

# **Fair Call: Player Perceptions of Justice in Football Referee Communication**

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## **Abstract**

Studies in organisations and other contexts have shown that people who perceive fairness tend to behave more cooperatively (Lind, 2005). Focus group discussions were held with 40 football (soccer) players to explore their expectations of referees and perceptions of referees' verbal and non-verbal communicative displays.

The analysis applied organisational justice concepts to the emergent themes and displays. Three forms of referee meta-display were revealed - displays of self, displays of reaction to players and pressure, and displays of preferred interaction style. Player perceptions of fairness are enhanced when players perceive referees to be:

- competent to perform as a referee
- dependable in the face of pressure on their decisions
- respectful of players.

Many displays are amenable to practice and improvement, some are not. Even before the game starts, young referees are perceived to be less physically and mentally competent, less dependable, less respectful, and consequently less fair.

The study is exploratory and preliminary but the findings suggest that justice models and concepts can raise understanding of referee-player communication, and contribute to referee training by making them more aware of influential verbal and non-verbal displays.

## Introduction

In a football referee chat room a referee recently challenged others to referee a game without speaking - with whistle, signals and cards alone – and see how long it took for the game to ‘explode’. On another thread, referees volunteer advice on tactics for effectively presenting yellow cards (sanction displays) to players (Ausref, 2007).

Referees believe ‘talk’ and the manner in which cards are presented are important influences on player behaviour. But what do players think? Conflict, anger and referee abuse abound in football. One in four referees quits in NSW each year (Oke, 2005) and the main reason is abuse (Lorenc, 2005). What are the important communicative displays to players?

To develop their communication skills referees rely on a variable ‘hidden curriculum’ based on personal experience, and advice from refereeing assessors, colleagues, and experts (Mellick et al, 2005, p45). There has been very little evidence-based research into referee-player communication, and that which exists has generally reported from the referee, rather than the player, perspective.

The research reported here is exploratory, and part of a larger study of communication and fairness. It used focus groups with male players to explore perceptions of referees and their communication, and used an inductive method to codify emergent themes (Buttner, 2004). The findings were compared with findings from organisational justice studies.

It is important to understand the way people perceive fairness and unfairness, and decision-makers’ influence on these perceptions. Studies in organisations and other contexts have shown that people who perceive fairness tend to behave more prosocially and cooperatively (Lind, 2005). Importantly, the perceived fairness of decision-makers, and the processes used to arrive at decisions, influence perceptions of fairness separately to the outcome of decisions (Lind, 2001; van den Bos, 1997).

Teaching, policing, customer service and nursing are a few of the occupations that involve frequent communication of decisions. Football refereeing provides a context where player perceptions of fairness are central, and one person has responsibility for making and communicating almost all decisions. Understanding of the way referees communicate fairness might lead to fewer antisocial behaviours on the football field, and might be transferable to other professions.

## Referees, decisions and communication

Although most referees have an opinion about the best way to communicate decisions, there is little evidence on which to base referee communication training (Mellick et al, 2005). 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 strategies for enhancing 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 also suggested that referees' ability to adapt their communication techniques and styles to different players and situations was in itself an important skill (2006). Mellick et al 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).

Both of these studies used the views of refereeing experts, and called for further studies that include the perspectives of other stakeholders. This author knows of no existing studies of player perceptions of referee communication.

### **Procedural, interactional, counterfactual and heuristic fairness**

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).

Perceptions of injustice 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).

If the fair process effect applies in football, players may 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 & Wilke, 1996).

Interactional justice has been described as 'aspects of the context involving the treatment of individuals during an interaction (e.g. courtesy, 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 referee wisdom?

'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).

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.

If the individual 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 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).

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) .

## **Research question**

The aim of the research was to explore player expectations of referees and their perceptions of referees' communicative displays.

'Communicative displays' was defined broadly here to include verbal and non-verbal behaviours, and process displays that are interpreted by others (Pace and Faules, 1994).

