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.
Sport officials’ strategies for managing interactions with players:

Face-work on the front-stage

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Highlights

- Official-player interactions are largely unspoken co-constructions
- Officials adapt and modify self-presentation according to context
- Officials assert and maintain face for themselves and players
- Officials have enduring styles to manage face protection for self and players
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.

*Keywords:* sport official, referee, communication, social interaction, allo-confrontation
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, & 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, 2017), 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-
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170 official encounters would help build on current perspectives of officiating communication that resemble a ‘one-way’ model of communication.

172 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.

192 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
SPORT OFFICIALS’ INTERACTIONS WITH PLAYERS 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 of communication that has been previously neglected in officiating research.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Fourteen Australian sport officials participated in the study, two from each of field hockey, soccer, rugby union, netball, Australian rules football, rugby league and basketball ('interactor' sports; MacMahon & Plessner, 2008). The sample included male (n=8) and female officials (n=6) with a mean age of 29.4 years (SD\text{age}=9.8). All had a minimum of three years experience as a sport official in their primary sport (with a maximum of 21 years; M\text{exp}=8.6 years; SD\text{exp}=5.2), and a minimum of two years at their current competitive level (max=10 years). MacMahon et al.'s (2014) officiating level definitions were used to recruit and classify participants as novice, development, sub-elite, and elite levels. Half of the participants were currently functioning at either novice (community, district club) or development (university, state competition) level, and half were officiating at sub-elite (amateur, semi-professional) or elite (national officiating panel with some international experience). Five of the seven sports sampled had at least one official from both levels: a) novice & development and (b) sub-elite & elite, with exception of field hockey and netball (Table 1 presents officiating participants’ demographic information).

Most officials had occupied other officiating roles prior to officiating (i.e., assistant referee, technical staff) and 11 officials had playing experience in their primary sport. Six officials said they had entered officiating as a volunteer. A diverse officiating sample was purposively sought who represented different interactor sports, sex, age and experience-level, and geographical locations in Australia. This was intended to help understand general
interpersonal demands of officiating work pervasive to different officiating experiences and sport cultures.

**Table 1**

Participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Years of officiating experience</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sub-elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Field hockey</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Rugby union</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Netball</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rugby league</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rugby union</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sub-elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I10</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rugby league</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Netball</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Field hockey</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sub-elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australian rules football</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Australian rules football</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sub-elite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some officials were recruited based on their accessibility to the researcher’s home institution as a convenience sampling approach. These officials were mostly novice level officials from soccer, rugby union, basketball and netball. In some cases, direct contact was made with officials through participation requests forwarded within officiating associations, whilst in other cases, participants assisted researchers by facilitating contact with other officials through snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Officials were contacted by email or telephone to request participation and were forwarded a letter of information on the details of the research. The remainder of officiating participants were recruited from a national officiating training group of talent identified, advancing officials from different ‘interactor’ sports.

Participation was requested prior to their involvement in a program workshop at the Australian Institute for Sport (Canberra, New South Wales) in November 2014. Program coordinators
provided access to officials, but ultimately it was the choice of the officiating scholars to participate. All participants were advised that they could choose either to participate or not and this would not influence their current status in the program or their sport organisation. All measures were taken by the researcher to ensure confidentiality with a closely-engaged officiating group (interviews were conducted privately at different times scholars were available during the workshop).

2.2 Data collection

A video elicitation method (e.g., Heath, Luff, & Svensson, 2007; Henry & Fetters, 2012) using an allo-confrontation interviewing approach (Mollo & Falzon, 2004) was used. Video elicitation as a qualitative research technique has been used in training health practitioners, by stimulating trainees’ thoughts and facilitating discussion about practitioners’ appraisals, beliefs, and emotions attached to their consultation experience with patients (Henry & Fetters, 2012). Video elicitation enabled investigation of social or interactional elements of clinical interactions that might not be identified using direct observation or interviews alone. Officiating researchers have employed similar strategies where sport officials reflect on recordings of other officials’ performance (see Hancock & Ste-Marie, 2014). A parallel approach can be found in allo-confrontation that involves research participants verbalising their observations of video-recordings showing another individual performing an activity they practice (Mollo & Falzon, 2004). Mollo and Falzon (2004) suggest that allo-confrontation can improve mental representation of self and one’s own practice. This is said to be a result of participants being kept at a distance from their own activity and an increased awareness to other forms of knowledge concerning one’s practice in relation to another. A video elicitation method using an allo-confrontation interviewing approach helped to provide a stimulus for officials’ to reflect on the perceived intentions of other officials’ interaction practices and own previous officiating
experiences in interactions. Also, whilst conventional allo-confrontation studies use recordings
of non-participants performing the exact practice, this study presented recordings of player-official interactions from their own sport and different ‘interactor’ sports in order to access officials’ opinions from a range of ‘interactor’ sports. It was acknowledged that officials’ were ‘familiar’ with the sports shown in the video recordings, but perhaps not particularly ‘knowledgeable’ of the sport-specific dynamics predicting interactions.

