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## 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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### 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 (Nikbaksh, 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

nature and ‘manipulative’ motives of people in interactions, although his intent was to illuminate trivial aspects of social relationships that explains how we sometimes act less as products of social systems, than as individuals who often are ‘working the system’ to their own ends. This is a useful way to frame and interpret player-official interactions in a competitive sport environment, as players and officials occupy different invested interests and seek diverging personal, social and role-related goals or outcomes.

Goffman proposed five basic ‘moves’ that occur within strategic interaction, of which three are discussed here to illustrate the emergence of strategic interaction in player-official encounters. These basic interpersonal ‘moves’ are seen to be used by people as observation games in the social world, or as Goffman calls them, ‘situated activity systems’, that reflect different stages, or moments, of impression observation and management in interaction. Interaction is defined as strategic in so far as one is an ‘observer’, or one who acquires information from another interactant (or ‘subject’), is interested to control and manage information in interactions that the other obtains. Goffman suggested that the ‘subject’ can achieve this end by means of a special capacity – “the capacity to inhibit and fabricate expression” (Goffman, 1969, p. 10). The first three moves that Goffman (1969) proposes are the ‘unwitting’, ‘naïve’, and ‘covering’ move. The unwitting move is when the subject, who is being observed, is un-oriented to the assessment an observer might be making of their behaviour. In other words, the observer acts “mindlessly relative to impression management” (Goffman, 1969, p. 12). He/she is unaware that their activities are being observed by others who seek information. Goffman describes that ‘the game’ begins when the person who creates an unwitting impression is aware to this and becomes concerned over the use of such information by an observer. Next, the naïve move involves an observer who draws information from another that they take to be an unwitting move, or someone who takes the information given off by someone at face value. Both these ‘moves’ involve an unaware participant and only become strategic interactions when information is used to influence another’s observation of self through impression management. The control move then refers to “the intentional effort of an informant to produce expressions that he thinks will improve his situation if they are gleaned by the observer” (Goffman, 1969, p. 18). A control move is said to occur when a subject attempts to influence the conclusions that the observer comes to by using information from interactions to shape and guide their appraisal of the situation and subsequent interactions and impression management.

The aim of this study was to explore players’ views of strategic interaction in player-sport official encounters. This type of information can assist officials to become more conscious of the types of people they often encounter in the competitive sport environment and better read players motivations and intentions to interact more skillfully. One aspect of the perceptual and decision making skills of sport officials involves the ability to detect deceptive intentions used by players to influence them (Dosseville, Laborde & Garncerzyk, 2013; Morris & Lewis, 2010). Officials can become better equipped to making informed evaluations of interaction situations and encounters with players and the consequences of their behavior on players. This increased emotional intelligence or empathy for understanding player motives and intentions can help officials become more flexible and adaptable to players and situations. It can help to inform officials to more appropriate communication approaches in relation game context or the encounter before them and, generally, to lead, respond to and direct players in more effective and impactful ways.

Therefore, three main research questions were asked in the present study:

- How does the unwitting move occur in player-official interactions?
- How does the naïve move occur in player-official interactions?
- How does the covering move occur in player-official interactions?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Study participants were 11 player captains (male=8, female=3;  $M_{age}=25.5$  years) with Australian national ( $n=2$ ), professional ( $n=3$ ), semi-professional (characterised by some financial compensation and greater competitive level

than amateur; n=3) and amateur (n=3) sport teams and clubs. Six different types of ‘interactor’ (MacMahon & Plessner, 2008) sport codes were represented including soccer, rugby union, rugby league, hockey, basketball and netball (i.e., sports where player-official interaction are high). A range of sports and competitive levels were chosen to reflect a greater variety of communication cultures and performance demands of participants. Player captains were purposefully selected as they interact frequently with officials about rule interpretation, game procedures and issues related to player behaviours. While it may be an assumption that player captains represent the ‘normal’ player, it was anticipated here that investigating ‘high interactors’, from ‘interactor’ sports, would more likely provide rich data (Patton, 2002). Player captains provide a third-person perspective (Davis, 1997) as this research strategy helps to explore what people might not want to reveal about themselves and interactions, but are open to divulging as a detached observer of such interactions.

Ethics approval was first gained from the principal researcher's university ethics committee. Contact with players was made through game and competition development managers who assisted in the recruitment of captains. Also, a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through existing participants who helped to provide access to other captains. Once interest to participate was established, captains were contacted and requested to be interviewed about their views and attitudes about officials and player-official game interactions. Captains were provided a letter of information and informed consent in advance to interviews to inform them about the extent of their participation and ensure confidentiality for themselves, and affiliated sport club.

## 2.2. Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in combination with video elicitation (Henry & Fetters, 2012). Video elicitation is a research method used in training health practitioners by stimulating thought and discussion about trainees' associated thoughts, beliefs, and emotions attached to their consultation experience with patients (Henry & Fetters, 2012). An adapted video elicitation technique was used in this research by using video vignettes of sport player-official interactions instead of actual video of the participant. Video vignettes provide a set of representative and rich, visual and audio examples of game interactions that capture important verbal and non-verbal cues, dialogue and different encounters and exchanges between players and officials. It offers as a way to trigger discussion about player-official interactions and allows for participants to bring their own language to explaining and expanding on familiar (and unfamiliar) observed stimulus. The use of video examples in semi-structured interviews provided a ‘thin-slicing’ approach to exploring communicative exchanges between players and officials.