RQ 1. What qualities do referees communicate to players?

RQ 2. What communicative displays influence player perceptions of the quality and fairness of referees?

## **Method and analysis**

This is the first study known to the author that attempts to understand player perceptions of referees and their communication. Previous research in referee communication privileged the viewpoint of elite referees and called for new perspectives (Simmons, 2006; Mellick et al,

2005). For this reason it was considered important to avoid imposing language or models as much as possible during the interviews, to hear and report players' own voices and associations. A qualitative interview method was selected to gather data about player expectations of referees and perceptions of their displays because it is 'particularly well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 173).

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups were chosen for this study for several reasons. As qualitative interviews, the ultimate goal of focus groups is to see the topic being studied from 'the participants' point of view' (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, p.187). When discussion flows well, focus groups benefit from what is known as the 'group effect', the potential for members to be stimulated and challenged by each others' accounts and experiences, and the emergence of insights that might otherwise not be accessible (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Most researchers recommend focus groups comprise 6-12 participants (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), and that they and the moderator be homogenous in ways that suggest they should feel comfortable to talk frankly. Homogeneity is a more important issue when the topic is sensitive (Amis, 2005). Teams of footballers who feel sufficiently comfortable with each other to play football together and share change rooms were used as the basis for deciding group composition. In this case one of the groups (Group 2) had 17 participants, five more players than the researcher requested. During this interview the researcher felt that discussion did not flow as well, and later in the data analysis stage he observed that this group yielded fewer useful insights.

Three one-hour group interviews were held in December 2006 and February 2007 with a total of 40 male players from three teams. The participating teams all play at high levels of the sport and selection was based in part on access and availability. One was a full professional team in the National A-League. The other teams (one metropolitan and one rural) were Under 18 teams from the NSW Super Youth league and NSW Development League. Early stages of the interviews used general, open-ended questions about soccer and refereeing ('*tell me about a time when you thought 'yes, that was good refereeing'*'), before introducing standardised open-ended questions related to preconceived themes if they had not been covered ('*Do you think there are better and worse ways to give a card?*') (Amis, 2005).

### **Analysis**

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. As the researcher sought not to impose language and models during the interviews, he avoided using a predefined framework to analyse and organise the data. The analysis used a grounded theory style, insofar as the important themes were constructed from data provided by the interviewees, rather than the researcher's preconceived notions, hypotheses (Daymon and Hollway, 2002) or theoretical formulation (Corbin and Holt, 2005). Open coding was used to uncover and organise concepts and categories in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) that related to what players expect and prefer of referees and refereeing. Simultaneously, the researcher recorded communicative displays of the concepts and categories. For example, players talked about expecting and preferring 'consistency' in referees. During the interviews (and in the subsequent analysis and interpretation of data) the researcher was alert to the various ways that referees display 'consistency' and 'inconsistency' to players including equality of treatment of individual players and teams, follow through after warnings, and judgements for incidents perceived by players to be similar. Approximately 300 open codes that derived from player comments,

anecdotes and assertions were selectively coded and collapsed into seven emergent properties, and then three central categories of meta-display. The final stage was the dimensionalisation of the properties (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

## Findings

### RQ 1. What qualities do referees communicate to players?

Findings for RQ 1 are summarised in table 1 and briefly outlined below. Three emergent categories of meta-display were identified: Competent, Dependable and Respectful. Each meta-display category comprises properties, which in turn comprise the dimensions. Each of the 15 dimensions should be viewed as a continuum from the ideal to an oppositional quality. The ‘meta-display category’ and ‘ideal’ columns represent (at different levels of abstraction) an idealised composite of ‘the good ref’, according to players.