This approach was chosen for several reasons. First, allo-confrontation helps to counteract response bias that might come from first person reporting. That is, it can help prevent officials from reporting only the thoughts they would prefer the researcher to hear. Using a third-party approach, allo-confrontation is intended to reveal participants’ interpretations and representations as projections onto the interactions of others (to capture officials’ perceived intentions of other officials’ interaction practices), but then it could also be personalised to provide more richness to interview responses. Second, it allows for a larger sample of officials to comment on game interactions, with consistency in the presentation of stimuli. Video vignettes provide examples of game interactions that capture audio and video of verbal and non-verbal cues and dialogue in different player-official encounters and exchanges. Finally, the use of non-participant video examples in semi-structured interviews used a ‘thin-slicing’ approach to explore communicative exchanges between players and officials. Thin-slicing is thought to encourage study participants to evaluate stimuli in a more intuitive manner (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

2.3 Video vignette selection

One set of recordings of interaction situations (or episodes) between officials and players was used with all participants. Recordings of vignettes included at least 2-3 situations from soccer, field hockey, netball, basketball, rugby union, rugby league and ranged in length from 3
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to 15 seconds. Vignettes were randomly arranged, but all participants watched the clips in the same order. Video recordings of player-official interactions from novice (community/club/district), development (state, amateur) and professional sport or sub-elit/elite matches (e.g., Australian Netball League; Euro Hockey League, English Premiership Football, Olympics, International Rugby Union, FIFA World Cup) were presented to participants during interviews. Recordings were mostly collected from an online public video forum (www.youtube.com) or edited from other retrieved game recordings provided by sport associations. Twenty vignettes were used in all, with 15 shorter vignettes ranging from 3-15 seconds, and 5 vignettes ranging from 1-2 minutes (total approximate running time = 7 minutes). Recordings (or vignettes) of player-sport official interactions were presented reflexively within semi-structured interviews that addressed a range of question categories (discussed in next section). All interviewees viewed interactions from their own sport and were generally familiar with other sports used in the vignettes (i.e., they had watched or played the sport and were aware of basic rule structures).

Selection criteria for the interactions used as video stimuli were informed by concepts and communication topics from previous officiating research and literature. Examples of player-official interpersonal exchanges included initial encounters and impression formation (e.g., players and officials shaking hands and other first meetings prior to the game; Dosseville et al., 2014; Simmons, 2011; Thatcher, 2005); decision communication (e.g., officials conveying decisions using whistle/hand signals/cards FLAGS, giving rule explanations; Mellick et al., 2005; Simmons, 2010); impression cues and acts of officiating competence (e.g., displays of politeness or empathy; anger and accelerated speech; calmness and paced speech; and self-confidence and firmness with players; Dosseville et al., 2014; Simmons, 2011); preventive communication (e.g., brief, in-game official communication with players to direct play or deter rule infringement;
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Mascarenhas et al., 2005); conflict directed towards officials or between players leading to official intervention (MacMahon et al., 2014; Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Rix-Lièvre & Genebrier, 2011), and players arguing or questioning officials (e.g., players seeking decision interpretation, repeatedly questioning officials, or infringing officials’ personal space; Faccenda et al., 2009; Simmons, 2006). Two researchers reflected on each video to reach consensus on a balance of interactions. The research intentionally avoided any bias in the presentation of ‘anti-social’ player behaviour by showing both positive and negative communication. This procedure aimed to highlight most common occurrences of officiating interactions based on research evidence as a means to provide a visual stimulus for discussion about relational and interactional characteristics of officiating work.

