer and 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 perceptions of subsequent events and indicators (Lind et al 2001). Simmons (2007) found that players are sensitive to a range of referee displays based on appearance and first impressions such as neatness of attire and grooming, age, voice and physique. Players used these displays as cues to the professionalism and competence of the referee.

**Communication, fairness and culture**

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 and 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 justice have used Hofstede’s power-distance and individualism-collectivism scales to differentiate cultures. He 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). Relative to most countries, Australia
scores low on 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 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, which has a much lower power-distance score. Spain is in between Australia and Malaysia on Hofstede’s index.

Hall and 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 Germany 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. 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.

It is conceivable that “football” has its own “culture”, somehow transcending national and cultural identities of the players, and that referee-player interaction is much the same in all
countries. Although tangential to the purpose of this study, this would be an intriguing finding.

**Present study**

This present study builds on Mellick et al’s (2005) assertion that referees need to promote perceptions of decisions as fair and just, and Simmons’ (2007) findings relating to several displays – anger, explanation and age – that influence player perceptions of the fairness of the referee.

The project investigates the effects that two communication behaviours - a short explanation, and displays of anger, have on player perceptions of the fairness of referees and their decisions. A third referee variable of interest is age. Simmons’ (2007) study found that youth in referees acts an heuristic leading players to perceive the referee 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)

**Method**

The study compares the effects of three communicative referee displays that previous research with players (Simmons, 2007) and elite referees (Mellick et al, 2005; Simmons, 2006) has reported to be influential. The study uses written vignettes, a method commonly used in organisational justice and psychology research. The design involves two studies, each is 3 (Country) x 2 (Referee age) x 2 (referee communication behaviour). The two behaviours are analysed independently. The three countries are Australia, Malaysia and Spain. They were selected because they differ markedly on Hofstede’s (1980) power distance and other culture dimensions. On the power-distance dimension, Malaysia ranks highest at 1, Spain is number 31 and Australia is number 41 (Hofstede, 1997).
Participants are asked for their national identity, 3 items were also adapted from Hofstede’s power-distance dimension index to identify attitudes to referees as figures of power and authority (1997). The independent variables embedded in and rotated through the vignettes are displays of anger (presence or absence), explanation (presence or absence), and referee age (18 or 35). The main dependent variables of interest are player perceptions of the fairness of the referee, the correctness of the decision, and the players’ attitudes and behavioural intentions concerning the referee. A scale was created to measure referee fairness based on items measuring perceptions of referee competence, dependability and respectfulness, the main dimensions of referee fairness reported by Simmons (2007). In pretest with an Australian sample \( n = 80 \) strong internal consistency was found for this scale, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .87.

Eight vignettes are randomly presented to the subjects online within a survey format. Each subject is presented with just one vignette and responds using 9-point Likert scales.

The size of the sample will be larger in this online experiment than would have been practical using normal experiment design. 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 the subjects’ responses. Effectively the experimenter has traded some control over the process for a larger sample.

**Sample**

The target sample for the study are male football players registered to play at amateur level in Australia, Malaysia and Spain. Recruitment of the sample in Australia required the cooperation of numerous individuals and groups from the different states. Subjects are recruited to the study through football associations, clubs and teams, mostly by email containing a hot link to the study, and also through hotlinks to the study from football club and association webpages. At the time of writing more than 1150 Australians have completed the study including 800 male players, but data has not been analysed.

**Vignette methodology**

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). They are useful in survey research because they help to create a richer, yet standardised, context than is customary in
normal survey questions (de Vaus, 1995), and useful to experimental designs because they enable control of extraneous variables (Sleed et al, 2002, p27) and manipulation of independent variables in ways that enable causal analysis (de Vaus, 1995).

Vignettes are not as complicated as real life, but they allow the researcher to design a context that evokes aspects of the real life situation of interest. An advantage of the vignette method is that the subject’s attention can be guided to the relevant aspects without informing subjects what those aspects are.

Video was considered for this study because the richer pictorial text might be perceived as more real than a written description (Sleed et al, 2002) and because it would reduce the need to explain the context verbally to participants in three languages. However the richness of the text can lessen control over what the participants focus on (Sleed et al, 2002). Extraneous variables, including the facial features, race, and shirt colours of people in a football video vignette, are likely to influence subject judgements (Collins and Brief, 1995). It was decided that although respondents would “apply their own stereotypes to aspects of the characters and their behaviours that aren’t specifically given ..” (Sleed et al, 2002, p25), the dependent variables of interest to this study – respondent reactions to anger, explanation and age – could be best isolated and standardised using written vignettes.

The subjects in this study are not aware that the research is designed to focus on referee communication, nor that scenario conditions are manipulated. According to Collins and 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” although they will not always acknowledge this if asked the reasons for their assessments (p93). In each vignette here the match incident is the same, the only information provided about the referee is the decision they make, and the two rotating variables, their age, and the way they communicate their decision. This study used vignettes to help access subjects’ “automatic inferences” about referee characteristics, inferences that might not otherwise be accessible through tapping self reports of conscious phenomenology (Collins and Brief, 1995, p93-94).

Although the design sought to capture automated, spontaneous reactions to referees’ different communicative displays, the artificiality of vignettes presented in an experimental or survey environment raises concerns about the validity of data captured using this methodology. Can
such brief written narratives adequately capture the reality of the context, and thus elicit responses that would be similar to reactions to real world situations? (Sleed et al, 2002, p22).

Sleed et al (2002) briefly address the question of external validity in their review of the differences between written and video vignettes, but there is little evidence to aid judgement. Vignettes have been used in audio and video form but are most commonly used in written form (Sleed, et al, 2002). A study of reactions to different types of argumentative unfairness used the same vignettes presented in four modes (two auditory, one written, and one roleplay). The study found that the different presentation modes had no effect on respondents’ cognitive, emotional and verbal reactions (Mischo, 2002).

Importantly, the results here will be considered alongside the findings of the studies that have previously reported the importance of the communicative displays being tested, and the extensive body of literature on the social psychology of justice that underpins the design.

**Cross cultural method issues**

Cross cultural research requires awareness of the perils of translation, especially language used to distinguish different emotions (Boucher, 1979). Item equivalence for the Australian-developed questionnaire was checked by translation and back translation into both Spanish and Bahasa Malay by bilingual natives in both languages (Mattila and 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.

Although vignettes are well known to researchers in a range of disciplines there is little published information to aid in their construction (Jeffries and Maeder, 2005), and less information about their use across languages and cultures. 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. The vignettes describe a competitive, low-scoring game, where the score is even, and the teams are playing hard to win. The participants were asked to respond to situations where referee decisions went against their team, rather than decisions in favour of their team. This is
because the study and referees around the world are more concerned with the mitigating effects of referee communication on players receiving unfavourable decisions, than players receiving favourable decisions!

In this study the vignettes are designed to create a football context that players across different cultures could readily identify with. 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 Bar-Eli (1995) described of having a negative and unexpected referee decision go against you, 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.
Online data collection in Malaysia and Spain will occur during March-May, 2008, prior to the I-Come conference in June 2008 where preliminary analyses and intercultural comparisons will be discussed. During June and July the researcher will interview players and referees in Malaysia and Spain. This will aid interpretation of the findings.

References
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