



PLAYER PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS IN FOOTBALL REFEREE COMMUNICATION IN AUSTRALIA, MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, SPAIN AND THE UK

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Abstract

Referee communication styles influence player perceptions of fairness, reactions to negative decisions, and the quality of football. A quasi-experimental between-subject study of football (soccer) player reactions to different referee communication behaviors was conducted in Australia (n=675), Great Britain (n=365), Malaysia (n=153), Spain (n=537) and Singapore (n=166). Adult male football players read vignettes describing a scene from a match where a negative decision is unexpectedly awarded against them. The age of the referee, and referee displays of anger and explanation were manipulated. 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.

Explaining the negative 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. 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 ($p<0.05$). Neither explanation nor anger had a significant effect on player intentions to argue. The findings suggest some differential effects internationally, but that players of the world game will generally react more favorably to referees who explain decisions and communicate calmly. Implications for referee training are discussed.

Introduction

A study of 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. 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, and consequently affect the quality of football. A study of elite UK football and rugby referees reported that the characteristics of skilful communication of decisions were "to engage the offender/s attention and instigate a decision interaction episode; to project confidence in the decision made; and finally to promote perception of the decision as fair and just" (Mellick et al, 2005, p42). A study of Australian football players reported that they prefer older referees, and referees who explain their decisions. Referee displays of anger were variously interpreted by players as an indication that the referee was intimidated, losing control or disrespectful of players (Simmons, 2007). Little is known about the relative influence of different referee communication styles and practices on players, or differences between cultures. Studies in organisations and other contexts 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 way people are treated by the decision maker, and the implementation of process (Lind, 2001). In a range of societal contexts there are "strong normative expectations" for leaders to explain controversial decisions (Bobocel and Zdanuk, 2005, p470).

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. Mattila and Patterson (2004) found that offering an explanation for a service failure has a positive effect regardless of culture, but that the effect was more powerful in the US than in Malaysia and Thailand.

A better understanding of influential communication styles and practices will help with the development of training that enables referees to become more self-aware and have greater control over interaction with players. It is expected that principles for the effective communication of decisions in football refereeing will be similar in other sports, and in other social contexts where negative decisions are communicated.

Method

This study examined the effect that the referee's age and communication style have on player reactions to a negative decision. The instrument was produced in English and translated into Spanish and Bahasa Malaysian. Translations and back translations were done by native speakers in the target languages. Player reactions were measured online in Australia, UK, Spain, and Singapore, and in person in Malaysia. Stated broadly, the hypotheses were:

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

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

H3 Players will react more favourably to a negative decision when the referee is 35 years old (versus 18 years old).

Within each of these broad hypotheses were 3 sub-hypotheses relating to the player 'reactions' (the dependent variables). These were the rating (on a Likert-type 1-9 scale) of the fairness of the referee (four items), the correctness of the decision (single item), and their intention to argue with the referee (two items).

The project used a between-subjects experimental design in a questionnaire format. Footballers (the subjects) were randomly assigned one of 8 vignettes describing a scene from a football match. The scene was designed to evoke the tension of close and hard fought competition, without conveying referee error, bias or some other extraneous characteristic that might prejudice or distract the subjects unintentionally. Apart from the systematic variation of the referee's age and communication style (the independent variables), little information is provided about the referee. Subjects applied their own stereotypes (Sleed et al, 2002) based on the systematically manipulated variables.