2.4 Interviews

An interview schedule was developed, based on recommendations by Henry and Fetters (2012) for conceptualising video elicitation interviews. Three progressive question categories were established across all interviews. First, interview questioning aimed to elicit participants’ definitions about communication and interaction by using thin-slices of player-official interaction recordings; second, questions were directed to elicit participants’ own values and attitudes about interacting (with players); and finally, probing perceptions of context and behaviour, based on video examples and relating to participants’ own experiences. This structure to the interview schedule was kept consistent across all interviews. The researchers were sensitive to bias, so video recordings used in stimulus portions of elicitation interviews were presented by the interviewer in a neutral, non-leading manner. Questioning within interviews were posed in ways that stimulated discussion about game interactions generally, officials’ communication motivations with players and ways they view officials and themselves and adjust their communication to different situations. For example, whilst viewing the video the officials
would be asked “what is the official trying to achieve in this interaction, considering the
situation?”, or “what are your impressions of the official’s actions with this player to this
point?”, or “how have the player and official in this situation adjusted their communication to
one another?”. Example questioning without presentation of video recordings included “what are
officials seeking to accomplish in interactions around decisions with players?” and “what are
some common responses of players to different officiating styles?” and “are there certain types
of communication you think are more or less effective with certain players?”. Interview
questioning shifted between video recordings as the source of questioning and the officials’
previous experiences in interactions with players.

2.5 Data analysis

Social constructionism and constructivist paradigms provided the overarching research
assumptions that guided the design and methods used here to understand player-sport official
interactions. The study’s research questions were used to provide overall structure for the
organisation and categorisation of data (i.e., what are officials’ face concerns and motivations
and face-work orientations?). Data analysis was achieved with a multiple-phase, data-verification
process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involved, first, the lead researcher engaging in a process of
indwelling (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) by reading and re-reading each interview transcript to
enhance familiarity with the data. Next, a first-level, open coding of interview verbalisations was
conducted. This involved raw interview fragments (words, phrases, descriptions and examples)
concerning viewed recordings of player-official interactions and officials’ personal experiences
in interactions with players being given units of abstract meaning. Next, dramaturgical theory
and other face concepts were used as the interpretive frame for analysing open coding of
officials’ responses. This second level of data processing involved a theoretical analysis to
situate the data within Goffman's writings and other contemporary face theorists that enabled a
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shift from concrete description to abstraction. The analytic framework used to interpret and guide reporting of interview data was led by theoretical explanations for the concepts of front-stage communication (represented by ‘social presentation’, ‘impression management’, ‘role performance’, and interaction ‘setting’; Goffman, 1959), face needs and interests in interactions (represented by ‘self-worth’, ‘self-image’, respect’, ‘deference’, and ‘pride, dignity, and honour’; Goffman, 1967), face-work orientations and negotiation (represented by ‘defensive’ and ‘protective’ face-work orientations; Goffman, 1967) including other face concepts such as ‘relational separateness and connectedness’ (Arundale, 2010) and ‘politeness’ (Brown & Livingston, 1987). Segmentation and charting of meaning units as answers to each research question were then grouped, thematised, and discussed as narrative responses (Patton, 2015) and supported by evidence from previous research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quotes and examples from interviews were used to help communicate the findings. This multi-level, theoretically-based inductive approach helped to reveal interaction subjectivities between players and officials (from officials’ viewpoint), and also conceptual structures of face concepts under study.

2.6 Trustworthiness

The researchers used established procedures for enhancing the trustworthiness of the study and for gathering qualitative data (Patton, 2015). Given our philosophical underpinnings, we were mindful that the findings, discussion, and conclusions provided in this research were co-constructed (i.e., they stem from the relationship formed between the lead researcher and the participants). Three pilot interviews were conducted with ‘novice’ and ‘development’ officials (MacMahon et al., 2014) to help first refine the interview guide and gain familiarity with general participant responses. Pilot and study interview recordings and transcriptions were checked and verified for transcription accuracy. Care was taken to ensure that interviews were conducted and
analysed systematically, while attending to the application of theoretical concepts new to
officiating research.

