



Real-time communication during play: Analysis of team-mates' talk and interaction

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The importance of maintaining high frequencies of communication between players during team sports is widely recognised. This article highlights an additional feature of communication that has strategic significance for team interaction during play, and offers empirically-grounded recommendations for coaches and players.

Design: A combination of descriptive statistics and Conversation Analysis was used to examine elite netballers' communications during defensive play.

Method: Play was video- and audio-recorded, and coded for frequency of different types of communication. Data were analysed for evidence of recurring patterns in players' verbal and non-verbal conduct. **Results:** Descriptive statistics demonstrated that higher frequencies of communication between defenders occurred when opposition players successfully obtained shots at goal. Qualitative Conversation Analysis provided an opportunity to unpack this finding by examining the specific interactional consequences following from particular verbal and non-verbal communications. Uptake of communication was demonstrated to be crucially dependent upon speakers' taking account, in their verbal and non-verbal conduct, of both their team-mate's current orientation, and visual access to the defensive problem. **Conclusions:** In addition to advocating for the maintenance of high frequencies of communication, it is recommended that coaches and players also turn attention to the specific practices by which players communicate about problematic features of unfolding play. We suggest specific ways in which players might be encouraged to design their communications to allow team-mates increased opportunity to notice and act upon particular events in the complex, fast-paced, highly contingent environment of actual play.

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Overview

Communication is recognised as crucial in team sport (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Sullivan & Feltz, 2003; Yukelson, 1993). Few studies in the sport psychology literature, however, have examined the nature of actual communicative practices as they occur during play. There is therefore limited understanding of how successful communication is achieved between team members in real-life sports encounters. This article reports results from a study designed to address this gap in knowledge. The recent development of portable, unobtrusive and reliable technology for the recording of talk has made on-field communication accessible for the purposes of empirical research. It is now possible to record vocal and visual behaviour of players in situ, and subject these materials to detailed scrutiny (c.f. Heath, 1986, who pioneered

the use of such technology for analysing interaction in medical consultations). The method of Conversation Analysis, a form of inquiry developed within sociology and linguistics (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), has emerged as the approach favoured by researchers from a range of disciplines whose interest is in rigorous, empirical analysis of naturally-occurring interaction. Conversation Analysis has been used to investigate the co-ordination of visual and vocal activity in a variety of real-life settings (see Drew & Heritage, 1998 for a review). Here, we apply the conversation analytic method to the study of elite netballers' communicative interactions during play.

Communication during defensive play was highlighted by coaching staff at a State Sports Institute as in need of analysis. Their goal was to determine whether existing communicative practices could be changed to improve defensive performance. Defensive players were video-taped during play and carried wireless microphones taped to their backs to record their talk. Recordings were coded for the frequency with which different categories of talk were produced. These frequency data were examined for evidence

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of patterns in relation to defensive outcomes. A subsequent qualitative analysis focused on the finer detail of co-ordinated talk and movement during play. By contrasting outcomes from the quantitative and qualitative approaches we highlight the particular advantages afforded by Conversation Analysis for the applied study of interaction in sport, and we conclude by offering some specific recommendations for coaching practice.

The importance of communication in team sport

Communication has been identified by researchers as possibly the most important aspect of intra-team interaction (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Dale & Wrisberg, 1996; Sullivan & Feltz, 2003; Yukelson, 1993). Beliefs about the significance of maintaining a high frequency of strategic and motivational on-field communication in team sport are also widespread among coaches and sport psychologists as illustrated by the following statements, sourced from professional sport organisations in America and Britain: “Most coaches agree that it is better for a team to communicate too much, rather than too little” (Lubbers, 2005). “All too often mistakes made in the heat of competition can be traced back to a lack of communication” (Karseras, 2003). Those working in the field would be aware of the routine nature of exhortations, from coaches and players alike, for increased on-field communication. Calls to ‘talk it up’, or requests for ‘more voice’ and the like, are repeatedly used with the aim of motivating team members, and organising and co-ordinating their movements during play. However, analysis of communication as it occurs during play remains a relatively under-developed area of research in sport psychology. In this paper, we begin to explore how the communicative choices made by team members during play impact on the quality of defensive interactions. Until recently, an appropriate method for investigating communication as it occurs in real time, during actual play, has not been available to researchers.