## 2.3. Vignette selection

Video recordings of player-official interactions were sampled from soccer (n=2), rugby union (n=2), rugby league (n=2), basketball (n=2), netball (n=1) and hockey (n=2) and represented elite (e.g., FIFA World Cup, Olympics), professional (e.g., European Hockey League, English Premiership, Rugby Union) and amateur-levels. Recordings were collected from an online public video forum ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) based on particular study criteria, ranged in elapsed time from 3 and 15 seconds and randomly arranged so that all participants would watch the clips in the same order. Selection criteria for recordings of player-official interactions was informed by previous research in officiating communication and other fields/disciplines interested in the perspective of those who receive health (patient to nurse or doctor), educational (teacher to student) and professional services (e.g., citizen to police, customer to service provider). Interaction episodes depicted exchanges between officials and players including initial impressions or first encounters (Simmons, 2011; Thatcher, 2005), displays of varying officiating competence (clips showed a range of officiating styles, approaches and expression; Dosseville et al., 2012), decision communication (clips showed officials giving decision explanations or rule interpretations; Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2009) as well as instances of interpersonal conflict between players where officials intervene (Mascarenhas, O’Hare, & Plessner, 2006) or players arguing or being ‘difficult’ with officials (Faccenda, 2009; Simmons, 2009) or being ‘difficult’ (clips showed players infringing officials’ personal space, repeatedly

questioning or complaining; Baker et al., 2012; Shattell, 2004; Valazquez, Contri, Saura, & Blasco, 2006). A balance of types of interaction situations were ensured across video clips.

#### *2.4. Semi-structured interviews*

A semi-structured interview approach was used to (a) explore players' attitudes of player-official interaction and (b) to allow participants to reflect and recount on their own sport experience to expand and elaborate on these responses (Maxwell, 2002). Several issues related to interactions depicted in video vignettes were discussed with participants. Discussion topics included the nature of the interaction situation/occasion, possible antecedents and consequences of the encounter, unspoken goals and motivations of interactants, alternative courses of action, and interpersonal style or approaches used by players and officials. To provide consistency across interviews, an interview guide was developed using concepts of Goffman (1959, 1969) and other communication research (Burlison, 2007) and tailored to the presentation of video vignettes. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research were considered. All attempts were made to gather clear audio recordings of interviews, transcribe and recheck accuracy of transcriptions, and ensure safety of transcriptions and recordings of interviews. One of the benefits of using video elicitation interviewing is it helps to eliminate researcher bias and allows respondents to bring their own language to their responses to the interviewer's questioning (improving confirmability; Maxwell, 2002). In terms of credibility, the researcher/interviewer had previous qualitative interviewing and analysis training and been involved in similar qualitative officiating studies with international rugby union officials and officiating development managers-performance coaches.

#### *2.5. Data analysis*

Research questions were used to structure the organization and categorisation of data. Deductive analysis was conducted using Goffman's (1969) theoretical concepts of strategic interaction to interpret interview data (Patton, 2002). The researcher, first, gaining familiarity with the data by reading and rereading each interview transcript. Next, transcriptions were examined for words, phrases, descriptions, and examples that exhibited the 'unwitting', 'naive', and 'covering' move. These fragments were coded with a meaning label to represent their thematic content and then grouped and organized using an Excel spreadsheet. Themes that were consistent with previous research, and the focus of this study, were organised as narrative responses to the research questions. Quotes and examples are used to help communicate the findings.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to explore players' views of strategic interaction in player-official encounters. The findings provide new ways to understand the complexity of officiating communication and help officials to more skillfully monitor and interpret interactions with players. This study used Goffman's concepts of strategic interaction (1969) as an interpretive frame to explore the ways sport team captains describe others and their own dealings and encounters with officials. While there is some overlap among Goffman's concepts, each have been used to present findings separately to better explain findings.

#### *3.1. Unwitting move*

Part of what Goffman explained as 'expression games' in strategic interactions is the 'unwitting move'. It assumes that information is unwittingly given off by someone, but interpreted by another as information still concealed or yet to be revealed. This assumes one person in interaction is unaware that their activities are being observed by others who might seek information. Officials can be unwitting to the impressions they project and types of information that players develop of them. Being seen as overly friendly or excessively authoritarian can offer clues to players that influence the approach they take in subsequent interactions with officials:

*Picking up on an official's personality is important and knowing how to adapt to that. Some like to be the boss, and you make sure you let them feel that way. Others who are seen to be more friendly can kind of be manipulated in a way. I mean, we all know someone like that, right? You're careful about when to approach them, give a bit of praise here and there, because when something doesn't go your way and you do complain or question them, they'll usually be there for you and a call goes your way.*

Officials can be unwitting to the information that players draw about them, and ways they can use such information to influence officials' decisions to gain an advantage. Goffman (1969) saw 'the game' as not starting until the individual who impresses the unwitting move come to recognise or becomes aware of another's use of such information.