The lead researcher conducted field interviews and was the most immersed in the
collected data. However, a systematic consensus analysis occurred with co-authors (established
experts in officiating communication and performance psychology) to improve the credibility
and trustworthiness of primary analysis. Co-authors were theoretically sensitised to officiating
interactions and field of officiating research, including qualitative processes. Co-authors met
collectively on fortnightly during data collection and analysis to a) reflect on transcripts and
refine interview questioning, b) reflect and organise first order meaning units generated by the
lead researcher’s analysis and thematise meaning clusters and, c) review and manage
participants’ reflections on the research’s initial findings (Smith & McGannon, 2017) to finalise
data themes and synthesis of findings. Member-checking procedures (Patton, 2015) were
undertaken to help ensure the accuracy of the findings. Smith and McGannon (2017) note the
limitations of exclusively relying on member checking in sport and exercise psychology studies
as a benchmark for verification and rigour. In line with these critiques, the researchers ensured
an involved process of member reflection occurred as a ‘practical opportunity to acknowledge
and/or explore with participants the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing’
(Smith & McGannon, 2017, p. 8). Officiating participants were emailed descriptions of
analytical themes along with example excerpts of officials’ interview verbalisations and asked to
alter or add to the findings based on their sport experience. Five officials responded with
reflections which mainly concerned additional examples to the first theme ‘anticipating players
reactions and modifying presentation of self’ (see findings and discussion), while another five
officials confirmed the accuracy of interaction themes without reflections, and four officials did
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not respond. Researchers ensured an involved process and dialogue with participants in order to explore contradictions in knowledge between the officials and researchers’ analysis.

3. Findings and discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore sport officials’ identity concerns and motivations and ways they adapt and accommodate ‘face’ in interactions with players. Within the real world nature of interactions, the features of player-sport official exchanges that are explained in the following sections occur contiguously and in ways that are imbricated. However, for clarity of communication, the findings are divided into three sections based on the distinct themes that emerged from this study concerning ways that officials manage face communication in different ‘interactor’ sports by: (a) anticipating players’ reactions and modifying presentation of self; (b) asserting and preserving officials’ face, and (c) giving and restoring players’ face. Each theme is discussed using sport officials’ interview responses, face theory provided by Goffman (1957; 1967) and other interactionist contemporaries (Arundale, 2012; Brown & Livingston, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 2009).

3.1 Anticipating players’ reactions and modifying presentation of self

Most officials said it is important to enact diverse ‘front-stage’ self-presentation during interactions with players to influence their perception of the officials’ ability to manage game activities, judge appropriately, and decide accurately. Officials actively anticipate and make sense of situations (based on previous experience and game context) to inform self-presentational needs and responses to players. This resembled a type of information seeking practice as some officials expressed a motivation to appraise and understand players’ circumstances and reactions to choose appropriate communication with players:

It is often a much more difficult job to keep a player in the game – to empathise and anticipate their complaint and show that you are on their side, not against them. (I3)
If they are coming at you, you have to understand why, why are they coming at you. ‘Have I done the wrong thing?’ and then ‘How do I get out of it?’ (I12)

Burleson (2007) suggests that more skilled communication involves attuning to others’ emotional states and thought patterns associated with certain contexts (akin to an ‘emotional intelligence’; Nikbakhsh et al., 2013). As a consequence of interpreting context and player behaviour, officials said they in turn manage the intensity of verbal tone, body language and other emotional displays to signal warnings or safety concern (‘just even showing disappointment to them [the player] through your facial expressions if they are pushing the line’; I10), breaches of values/ethos of the game (‘when they are disrespecting the game, that can’t happen, that’s when you need to be direct and firm with them; I3), and awareness and understanding of players’ circumstances (‘just even showing a bit of empathy to the player, like ‘You’re working hard, I saw what they [opposing players] are doing, I’m going to deal with it’; I7). Such personalised and contextual interactional displays express discreet messages tailored to the situation, with some personal examples and reflections on intentions of officials viewed in video vignettes that included speed of gestures (e.g., slow hand movements (I2); low hands/open palms (I8); eye signaling (I5; I9); or facial expressions of feigned anger (I4, I10), and familiarity or affiliation (I2, I9). Adaptive interactions used in conflict situations with players were said to benefit from monitoring one’s own emotional responses and speaking slowly (I4, I8); appearing calm (I2, I10); being in-control of oneself (I2, I4); and use of concise and paced phrasing (I5).