Some empirical studies that have examined communication in sport have used self-report measures, such as questionnaires or focus group interviews that measure the frequency of talk, and purport to reflect coaches’ or athletes’ ‘thoughts’ or ‘beliefs’ about the importance of on-field communication. Williams and Widmeyer (1991), for example, administered a Group Environment Questionnaire to female U.S. collegiate golf team members, demonstrating that measures of cohesion (togetherness, team spirit) and Motivation were significant predictors of performance variance, whereas a measure of communication was not. Although useful, such self-report measures are limited in that they provide no information about the actual words used to communicate during play, nor do they shed light on how talk is co-ordinated with conduct and movement. There are difficulties, then, in attempting to relate data produced in such studies to the types of interaction that are characteristic of real-life settings (Locke, 2004; Silverman, 2005).

Another limitation of self-report measures is their inability to throw light on the way talk is routinely employed to accomplish specific ends. Indeed, the sport psychology literature in general has not systematically addressed the impact of communication on the quality of performance outcomes. In recognition of this gap, Sullivan and Feltz (2003) developed a formal measure of ‘effective communication’ to assess the relationship between talk and sports performance. Their *Scale for Effective Communication in Team Sports* (SECTS) measures four factors of effective communication derived from a series of studies involving 681 athletes sampled from recreational, intercollegiate, club and varsity level sport teams. They described the factors as: ‘Acceptance’ (communications involving messages of support), ‘Distinctiveness’ (messages that exchange a shared identity), ‘Positive conflict’ (messages dealing constructively with conflicts) and ‘Negative conflict’ (e.g.,

expressions of anger). These factors were considered constitutive of ‘effective communication’ in that they correlated significantly with a questionnaire measure of team cohesion. Sullivan (2004) used the instrument to assess gender differences in communication, concluding that male and female athletes in a sample of U.S. varsity and recreational team sports did not communicate in different ways. The construct of ‘effective communication’ as measured by the SECTS is yet to be validated against other criteria, however. The scale therefore appears to have limited applicability to the question of how on-field communication affects performance outcomes.

There are also a few studies of communication in sport that draw on recordings of coaches’ or players’ talk. One study analysed U.S. high school football coaches’ pre-game, half-time and post-match speeches, showing how messages of regret (about individual performance, collective failure, social significance and the future) varied as a function of team success (Turman, 2005). In another U.S.-based study, coaches’ communications during practice sessions for young girls’ basketball teams were catalogued for linguistic features such as frequency of pauses, repetitions, verbs and jargon (Masterton, Davies, & Masterton, 2006). Of most relevance for the present study is an analysis of communication occurring between points in women’s U.S. collegiate doubles tennis matches (Lausic, Tennebaum, Eccles, Jeong, & Johnson, 2009). This talk by partners between sequences of play was coded for ‘emotional’ or ‘action’ statements. Winning partners were found to exchange twice as many messages as losing pairs, and their overall communication pattern was more homogeneous than that typically exhibited by losing pairs. In order to generate practical recommendations concerning on-field communication, the current research investigates intra-team communication by focusing on the local occasions of its use (Schegloff, 2005), that is, by analysing talk and interaction as it takes place during play. We will argue that a fruitful method for such applied research is an approach known as Conversation Analysis.

The importance of mutual orientation in communication and interaction

There has been a long-standing interest amongst a number of researchers in examining the ways in which individuals establish mutual orientation as a prerequisite to successful communication (see for example, Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2002; Goodwin, 1981, 1986, 1996; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Heath, 1982; Heath & Luff, 1992; Heath, Sanchez Svensson, Hindmarsh, Luff, & Vom Lehn, 2002). The orientation of the body in the environment, its positioning and action, have been demonstrated to be crucial to how people understand each other and build action together. There is also a growing body of work concerned with investigating the way gestures are used during talk to direct and encourage others to look at objects (for example, Burgoon et al., 2002; Goodwin, 2003; Kendon, 2004; Kita, 2003; LeBaron & Streeck, 2000). Together with talk, then, interactants’ bodily orientation, movements and gestures are considered critical to referential actions. Goodwin (1980, 1981) was one of the first to investigate the systematic practices by which frameworks of mutual orientation are produced. In one study of archaeological fieldwork, Goodwin (2003) examined how interactants’ understanding of the complex visual field of an excavation site was produced in terms of the structure and elaboration afforded by language, pointing and mutual action. Studies have examined a range of other work environments in which it is crucial that participants establish how relevant objects and events should be understood in order to perform co-ordinated, collaborative tasks (see for example, Heath, 1986 on doctor-patient interaction; Heath, Jiroka, Luff, & Hindmarsh, 1994 on share-trader talk in dealing rooms; Heath & Luff, 1996 on driver-controller communication in underground trains; Nevile, 2002, 2006, 2007 on pilot-to-pilot talk

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