



Sport officials' strategies for managing interactions with players: Face-work on the front-stage

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ABSTRACT

Communication is central to managing perceptions of fairness and performance in sport officiating. Most of the few studies that focus on sport official communication have been limited to 'one-way' impressions and decision communication and tend to neglect more dynamic, dialogic interactions with players. This study explored sport officials' identity concerns and motivations and ways officials adapt and accommodate 'face' in interactions with players.

Design: Qualitative methodology.

Method: Video elicitation interviews using an allo-confrontation approach were conducted with 8 male and 6 female sport officials from 7 different team sports representing novice to professional levels. Goffman's (1959; 1967) dramaturgical sociology of interaction was used to frame identity projections and context in officials' communication management strategies.

Findings: Analysis of interview transcripts revealed three distinct ways officials' face concerns emerge and are managed in interactions with players including (1) anticipating players' reactions and modifying presentation of self, (2) asserting and preserving the officials' own face, and (3) giving and restoring players' face. When incompatible interactional exchanges occur in sport matches, officials use different defensive and corrective face-work strategies to assert, re-establish, or appropriate face statuses for themselves and players.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the importance of dynamics and context in sport official communication. They also emphasise the need to maintain relationships, preserve and protect identities, whilst being strategic in interactions with players. We conclude that new conceptualisations are needed in sport official communication to build on current 'one-way' concepts that dominate officiating research and training.

1. Introduction

Psychological and performance demands of sport officials (i.e., referees, umpires, judges) have received limited attention in sport science compared to topics such as athlete performance and coaching pedagogy (Dosseville & Laborde, 2015; MacMahon et al., 2014). The unique responsibilities and demands of officiating make it a dynamic performance role worthy of study. Sport officials deliver unpopular decisions in environments of high time and other pressures whilst being held to high expectations from others who desire accuracy and consistency. Much of officiating success is predicated on officials' ability to encourage perceptions of fairness and persuade compliance and cooperation from those who wish the decisions were different. A growing appreciation concerning these complexities has led scholars and practice communities to acknowledge the importance of communication to

officiate effectively and deal with the constant accountability of being a sport official (Fruchart & Carton, 2012; Mellick, Bull, Laugharne, & Fleming, 2005; Simmons, 2011). Because officiating communication and skilled player interaction are intrinsic to officiating realities and perceptions in performance (MacMahon et al., 2014; Mascarenhas, Collins, & Mortimer, 2005), the current study sought to investigate attitudes and intersubjectivities in officials' interaction experiences with players.

Two trends generally emerge from most of the studies on sport official communication. One trend is that studies often aim to capture the experience of elite sport officials to isolate communication priorities and behaviours they use with players (e.g., Cunningham, Mellick, Mascarenhas, & Fleming, 2012; Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2006; Slack, Maynard, Butt, & Olusoga, 2013). High-performance sport officials find self-presentational demands stress-inducing (Hill, Matthews,

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& Senior, 2016; Thatcher, 2005) and are motivated to accommodate a 'corporate theatre', an image of decisiveness and accountability to meet perceived expectations held by multiple audiences interlinked to match proceedings (Cunningham et al., 2012). Players use fairness cues about officials as heuristics to formulate expectations about officials' decision correctness (Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2011), competence, and legitimacy (Dosseville, Laborde, & Bernier, 2014). Respectfulness, dependability (Simmons, 2010), confidence, composure (Furley & Schweizer, 2016), politeness, and honesty (Dosseville et al., 2014) are more preferred officiating qualities, whilst decision communication behaviours such as eye contact, posture, hand/body movements, and providing rule explanations can influence acceptance of officials' decisions (Mellick et al., 2005). Fairness and organisational justice principles are frequently used as an interpretive lens to explain officiating communication, thus suggesting officials' procedural and interactional displays have a powerful influence on players' attitudes and behaviours.

A second trend is most existing research on officiating communication is grounded in one way concepts of communication, such as message transmission and impression management. Such emphasis has translated to the analysis of communication in sport officials to focus on observable behaviours or single communication variables concerning the official, or the match situation (e.g., decision communication). These traditional conceptualisations of sport officiating communication often assume officials to be the 'sender' of decisions or social information and players, coaches, and the audience as communication 'receivers'. A cause-effect conceptualisation of communication (or, transmission model; Shannon & Weaver, 1949) ultimately separates communication from a more complex relational and interactive process, therefore neglecting player participation in the communication process as a co-interactant. Interactions between players and officials contribute to an alignment in expectations, behaviour, and attitudes concerning contextual and technical aspects of the game (Rix-Lièvre, Boyer, Terfous, Coutarel, & Lièvre, 2015). Better understanding of interpersonal factors in player-official encounters would help build on current perspectives of officiating communication that resemble a 'one-way' model of communication.