One official explained underlying goals of subtle behaviour signals without verbalisations used with players to help orientate expectation and congruency:

Even if it is just to make a point and go like [nodding movement] with your head or some eye contact. Just little messages to let them know how they are playing and how they
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could, potentially cause an injury, because you want that advantage and consistency, or fluency to the game and people are happy. (I2)

Part of this enactment of front-stage interactions in social settings involves constructing a certain discourse or stance that contributes to, as Goffman (1959) terms, ‘working consensus’ (an implicit agreement between people to temporarily avoid conflict in order to carry out their business). Sport coaches are found to negotiate a ‘backstage’ stance that is communicated through ‘front-stage’ performative actions to influence ways leadership identities are constructed and conveyed to sport team athletes (Wilson, 2013). Vine (2017) showed how rugby referees and players jointly achieve cooperative and antagonistic interactions through contextually shared, embodied practices. Some officials said they explicitly improvise and respond to personality traits of players and interpretation of the needs of situations through strategic use of face patterns. One field hockey umpire with international experience emphasised the importance of adapting communication style in interactions to convey certain situated identity based on the player and context:

I don’t think you can always just rely on one style to referee. There are so many different types of players and situations you have to deal with, it just doesn’t make sense. Some refs at our national competitions often have their ‘go-to’ way of refereeing that gets them through most games, but not every game where they can get into problems. Sometimes you have to be the firm police officer, the next the friendly and familiar guy, and in the next situation the teacher to help the players understand what they did wrong. It is different approaches for different situations. (I4)

Displaying awareness and vigilance to players is one social act that contributes to players’ ‘interpretings’ of face affiliation and certainty (Arundale, 2010) about officials because it communicates reliability, role commitment and focus. Players can however develop
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dysfunctional ‘interpretations’ from relational cues of face that can motivate players to interact differently with officials. One official emphasised it is ‘important to not appear overreactive or flustered in front of players’ (I7) as some players can use such information to choose different interpersonal approaches with officials. Showing too much openness can cause players to perceive opportunity to manipulate. For example, players are sometimes motivated to influence decisions through strategic or manipulative approaches if officials are perceived as overly-friendly (Cunningham, Simmons, Mascarenhas, & Redhead, 2015).

This first theme refers to situated, adaptive front-stage self-presentation by officials that occur as a response to players’ behaviours and officials’ monitoring and anticipation practices. Communicative displays with players in interactions aim to project context-appropriate identity and messages that align with officiating goals and reactions to players’ behaviours towards officials. Officials’ presentation of self thus derives from a deliberate activity of interpreting player responses towards officials (and game values) and front-stage communications perceived to affirm more context-specific function and purpose.

3.2 Asserting and preserving officials’ face

Another way sport officials adapt or accommodate to players is through face-work practices that protect or affirm the officials’ face. Officials are motivated to avoid ‘face loss’ and actively guard against compromising their authority, but similarly seek to avoid being seen in interactions as over-authoritative (I6, I11) or over-controlling (I1, I4, I10). Many officials said they are motivated to maintain preferred impressions in the minds of players and others and appear approachable (I3, I10) and respectful (I2, I4, I8) in interactions. Identity negotiation processes are inevitable features of social interactions and influenced by a tension between behavioural confirmation and self-verification (Hargie, 2011). One official emphasised this
tension by explaining their interest to preserve their face during interactions with players whilst projecting outward demonstrations of control of game activities to others:

Sometimes you need to stop everything. Slow it all down, and make sure others see you are doing that. You might be just giving a regular yellow [card] out, but people see that the player was provoked. Like, ‘Okay, I’ve dealt with you and now I am dealing with this guy’. The crowd needs to see that and the players need to go, ‘Okay he didn’t just send our guy off because he punched him, he actually saw what happened and is stamping that by making a point here.’ (I1)

Players’ disagreements with officials’ interpretations or decisions can sometimes breed conflict or questioning of officials. Goffman (1967) describes defensive face-work as actions used by an individual to circumvent the loss of face that might potentially discredit the identity one is attempting to maintain. Officials in this study said that face-testing interactions frequently occur with players who are aggressive (‘at times they’re [players] right in your face, angry, and in your personal bubble’; I3) or emotional (‘can be the emotional signs, they are out of control, just not thinking straight, constant outbursts to any decision you make; I5), while other players are said to be more persistent (‘that type of constant approaching you and asking questions’; I1) and planned (‘even just picking their moments when to appeal; I11) in their interactions with officials. One type of defensive face-work is ‘avoidance processes’, such as avoiding situations in which a person’s face is likely to be threatened or wronged (Ting-Toomey, 2009). Whilst officials should avoid not listening to players or addressing questions (MacMahon et al., 2014), avoidance can be a subtle and less assertive communication style to influence players’ attitudes and behaviour in conflict situations (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Officials often described using avoidance tactics to help preserve their credibility in interactions and secure broader officiating
goals, particularly with players who seek out unnecessary interactions with officials to challenge or question:

A tool I sometimes use is physically guiding players away from areas. Say you are in the middle of the court and a player approaches you. If you walk towards their bench, they’ll follow, because they want to talk to you. Almost without them even knowing, you can walk them back to the bench. Because they stand in the middle of the court and yell at you while everyone sees it or follow you around because they want to have a conversation. (I8)

When a feature of the ‘working consensus’ (Goffman, 1959) is disrupted on the front-stage by an unexpected situation, an erroneous decision, player transgression, or perceived moral imbalance, officials aim to restore the desired expressive order and flow of events through deliberate face-work and self-supporting actions. One official said that while it is important to be relaxed, flexible and composed with players, officials must also be forward and firm to convey the message that ‘This stops now’ (I7). An ‘approach’ motivation involves asserting face presentations with players to enhance a preferred image for the official:

There might be a player who is going off, or a player who is nattering just following you around in your ear, and you know eventually you have to say, ‘We need some distance here. I need you to go play the game and not keep engaging me’. Ultimately, if they continue, it starts to discredit what you are trying to do. (I4)

People can also engage in approach-based face-work as a means of affirming and supporting individuals’ relational needs of face (Rickheit, Strohner, & Vorwerg, 2008). Showing accountability to players is one type of defensive face-work process that officials frequently identified to have face restorative intentions. Examples given by officials included admission of errors to less-impactful game decisions, admitting limited sight lines to make decisions, or lack
of critical information to make accurate judgements. In situations where people are reproached, Goffman (1967) suggests ‘accounting’ is used that involves excuses or attempts to explain one’s behaviour to others (Goffman, 1967). Such face-work helps to avoid or reduce criticism that has an impact on the face of others in response to accounts (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). One official emphasised the importance of not covering up obvious errors as this can further compromise perceived authenticity of officials, but knowing \textit{when} to show accountability to send subtle messages to players:

I notice a lot of players in our competitions attack other referees if they believe they made a blatantly bad decision, but don’t fess up to it. You obviously can’t do it all the time, although it does help build rapport with players if you are showing your cards a little bit by letting them know when you’ve missed something or got it wrong’ (I1).

Where the first theme related to officials’ self-presentation adaptations to context, the second theme concerns officials’ self-presentation which is more enduring and consistent across context and interactions. Officials aim to protect or assert the projection of their image to players in interactions through face-work to order to maintain functional goals and general identity concerns of officiating. Officials in this study generally said this is achieved through approach and avoidance strategies.

3.3 \textit{Giving and restoring players’ face}

A third way sport officials adapt or accommodate interactions to players is through face-work that gives and corrects players’ face. This was indicated in officials’ responses through a variety of communication tactics and approaches they use such as emphasising player autonomy (e.g., allowing players to express themselves to a point), being respectful, actively listening to players, providing explanations, and showing favorable personality traits (e.g., avoid being dismissive to players). Sometime face-work in social interactions can help to safeguard the
identities of others through protective orientations (Goffman, 1967). If a particular threat to anothers’ face cannot be avoided, the use of corrective processes by interactants can help restore the expressive order and flow of events. Officials said ignoring players’ face concerns is unhelpful to relations with players (i.e., not respecting players’ ‘voice’) and over-emphasises role positions, making players feel subordinate to officials:

Somebody was suddenly looking out for her [player] interests, while the whole game she perceived we weren’t, that I was ‘targeting’ her. I spoke to her on the run and said I was watching how they [the other players] were frustrating her, all of a sudden somebody had actually said to her, ‘I saw that, and I’m going to deal with it, or I am dealing with it’.

But, that is important; you’ve got to get the perception over those little things. (I4)

Face in interaction also makes salient the benefit of enhancing perceptions of respect for players in communication. Teachers who initiate attentive face-work when giving instructional feedback to students are found to reinforce students’ feelings of approval and admiration that contribute to their learning and academic performance (Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008).