*Table 1. The qualities referees communicate to players*

Meta-display category	Property	Dimensions	
		Ideal	Opposite
<b>1. Competent</b>	Physicality	Athletic	Unfit
		Aware	Oblivious
	Mentality	Experienced	Inexperienced
		Intelligent	Unintelligent
	Confidence	Decisive	Indecisive
		Assured	Insecure
<b>2. Dependable</b>	Consistency	Assertive	Diffident
		Reliable	Unpredictable
	Resilience	Professional	Uncaring
		Resolute	Yielding
	Accountability	Courageous	Fearful
		Answerable	Unanswerable
<b>3. Respectful</b>	Personality	Discreet	Attention-seeking
		Firm	Punitive
	Engaged	Aggressive	

#### *Meta-display category 1. Competent*

Competent qualities refer to the person. A referee is expected to be a person who is competent to referee in terms of physicality, mentality, and confidence.

#### *Meta-display category 2. Dependable*

Dependable referees react well to the many pressures they face during a game and provide a predictable environment for play. They need independence to make and stick to their own

decision, uninfluenced by players, coaches, spectators and other pressures. They need courage to make unpopular decisions and confront difficult situations.

### *Meta-display category 3. Respectful*

Respectful refers to the referee's attitudes to players, and preferred interaction styles. Interviewees frequently stressed that games are played for players (and spectators in the case of professionals), and that referees should respect players by being accountable, discreet and polite.

## **RQ 2. What communicative displays influence player perceptions of the quality of referees?**

Good interpersonal skills are essential to player notions of good refereeing. Player expectations found here are consistent with Sitter's finding that a friendly style correlates more with fairness than a dominant style (2003), and that showing respect enhances perceptions of fairness (Tepper et al, 1998; Bies and Moag, 1986). Players generally expect and prefer referees to communicate calmly, confidently, properly, assertively and respectfully. Players perceive these qualities through talk, bearing and gesture. These expectations align with findings from previous studies of elite level referees (Simmons, 2006; Mellick et al, 2005) and much received wisdom in the refereeing community.

Perhaps the most important findings here relate to displays that players associate with poor refereeing. The most frequently mentioned displays include anger, aggression, panic, carelessness and impropriety, hesitation and arrogance. Player perceptions of these displays diminish perceptions of fairness.

### *Competence displays*

Consciously and unconsciously players perceive displays of the referee's competence to judge. Players expect referees to be sufficiently fit to keep up with play and be in a position to judge. They notice displays that the referee might not be sufficiently fit, such as overweight, frail stature or the wrong age (too young or too old).

Players associate experience with more flowing games, a calmer personal style, a greater willingness to communicate with players, better skills and resilience to pressure.

Experienced referees were said to understand players and allow the game to flow, and have the acuity to detect and discipline player 'diving' (cheating).

*.. it all comes with the experience of the ref.. the more experienced the ref, the more times they've seen diving and the easier it is for them to pick it (Focus group 3)*

Players said referees need to be intelligent to avoid being fooled and justify their decisions. They display intelligence and decisiveness mostly through the quality of their voice and articulation, and the speed of their answers and decisions.

*You ask questions and they've quickly got answers. You know what I mean. They're quick, they've got quick minds .. (Focus group 1)*

Players don't normally know what playing or refereeing experience a referee has, and perceive experience through many displays. Displays of inexperience include getting in the way of the ball or players, panic, anger and 'trying to stamp their authority' early in the game by issuing lots of sanctions.

Youth is a powerful display suggestive of inexperience and young referees are at a disadvantage, regardless of their real experience. Young referees are perceived to be deficient in most of the qualities players value in a referee, including mentality, confidence, consistency, dependability, accountability and personality. In each of the discussion groups, players said that they prefer not to have young referees officiate their games.

Referees need experience to determine which behaviours and incidents require their intervention before they become larger problems. They need confidence to assert themselves firmly and effectively when they intervene. Displays of effective assertion mentioned by players include a calm and confident voice, and firm, clear hand signals.

Displays of anger such as shouting, waving arms and brandishing cards were felt by players to reflect a lack of confidence. Panic, and taking player criticism personally were also thought to reflect a lack of confidence. Avoiding difficult decisions and ignoring dissent also display a lack of confidence.

