



The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

## Strategic Interaction in Player-Sport Official Encounters

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### Abstract

Sport officiating communication studies use the views of officials and focus on 'one-way' communication and behavioural factors such as impression management and decision communication. Little is known about player perspectives and ways players differ in their interaction with officials. This study used Goffman's (1959; 1969) dramaturgical sociology as an interpretive frame to understand players' views of strategic interaction in player-official encounters. Main findings show the emergence of the 'unwitting', 'naïve' and 'covering' moves (Goffman, 1969) in player-official interaction and that players actively attempt to influence officials and their decisions through deliberate and unconscious strategies such as complaining and selective questioning.

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Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

*Keywords:* Sport official communication; player-official interaction; dramaturgical sociology; communication training; referee

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### 1. Introduction

Communication and player management are clearly central to sport officiating performance (MacMahon & Plessner, 2008; Mascarenhas, Collins, & Mortimer, 2005). Officials (referees, umpires, judges) interact with players (and coaches/managers) under time pressure in an emotionally charged environment where people compete for conflicting goals and interests. Communicating difficult decisions, dealing with interpersonal conflict, and maintaining social order remain key performance areas of officiating that are difficult to teach or train (Cunningham, Simmons, Mascarenhas, & Redhead, 2014; Mascarenhas et al., 2005; Mellick, Bull, Laugharne, & Fleming, 2005). English Premier football referees say they manage players and game activities through reading

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player and manager body language and behavior, using player and coach language, addressing players by first name and shirt number, and applying active listening or empathetic communication (Slack, Maynard, Butt, & Olusoga, 2013). An interview study of officiating development managers and performance coaches with peak Australian sport bodies showed that they conceptualise effective communication and player management as a combination of *personal qualities* of officials, mastery of *one-way communication* techniques (e.g., impression management, whistle/voice use, direction-giving), *monitoring situations* and people, and *skilled interaction*, or ability to adapt and interact appropriately to situation (Cunningham et al., 2014). While interviewees thought some officiating communication characteristics are more natural assets and less easily influenced (personal qualities) and others more trainable ('one-way' officiating displays and attitudes) – the ability of an official to monitor situations and interact skillfully was seen as important but most difficult to train. Emotional intelligence (Nikbakhsh, Alam, & Monazami, 2013) and social competence (Carlsson, 2006) are often linked to officiating performance effectiveness. The capacity to read and interpret peoples' attitudes, intentions and motives contributes to officials' ability to adjudicate and communicate more sensitively and effectively.

Sport officiating communication studies have used the perspectives of officials, especially those with high experience, or officiating status (Cunningham, Mellick, Mascarenhas, & Fleming, 2012; Simmons, 2006; Slack et al., 2013). Studies also tend to focus on one-way, or a "transmission" model of communication and behavioral factors of sport official communication such as impression management (Thatcher, 2005) and decision communication (Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2010). Fairness and organisational justice has been the main frame used to understand sport official communication and different ways that players respond and react to injustice in officials. Players identify favorable and less favorable attitudes, personal characteristics and skills in officials (Dosseville, Laborde, & Bernier, 2012; Simmons, 2010). Showing self-control or calmness, giving explanations and being perceived as honest, respectful, fair and competent to officiate are seen by players to be preferred attributes in officials (Dosseville et al., 2012; Faccenda, Pantaléon, & Reynes, 2009; Simmons, 2010; 2011). Players also report less favorable officiating communication displays including un-necessary actions, anger and not providing decision explanations (Bar-Eli, Levy-Kolker, Pie, & Tenenbaum, 1995; Simmons, 2009). While it is important to help officials understand how they can better present themselves and decisions they deliver, to establish a more complete conceptualisation of sport official communication it would be worthwhile to explore other complexities in communication, such as the ways players differ in their interaction with officials.

One research field that is helpful to understand the nature and particular dynamics of player-official interactions is dramaturgical sociology (Goffman, 1959; 1967; 1969). Goffman provides original thought about the presentation of self in everyday social life that reveal ritual aspects of the approach, or 'line' people take in interactions and how we accommodate or manage 'face' to people and situations. In the traditions of Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, Goffman developed several concepts about how people intentionally 'give' and unintentionally 'give off' signs or expressed cues in the presence of others that express our assessment of the situation and perception of ourselves and others. He is known for first critically discussing the concept of impression management (a well-studied communication and social psychology phenomenon) that explains the way we are generally motivated to construct certain impressions of self (more often than not as 'positive') in interactions with others. Goffman (1959; 1967) saw this as an intrinsic part of our socialized selves and expression of self that is influenced by our social and cultural arrangements. This social constructionist view can help to reveal some of the complexities in player-official interactions, and provide new ways to conceptualise and inform training in sport official communication and player management.

One of Goffman's (1969) interests was strategic (game-like, or calculative) aspects of human encounters. He used a game-analytic metaphor as a way of describing information management in social interactions. In his 1969 book, *Strategic Interaction*, he suggests different concepts of 'game observation' that help to explain "the individual's capacity to acquire, reveal, and conceal information through social interaction" (p. 4). From this perspective, interaction is seen to exist as sort of an "information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (Goffman, 1959, p.8). Impression management is considered by Goffman to be strategic when it is informed by an assessment of others' impressions and use of such information to choose particular course of action that involve intrinsic payoffs. Some criticise Goffman's cynical outlook on human

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