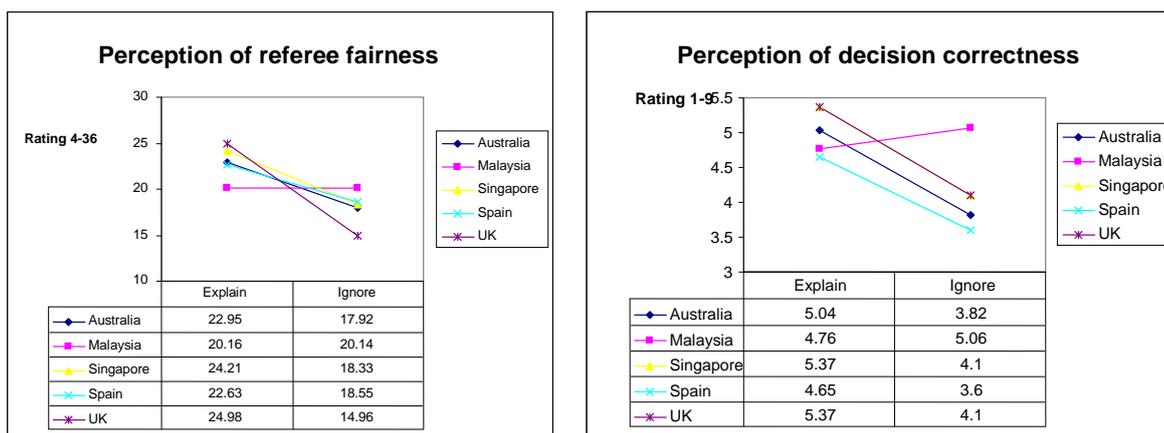
In total more than 4500 footballers from 35 countries completed the survey. This paper reports on adult male players (n=1861), amateur and professional, from the five main target countries. The sample was obtained through football associations and organisations in each country. In Malaysia the researcher was introduced to teams of players by the Football Association of Malaysia and the Kuala Lumpur Social Soccer League. The Malaysian sample reported here includes only the surveys completed in Bahasa Malaysian. This was done to remove expats, foreign nationals living in Malaysia, from the sample. In Australia and Spain hot links to the internet version of the study were posted on state and regional football federation websites, and in the UK and Singapore the sample were accessed with the aid of leading competition organisers, Football Mitoo and Espzen respectively. It is possible that the Singapore sample included many expats. Data was analysed using SPSS. Hypotheses were tested using single tail analyses of the variance of means.

Results

Hypothesis 1.1 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 Graph 1.

Hypothesis 1.2 was supported in each country except Malaysia. Players' (Australia, Spain, UK, 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 Graph 2.

Graph 1. Mean effects of explanation on perception of fairness. Graph 2. Mean effects of explanation on perception of correctness.



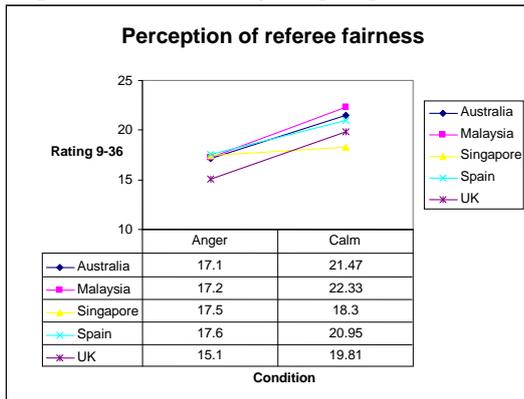
Hypothesis 1.3 was not supported. Player intentions to argue with the referee were not significantly ($p < 0.05$) influenced by the presence or absence of an explanation for the decision.

Hypothesis 2.1 was supported in each country except Singapore. Graph 3 shows that players' (Australia, Spain, UK, 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.

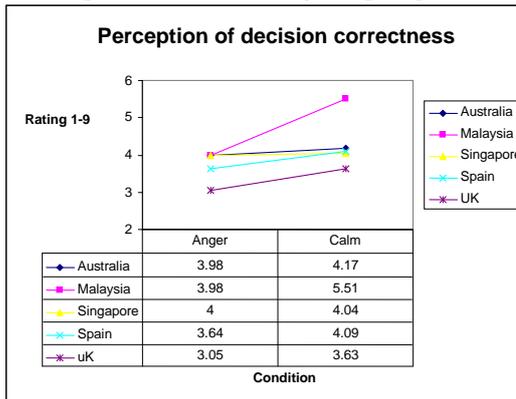
Hypothesis 2.2 was supported in Malaysia and the UK, but not in the other countries. Graph 4 shows that player attitudes to the correctness of the decision were significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in Malaysia and the UK when the referee communicated the decision calmly, than when the decision was communicated angrily. The effect was not significant in the other countries ($p < 0.05$).

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

Graph 3. Mean effects of anger on perception of fairness.