The study of officiating communication cannot be restricted to a cause-effect conceptualisation because of the situated and naturalistic conditions under which communication occurs. Officials communicate under time pressure in uncertain and changing circumstances that demand spontaneous responses with players whilst appealing to different goal ends and role constraints. This has direct implications on the ways officiating communication should be studied and interpreted. Ecological dynamics suggest that human actions can be explained by the expectations and goals that govern and guide them, which for sport officials can include safety, fairness, accuracy, or spectacle (Russell, Renshaw, & Davids, 2018). Some sports characterise these challenges for sport officials more than others, particularly team sports (or 'invasion' games) such as soccer, rugby, and basketball (sport types that are often the focus of officiating communication studies). MacMahon and Plessner (2008) term these type of sport officials as 'interactors', as opposed to 'monitors' (e.g., gymnastic judge) and 'reactors' (e.g., tennis line judge) where more predictable decision cues are provided and less officiating interaction with players is required. 'Interactor' officials are in close proximity to many players (Dosseville et al., 2014), are viewed as more favourable to players when they are unobtrusive and allow game play to 'flow' (Mascarenhas, O'Hare, Plessner, & Button, 2006), and benefit from having a heightened emotional intelligence or 'feel' for players' actions, temperaments and personalities (Nikbakhsh, Alam, & Monazami, 2013). A naturalistic and ecological dynamics view helps account for the different goals and motivations of officiating communication and ways officials adapt, accommodate, and attempt to manage their communication to context.

Officiating inherently demands some degree of socially situated identity that is to be communicated and performed. The sports official's social role has been likened to an educator who encourages players to

develop more organised and socially desirable behaviours (Isidori, Müller, & Kaya, 2012) and moral arbitrator who deters players from attempting to correct moral conditions with aggressive actions (Jones & Fleming, 2010). Such metaphors about sport officials' social role has implications on their interactive plans and goals in light of the philosophical, institutional, and pedagogical relationships they fulfil. Some of the complexity of officiating communication motivations and interaction adaptations with players can be informed through sociological dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Goffman (1959) suggested that the presence of others motivate a person to mobilise their activity in such a way as to present an impression that the performer believes they 'ought' to convey. This socialised 'front' is part of a social mask we project to others that helps "define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 13). Goffman's theatrical metaphor provided an account about how we navigate everyday social interactions through our activities on the 'front-stage', a term to describe the influence of setting through which interactants deliver their performance (or persona). 'Self' and 'identity' were critical concepts to Goffman's analysis of human communication that reveal unspoken dynamics in interpersonal encounters, particularly in social settings where people are ascribed social roles, position, and status, such as sport officials.

Goffman's (1967) ethnographic research later explored image management in social interactions developing concepts of 'face' and 'face-work' and the focus of this study concerning officiating interactions with players. Goffman (1967) pointed out individuals' frequent 'positioning' of themselves with respect to others' in the constant flow and progress of contained, social settings (Arundale, 2010). Face is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken" in interaction (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). An individual's social 'face' is associated with self-esteem and personal rights or entitlements and "something that is not lodged in or on his [or her] body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in an encounter" (Goffman, 1967, p. 7). Loss of face in interactions can have instrumental effects on perceptions of credibility and competence to others. Face threatening acts are mitigated through 'face-work' that involves "actions taken by a person to make whatever he [or she] is doing consistent with face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). Face-work is verbal and non-verbal actions that people use to diffuse, manage, enhance or downgrade self or others (Huang, 2014). Defensive face-work are actions by an individual to prevent the loss of face, like avoiding situations that might potentially discredit the impression one is attempting to maintain. Rather, protective face-work refers to attempts made by an individual to save or correct the loss of others' face (or to help someone to take up a more favourable presentation) based on the assumption that others will return the same ritualistic consideration (Goffman, 1967). Little is known about the face concerns and motivations of sport officials (or ways officials perceive players' face concerns) and the usefulness of face-work concepts to understand officials' modes of interaction with players.

The aims of this study were to explore sport officials' face concerns and motivations and understand ways sport officials adapt or accommodate communication face-work in interactions with players. Previous officiating research suggests that better negotiation of officiating communication goals and social identities can help mitigate players' feelings of injustice and influence game atmosphere (Faccenda, Pantaléon, & Reynes, 2009; Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2011). Goffmanian concepts of 'front-stage', 'face', and 'face-work' offer valuable language for exploring ways officials perceive and are motivated by identity concerns in interactions with players to become more accepted, effective and influencing. A constructivist and dramaturgical sociological perspective of communication contributes a new understanding about identity features in officiating, particularly ways officials act within interacting role constraints and how expectation, context and role affect less visible and 'unspoken' dynamics in player-official interaction. The study contributes new theoretical insights to the study of officiating that emphasise a dialogic, co-constructive view

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