Fair play or foul? World Cup sportsmanship under scrutiny at Birmingham

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Sports psychologists at the University of Birmingham are investigating how factors such as motivation can influence how likely a football player is to adopt antisocial behaviour in their quest for victory in contests such as the World Cup.

Which of the England players is most likely to commit a foul, square up to a referee, or verbally intimidate their opposite number in the 2010 championship? Might it be possible to predict who in Fabio Capello's 23-strong squad will adopt dirty tactics on South Africa's pitches in the coming weeks, and who will not?

'Frequency of antisocial behaviour is often increased in sport compared to other life contexts, especially when the stakes are high,' explains Dr Ian Boardley, lecturer in Sport Psychology and Education.

'The degree to which players will engage in offensive verbal and physical behaviour to gain unfair advantage is informed by their motivation,' he says. 'If they are focused on winning at all costs they are more likely to take part in this kind of activity, whereas if they are more concerned with developing their own personal skills, self-improvement, and play for the pure love of the game they may be less likely to do so.'

Research led by Dr Boardley has highlighted several psychosocial mechanisms that underpin transgression in sport - explaining why some sportspeople don't experience the normal feelings of guilt or remorse that should accompany such acts.

Known collectively as moral disengagement, these include:

• Transgressing rules for the benefit of the team

• Displacing responsibility for harmful acts to others, such as the coach

• Diffusing responsibility for antisocial acts within the team to minimise personal blame

• Feeling forcibly provoked into retaliatory acts – 'the victim made me do it'

'Once experienced in their use players can adopt anti-social behaviour almost instinctively,' says Dr Boardley, 'and their previous experiences and motivational style may affect the likelihood of players developing such traits. Having used these mechanisms to transgress without any accompanying negative emotions in the past, players may be more likely to make calculated risks if they think they can get away with it. Ultimately it comes down to cost-benefit analysis.'

The high stakes of the World Cup mean the price of cheating is exceedingly high, with transgressions potentially leading to personal national humiliation or destroying an entire side's chances of making it to the Final. However, many consider the risk to be worth it given the potential rewards.

In the 2006 World Cup Final French soccer star Zinedine Zidane was sent off during extra time after head-butting the Italian player Marco Materazzi following a verbal confrontation. After the match Zidane claimed he had been responding to verbal taunts and insults from Materazzi, allegedly concerning a female member of his family. Italy went on to the win the match 5-2. Even today Zidane apparently has no regrets, maintaining that he would 'rather die' than apologise to Materazzi.

Conversely David Beckham has repeatedly publicly expressed his remorse for kicking Argentinean Diego Simeone minutes into the second half of a second-round game in the 1998 competition, an act that led to his first-ever red card. With the score at 2:2, Simeone floored Beckham from behind and the England player immediately put out his leg, bringing down his opponent. Argentina went on to win the match on penalties. These conflicting emotional responses suggest Beckham is much less likely to repeat his actions in the future in comparison to Zidane.

Football is associated with higher levels of anti-social behaviour and moral disengagement than some other sports, says Dr Boardley. 'There may be several reasons for this, including culturally-acceptable behaviour, soccer being a male-dominated sport, crowd response and the predominant motivational climates that predominate in football training. These may encourage aggressive behaviour and cultivate an obsession with victory.'

Moral disengagement can even override old associations, it seems. Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo famously clashed as opponents in the quarter finals of the last World Cup – with Ronaldo encouraging the referee to penalise Rooney who was subsequently sent off for his foul on a Portuguese player - even though both men regularly trained and played together for Manchester United.

'England's squad has changed since the last World Cup and some players will cope with the pressures while others won't,' adds Dr Boardley. 'Rooney clearly has the potential to misbehave but he may well have learned from his past experiences.'

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Note to editors

Dr Ian Boardley is available for interview in person for the duration of World Cup.

For more information

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