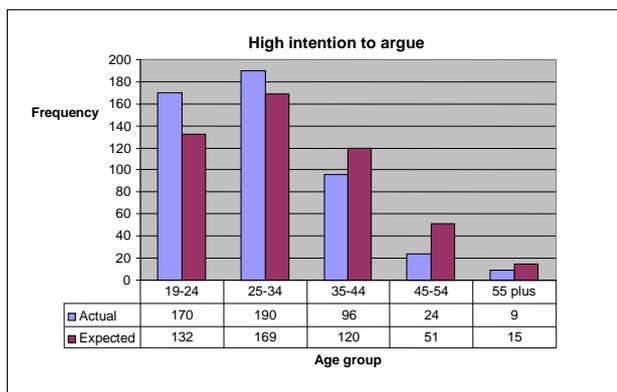
Graph 4. Mean effects of anger on perception of correctness.



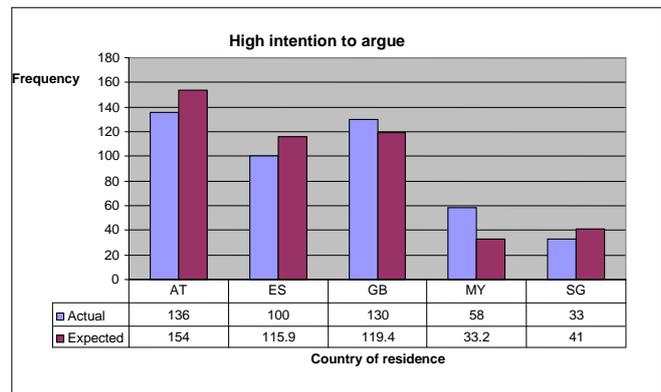
Hypotheses 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 were generally not supported. The age of the referee had some effect in Malaysia and Singapore on player ratings of fairness, correctness or intention to argue, but not in the other countries.

Although not hypothesised, chi square tests were used to test the independence of the relationship between the intention to argue (single item), and the age and place of residence of the players. Graph 5 shows that younger players (19-24; 25-34) are significantly more likely to argue with referees than older players (35-44; 45-54; 55 plus). The chi square tests showed that among the low intention to argue group there were significantly more Australians and Spanish players than expected, and significantly fewer Malaysians. Among the high intention to argue group there were significantly more players from Malaysia and the United Kingdom, see Graph 6.

Graph 5. Age and high intention to argue



Graph 6. Country of residence and high intention to argue



Discussion / Conclusions

There were some significant differences between countries, however the majority of the response patterns across the five countries are striking in their similarity. Except for Malaysia, when a referee provides an explanation for the decision, players' attitudes to the referee and to the decision are improved, compared with not explaining. Importantly, when a referee explains, players perceive the decision to be more correct. The positive effects of an account for a negative decision are consistent with numerous previous studies in other contexts (Bobocel and Zdanuk, 2005). The findings for Malaysia are consistent with Mattila and Patterson's (2004) finding that not-explaining the bad news of a service failure has a more powerful negative effect in a Western culture than in East Asian culture, but they differ insofar as this study found explanation had no effect for footballers in Malaysia.

Anger had a significant negative effect on perceptions of the fairness of the referee in all countries except Singapore. However it was only in Malaysia and the UK that an angry communication style had a significant effect on the players' perception of the correctness of the decision. The negative effect of anger on player reactions was strongest in Malaysia. The study breaks new ground in understanding of referee/player interactions, and in cross-cultural similarities and differences. The results generally support Simmons' (2007) findings. Referees should try to be accountable for their decisions, and avoid displays of anger. The received wisdom that referees should project calm confidence is supported.

The match situations contrived through the different vignette conditions did not find referee communication behaviours that would increase players' intention to argue. Rather, the results indicate that some players are more likely to argue. Younger players and players from Great Britain and Malaysia reported they were more likely to argue with the referee. Further studies that focus on understanding players and coaches who repeatedly argue with referees are warranted.

The use of a between-subject method in an experimental design adds credibility to the findings concerning the differential responses to the independent variables. The large samples from Australia, Spain and the UK were gathered

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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. 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. 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. As Mattila and Patterson (2004) suggest it may be more useful to view people's justice perceptions as situation specific and dynamic, but this study indicates that players react more favourably to referees who explain decisions effectively and communicate calmly.

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