### 3.2. Naïve move

A naïve move refers to actions solely taken on face value of information given off by another's unwitting move. A naïve move is an unwitting move as judged by another person in interaction. Some players see officials as naïve observers of players' unwitting expression. One national representative player described that some officials can be overly sensitive to players, and naïve to unwitting expression:

*Sometimes you see people who are just frustrated with the way the game is going and say things to themselves, or others, that isn't necessarily aimed at the referee. I know some do it to get a dig out of the referee, but for the most part referees hear that and take it as a personal jab from a player. Sometimes it is just the way you react as a player and the ref shouldn't see it as an insult.*

As Goffman suggests, naïve moves involve an unsuspecting person within interactions. It is when a naïve move is taken as observed information and used to manage interactions differently does it emerge as strategic in its nature. Players can often rely on what they interpret as naïve expression to influence officials and their decisions:

*As a captain, I remember one referee and he refereed grand finals, and he would come up to me because I gave him a lot of praise. Then, I gave him one criticism and said, I think you need to work on this because you miss that call a lot and I found he was seeking my guidance after the game to find out how I thought he refereed different things like that. Then I could start putting more of an opinion across, and if he was listening to it, I don't know how much, but why he would come across to me to ask how he did kind of meant I had his ear.*

Both the unwitting and naïve move are part of the 'observation game' that Goffman describes and seen to contribute to strategic interactions only when such information is used to construct impressions that conceal such awareness.

### 3.3. Covering move

A covering move is one which improves a person's standing in 'the game', if accepted by another. Goffman (1969) saw the control move as 'not communication, but rather a set of tricky ways of sympathetically taking the other into consideration as someone who assesses the environment and might profitably be led into a wrong assessment' (p.13). Players can attempt to influence the conclusions that referees develop of them and consequences of their decisions. Players are aware that they are being observed by officials and manage impressions to represent themselves in certain ways to officials and even involve other teammates in coordinated communication:

*Players obviously think often that they have done nothing wrong. By acting bewildered and shocked to the referee, they [the player] are putting doubt in their mind.*



*I'll be standing here (points to himself) and you're the ref, and my half back is here (points beside him), and he'll go to me, "[Nickname], can you tell the ref 'this and that'..." you know what I mean!? It isn't to me, it is really to him [the official]. You know. So, then I'll go to the ref and he'll go 'yeah I heard him' bla bla. I reckon a lot of the time refs just ignore those people, they don't want to hear it, they've made a decision, they have to have a bit of a thick skin when their ref'ing.*

This camouflage or concealment in interactions can manifest covertly or through explicit expression. Players often react to game situations and officiating decisions in ways that draw attention or attempt to discredit an official's performance. This can manifest in different verbal and non-verbal expression:

*The umpire wasn't calling it, and this was a terrible thing for me to do, but I sort of yelled out, not directly, but I spoke aloud on purpose to another player, "Look at that goal attack, she's got a hold every time!" and then it went down to the other end the umpire called that after I said it.*

Players also recognise other players' strategic attempts to act in intimidating or threatening ways with officials. However players are also conscious about the advantage of not coming across to officials in these ways as it can influence the outcomes they seek:

*You gotta sort of pick your battles about what to talk to the referee about. You want to avoid being seen as a nuisance to the referee about something that really isn't important. You'll never really get them on your side. If there is an area of the game you are getting penalised for repeatedly, that might be where you take the time to go to the referee.*

*You have to be selective when you interact with the umpire, the times when you go up to them and ask what for. A lot of people just go up and complain about everything they think is wrong. In the grand scheme of things you don't want to hassle the referee, but some things should be heard.*

These examples of covering moves represent different forms of strategic impression management aimed to subtly, or deliberately influence officials.

#### 4. Conclusions

This research explored player views of strategic interaction in player-official encounters. The findings show that player captains identify particular strategic observation, expression and impression management that occur between players and officials. Types of strategic interaction reported by players in this study included using information about personality traits and characteristics of officials to inform adaptive ways of interacting, intermittent use of praise and criticism, displays of manufactured or performed expressions, and use of complaining and timed or selective questioning. These findings reveal other complexities in player-official interactions that would be useful to address and advance training and development in communication and player management in sport officials. If officials can be improved to develop a heightened sensitivity to players and interactions, it will assist them to better monitor, interpret and manage different sport situations they encounter. In policing, officer training addresses their attitudes and understanding of criminal behaviour as 'schema', or the set of beliefs or mindset that influence the organization and interpretation of social information that predict future behaviour (Blagden, 2012). Officials can develop more sophisticated schema about player behaviour and interaction, as communication and player management for officials is influenced by the ability to make sense of player body language (Slack et al., 2013) and trends or patterns in player behavior (Mascarenhas et al., 2005). Such training may focus on improving officials' observation and interpretive skills for social cues and reflexivity to different types of encounters with players in relation to game context (Cunningham et al., 2014). Future research should aim to explore different types of interactions or encounters between player and officials and trail action research approaches to study and develop new innovations for supporting in-game/on-field performance of officials in communication and skilled interaction.

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