Many officials said showing respect to players is an instrumental part of managing game atmosphere and acceptance in officials, and from participants’ comments in this study about officials’ interaction intentions in video vignettes, other officials can sometimes limit their outward expressions of respect to players:

Being polite with players goes a long way, at least I’ve found. Some players don’t expect it. Maybe because they’ve had an official who wasn’t like that with them before and they think we are all the same. Like the basketball referee there [referring to video vignette example] who was talking over the player, when it seemed like all the guy wanted was a few quick words to understand why his teammate had the call against him. (I8)
Providing rule and decision explanations were said to aid in emotional management of players, but also help to build a shared understanding about the game events. Teachers use explaining as a way to attempt to resolve conflict through compromising or integrating viewpoints of students (Wragg & Brown, 2001) and explaining is used by managers to soften employee complaints and feelings of unjust treatment (Trosborg & Shaw, 2017). Officials said that giving explanations conveys accountability, transparency and builds player acceptance in officials. One experienced basketball official said ‘explanations can be ineffective with players if officials have not built respect and trust early on with players’ (I4), while other officials described how explanations aid in enhancing attitudes of respect within interactions:

I like to talk to the players and make sure they understand my decisions, so that we are both like, ‘Yep right, we are both on the same page now.’ You may disagree with it, I’ve explained it to you, you’ve accepted that and it is fine. Now, we are moving away from that’. To me, that is building that respect. (I11)

Listening to players and accommodating relational preferences of players in encounters contributes to certainty and connectedness in face exchanges (Arundale, 2010) with officials. Officials will listen to players (up to a point and where it seems reasonable to do so), believing that players benefit from being heard and need opportunities for cathartic responses. Some officials recognise that players can become increasingly frustrated and officials need to allow players to ‘get it off their chest’ (I2, I14). The ‘voice effect’ proposes if people are given an opportunity to share their opinion or perspective in decision-making processes, they feel more motivated and become more satisfied and accepting of leadership (Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1996). Some ‘interactor’ sports encourage a high frequency of interactions between team captains and match officials and less between other players and the officials. Some captains were
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said to collaborate with officials while others contribute to greater disruption to game interactions based on the desirability of closedness or openness (Arundale, 2010):

A lot of communication should be channeled through the player captains. The captain might approach to just get a particular point across. I am always making a point to be receptive to what the player is trying to say because often it will be valid. (I7)

More experienced officials said greater familiarity with players improves understanding and awareness of boundaries in interactions. This included a perceived freedom to experiment with a greater range of emotions in exchanges, including humour, sarcasm and feigned anger. Familiarity with players reduces the need to use impression management in interaction, while less familiarity requires more procedural communication and other ‘tool-box’ skills:

There is the player you totally react to, you’ve never seen in your life, and you use the tools available to you. It might be a calm demeanour. Use a talk on the run, a word here or there to break the ice. I will definitely try and say some things here or there that often get an interaction that breaks the ice really well, so to get their confidence in you. (I12)

Humour or repartee was said to convey favorable personal qualities and demonstrates openness to players, which can help in circumventing negative emotional responses in situations of conflict. Professional European football referees say they use humour and ‘banter’ with players that suggests an approachability (Slack et al., 2013). Including the use of humor, many officials said it is important to use collaborative approaches to build a progressive attitude of acceptance toward officials that can have substantial impact on the quality of later game activities:

If you sort of don’t build these relationships, and build that rapport and ‘chains of agreement’, then inevitably it is going to build up, the heat is going to build up, and once
it starts building with one or two players it spreads so quickly, and everyone else is going
to get heated and by that point there is not even much you can do. (I2)

While the first two themes concerned official-centered self-presentations and face
adaptations in interactions, the third theme concentrated on officials’ motivations concerning
accommodation of perceived face concerns of players. Officials use a range of interaction tactics
to correct perceptions of unjust treatment, communicate respectfulness (through politeness and
explanation giving) or show favourable personality traits (i.e., approachability), and shift
interaction tone and focus (through humour or affiliative interaction behaviours). These
approaches accord with protective face-work orientations (Goffman, 1967) that emphasise
preservation and autonomy for others within interactive exchanges.