#### *Dependability displays*

Players expect referees to treat each team and individuals equally and consistently, and to interpret and make decisions based on the rules. When players perceive deviation from these fundamental principles, for any reason, they have cause to doubt the referee's commitment to the principles.

Displays of deviation from these principles include:

- using first names for one side and not the other (especially 'home referees')
- repeated warnings without following through
- 'picking on certain players' (often because the referee anticipates illegal or dirty play)
- making a decision that is perceived as an attempt to 'even the ledger' after a bad or harsh decision to the other side.

A 'professional' approach to refereeing helps display dependability because it shows a commitment to propriety in the game and high personal standards. Players said that neat attire and grooming display pride in refereeing, while old boots and poor grooming show lack of care. Staying calm and having a clear voice also suggest professionalism.

Players want referees to make their own decisions, and be resilient to influence from players or other pressures. Displays of independent decision-making include standing firm on decisions, and giving an explanation .

*If he's got an answer for it you know it's all about him .. You know it's what he wants  
(Focus group 3)*

Interviewees referred to several displays that suggest the referee is yielding to players and spectators who call out to the referee. Changing the decision, 'taking the whistle out of his mouth before he blows', and overruling assistant referee decisions can all suggest to players that the referee is yielding to pressure.

Younger players suggested that referees need courage to confront angry or abusive coaches, parents and spectators on behalf of the players.

*Like when a ref goes over to the coaches on the sideline and says to get out or he's not going to take any more from him ..It ruins the game if the parents and coaches start yelling and stuff .. It starts to become about them ..(Focus group 2)*

Unwillingness to confront difficult situations, and ignoring abuse from players, display lack of courage.

### *Respectful displays*

Important displays of respect for football players include a free flowing game, clear and specific justifications for decisions, answers to player questions and apologies for bad mistakes. Players frequently reported getting angry or frustrated when referees ignore or dismiss them, and that younger referees were often less likely to answer than older referees.

Player descriptions suggest good referees exercise discretion that respects players. They resist heavy sanctions, and find alternatives to stopping play and penalising, such as admonishing and warning players during ordinary stoppages, or playing advantage.

Providing justification and playing advantage were frequently mentioned as displays of respectful refereeing. Waving and calling 'play on' shows that the referee has seen the incident (acuity), but prefers the game to flow (respect for the game and players).

Players' consistently expressed a preference for a firm approach, but not a punitive discipline style. Punitive displays include frequent stopping and sanctions, heavy penalties for players swearing at themselves, and a range of sharp and confrontational gestures such as waving arms, and brandishing and shoving cards at players' faces.

Players generally felt that gestures should be proportional to the seriousness of the foul, but that shoving cards in player faces shows disrespect and is likely to inflame.

*If someone did that to you in the street it's going to end up in a fight .. it's going to make you angry (Focus group 1).*

Many players felt that use of aggression to assert control over the game is counterproductive.

*When they throw cards around it gives them nowhere to go.. Like that dickhead on the weekend. He tried to impose himself on you. 'I'm in control here'.. For the first couple of minutes when I came on as a sub he just abused me. 'If I see you doing that again you'll be off' Blah Blah .. 'It will be a penalty next time I see you touch him'.. it only makes me frustrated' (Focus group 1).*

Players prefer referees to be approachable, to talk normally without shouting and threats, and respond to reasonable questions.

*If the ref's calm the players are going to be calm too. Cause if the ref's like screaming at you, you're not going to talk back to them in a nice way .. Players scream back at him and get yellow cards .. It changes the game (Focus group 3).*

Displays of aggression and unwillingness to engage include ignoring, turning back on players, dismissing concerns, anger, verbal abuse, sharp gestures and threatening players.

## **Limitations of study**

The paper makes a broad assumption that player perceptions of good refereeing approximate 'fair' refereeing, in order to make conceptual links between the findings here and theories of fairness and justice. The validity of this assumption hasn't been tested or explored.

