

REFEREE COMMUNICATION MITIGATES PLAYER UNCERTAINTY ABOUT DECISION CORRECTNESS

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Football referees know that communication influences player reactions to decisions, but little scientific work has been done to identify influential behaviors and styles. Even less is known about the relative influence of communicative displays across cultures.

The 'fair process effect' says that people react more positively when they feel they have been treated fairly and more negatively when they feel they have been treated unfairly. Importantly, being treated fairly is 'often how (in terms of process and interpersonal style) the outcome is received rather than what is received' (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003, p253). Research has found that if people perceive procedural fairness, but are uncertain about outcome fairness, they will substitute information about the more certain mode (procedure) to generate a belief about the less certain mode (outcome) (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). This project sought to compare players' reactions to referee displays of anger, calm and explanation when communicating a decision about which players were uncertain.

The project used a between-subjects experimental design. Players from Australia, Spain, Malaysia, UK and Singapore ($n=1861$) responded to one of 8 match-scene vignettes randomly assigned in an online questionnaire format. The scene evoked uncertainty about a referee decision awarded against the player. Apart from systematic variation of the referee communication style, the incident was the same.

Ratings of the referee and correctness of the decision were significantly ($p<0.05$) higher when the decision was explained than when not explained in all countries except Malaysia. Ratings of the referee were significantly ($p<0.05$) higher when the decision was communicated calmly than when the decision was communicated angrily in all countries except Singapore. In Malaysia and the UK ratings of the correctness of the decision were significantly ($p<0.05$) higher when the decision was communicated calmly.

The results indicate that players substitute communicative procedural and interactional displays to form perceptions of the fairness of the referee and the correctness of the decision, although the influence of communicative displays differs across cultures. The findings underscore the importance of effective procedural and interpersonal communication by referees because they mitigate player uncertainty about decisions and enhance perceptions of fairness and correctness.