4. Conclusions

This study contributes new knowledge concerning ways that sport officials purposefully
manage their interactions with players. It shows that officials adapt and modify identity and
messages appropriately for different players and contexts, and that they also use enduring
strategies for both projecting and presenting themselves, and preserving the face of players
(Goffman, 1957; 1967). Officials from this study articulated three distinct, but inter-linked, ways
they manage face communication with players: through anticipating players reactions and
modifying presentation of self, asserting and preserving the officials’ face, and giving and
restoring players’ face. The complex micro-organising features of face (Goffman, 1967) in
player-official interactions are guided by officials’ deliberate and subtle face-work orientations
used to manage perceptions of fairness, authority and control.

Constructivist viewpoints of skilled communication emphasise importance in ways
personal and social identities are presented and maintained (Burleson, 2007). Interactions with
players are simultaneously opportunities to contribute towards identity projections and to
manage multiple goal ends that characterise the ecological and dynamic nature of officiating. The findings highlight the complexity and multi-functionality of officiating interactions and communication messages that are needed to meet the nuanced and changing objectives of officiating work in ‘interactor’ sports (MacMahon et al., 2014). This research improves conceptualisations of officiating communication by integrating constructivist and dramaturgical sociology concepts to account for context in communication and importance of adaptive approaches to interactions.

Several study limitations should be acknowledged. The allo-confrontation approach to video elicitation used in this study consequently led to participants interpreting other sport officials’ communication intent and meaning. This approach was used as it is suggested to help improve participants’ awareness to other types of representations of a practice, however deeper insights into cognitive processes in interaction might be achieved using auto-confrontation (where participants study their own activity) (Mollo & Falzon, 2004). Another limitation was that officials were not only presented video stimuli of officials interacting within their sport, but also examples from other ‘interactor’ sports. This could potentially lead to participants speculating on the underlying rationale or purpose of interactions in sports they are familiar with, but may not have sufficient interaction knowledge about. Whilst this could potentially limit the depth of officials’ introspection about face exchange, the method allowed a diverse range of sports officials to be involved and stimulate personal accounts of their own officiating experiences to give initial evidence for the emergence of face concerns and orientations in interactions.

There exist many future research opportunities to study interaction and face in officiating communication. Further understanding about ways communication context are co-constructed with players might consider investigating player and officials’ social activity, concurrently (for
examples see Rix-Lièvre et al., 2015; Vine, 2017). Such an approach might study how negotiated identities in interactions are linked to ways players and officials coordinate their activities to achieve accordance or discordance. Also, conversational analysis is often used by linguistic and pragmatic researchers to study face and holds promise as a way to explore dynamics in interaction initiation and turn-taking. In some sports, player captains occupy a team role that requires them to engage more frequently with officials where analysis of conversation meaning and influence across the match could be attempted. Cultural norms can predict the dominance or desire for particular types of face in player-official interactions. Eastern and Western cultures are known to have different expectations of authority and preferences concerning harmony and individualism (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003) and power-distance (Merkin, 2006). Cultural competencies important to officiating situations where players from varying cultures are involved could be another area of study. Similarly, future research could be designed to explore differences in face exchange across sport cultures and types. Finally, exploring face-work exchanges between coaches and officials can help to better understand how officials deal with coaches to orientate more productive and cooperative discourse.

5. Practical perspectives

Sport bodies recognise the importance of interactions with players, but they have been frustrated by their inability to design interaction training for sport officials (Simmons & Cunningham, 2013). Officials need to understand players’ perspectives in order to develop effective working relationships. This comes from not only understanding what they are saying, but also how they are saying it which will provide a more complete picture of their standpoint. Therefore, officials need sophisticated social assessments of context and players in order to effectively manage the game. A new approach that integrates the findings here with the current evidence base might be to:
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• Begin with a focus on presenting preferred personal qualities (e.g., approachability, openness, empathy) and refining ‘one way’ communication skills (e.g., confidence, account/explanation giving).

• Create exercises to help officials to read players emotions and unspoken communications (Cunningham et al., 2014).

• Develop a framework for structured discussions to help officials reflect upon their own interactions through self-review (auto-confrontation), and observation of other officials’ interaction practices (allo-confrontation; Mollo & Falzon, 2004).

Interaction improvement exercises might encompass scenario building and role-play, with active listening and conflict management training. Low-cost technology, such as microphones and body-head cameras (POV) could be used to enhance reflection and also to review player interactions. Assessment should emphasise officials’ abilities in self reflection, monitoring social cues in players, and adapting for interactions.

References


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