The sample were all male. Females have been found to perceive and communicate fairness differently to males (Cole, 2004). The adults in this sample were all full professionals. Consequently the perspective of the 'Sunday League' adult was not explored.

## **Discussion**

The findings offer new insights into the previously unexplored perceptions of football players, and suggest possible applications for organisational justice theories. In view of the limitations discussed above the findings should be treated as inconclusive, but the findings in relation to young referees lend validity to the study. Young referees are known to experience more abuse from players than older referees (Oke, 2005; Folkesson, 2002), even when they have similar levels of experience (Friman, 2004).

Players' concern for referees to be competent and dependable parallel organisational justice findings that employees perceive unfairness when there are deviations from expected procedure (van den Bos and Wilke, 1996). One implication is that referees should take care to present themselves as confident and professional (speech, attire, grooming, preparation) and show due attention to the proper formalities and procedures. Studies in fairness heuristics suggest that this is most important during early encounters, especially before the game when many formalities occur, as first impressions are likely to shape subsequent perceptions (Lind et al, 2001). The findings also suggest that perceptions of equal treatment for individuals and teams help promote perceptions of fairness. Use of first names by referees may suggest approachability, but unless the referee knows all the players' names it can cause players to think the referee is too familiar with one team, and undermine perceptions of consistency. This appears to be particularly important when there is a 'home' referee talking to the home players.

Part of the art of good refereeing is finding the right balance in decision making, communication and discipline. Referees should be aware that players prefer the game to be free-flowing, and often see frequent stoppages as an indication of poor or inexperienced refereeing. Players can engage in counterfactual thinking (Colquitt et al, 2005) which leads them to believe that a referee had player-friendly alternatives to stopping the play or issuing

harsh punishments, but chose not to use them. Players interviewed in this study so frequently mentioned problems of frequent stoppages that counterfactual thinking might be a fruitful model for improving understanding of player responses to referee decisions. Based on player comments here, referees would be well advised to master the practices of waving and calling 'advantage', and issuing warnings 'on the run', as displays of experience and respect for players.

The importance of respectful treatment has frequently been claimed in interactional fairness (Buttner, 2004; Tepper et al, 1998; Bies and Moag, 1986). Players expect referees to be firm and confident and to be able to assert themselves, but dislike arrogance and aggression. Players feel that they are entitled to answers to 'reasonable' questions, and explanation. Justification is well known to enhance perceptions of fairness in many situations (Bobocel and Zdanjuk, 2005) and clear and calm explanations were considered displays of respect to players.

Referees' widespread belief in the importance of a calm manner was supported by the findings here. Calm manner was thought to be a calming influence on the players, and a display of experience and confidence. Sitter found that a relaxed style correlates with informational justice (2003).

By contrast, displays of anger by referees appeared to have little or no place. Based on these interviews referees would be advised to avoid showing anger. Anger displays a range of qualities oppositional to notions of fairness and good refereeing including lack of confidence, inexperience, intimidation, fear, aggression, and inconsistency. Van Prooijen et al have argued that people are more sensitive to procedures that they evaluate as unfair than procedures they evaluate as fair (2006), suggesting that studying negative referee behaviours and displays, such as anger, might contribute very usefully to the training of referees.

The findings in this study may help to explain the high levels of abuse experienced by young players. The centrality of 'experience' to many of the qualities desired in referees, makes the display of youth a potentially very harmful heuristic (Lind et al, 2001). In addition to their real inexperience and smaller stature, young referees may be battling a range of negative player perceptions concerning their competence, dependability and respectfulness. The findings suggest that young referees should practice the display of a range of preparations, attitudes and behaviours consistent with perceptions of fairness. The ongoing problems the sport has with the abuse of referees and attrition among young people suggest this deserves fuller investigation.

In the emotion-charged environment of a football field there will always be accidents and mistakes that can be misinterpreted. And some players arrive malicious or intoxicated or vengeful. But this study suggests that football referees might benefit from a better understanding of their communicative displays, and that organisational justice theories can make a valuable contribution to their understanding.

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