



Portraits of adolescent athletes facing personal and situational risk factors for doping initiation

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the personal and situational factors that contribute to the initiation of doping among adolescent athletes.

Design: This research was guided by a social constructionist epistemology and a relativist ontology.

Method: Data were collected using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 21 young adults who reflected on their experiences related to doping as adolescent athletes in a variety of competitive sports. The data analysis consisted of the development of creative non-fiction portraits (drawing upon the traditions of creative non-fiction storytelling and portraiture). This approach involves the creation of a story that is not a direct account of a participant's experience but a representation of events and experiences, grounded in research data.

Results: Four portraits were created depicting four separate characters with a unique set of beliefs, perceptions, motives, and circumstances that lead them to consider initiating doping. The portraits take the form of an inner monologue of the characters and depict a complex set of personal and situational factors that contribute to doping behavior.

Conclusions: Presenting the findings as portraits provides an accessible form of data presentation that readers can relate to and draw personally-relevant conclusions from.

1. Introduction

Doping is a worldwide problem that compromises fair play and integrity in sport (Backhouse, Whitaker, Patterson, Erickson, & McKenna, 2016). The prevalence of doping among athletes competing at a national level or higher has been estimated to be between 14 and 39% (de Hon, Kuipers, & van Bottenburg, 2015). Although this issue has been mainly discussed within the elite sporting context, research has highlighted the occurrence of athletes doping at sub-elite levels, including university, college, and even high school teams (Erickson, Backhouse, & Carless, 2017; Nicholls et al., 2017; Woolf, Rimal, & Sripad, 2014). Findings from Laure (2000) revealed that between 3 and 5% of adolescent athletes have openly admitted to using prohibited substances for performance enhancement in sport and that the initiation of doping can begin as early as eight years of age. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that adolescence is a crucial period for developing attitudes and moral values, including the commitment to compete as a clean athlete (Elbe & Brand, 2016). Doping prevention programs have, therefore, aimed to educate adolescent athletes to provide them with the knowledge and skillset to make informed decisions surrounding performance-enhancing substances and resist the

temptation or pressure to dope (Elbe & Brand, 2016).

In order for doping prevention programs to be successful, the content of interventions must resonate with adolescents by addressing their specific needs and values (Backhouse, McKenna, & Patterson, 2009). When designing and implementing doping prevention programs, understanding the attitudes, motives, and risk factors associated with doping initiation have been suggested to be fundamental to program effectiveness (Backhouse, McKenna, Robinson, & Atkin, 2007; Backhouse et al., 2009; Lucidi et al., 2008). A multitude of personal, social, psychological, and situational risk factors that lead to the initiation of doping among all levels of athletes have been documented. Ntoumanis, Ng, Barkoukis, and Backhouse (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the personal and psychosocial predictors of doping intentions and behavior across athletes of all ages and competitive levels. The results indicated that using legal supplements, perceived social norms, and positive attitudes towards doping were the three strongest positive correlates of doping and doping intentions. However, the predictors or determinants of doping can vary considerably depending on the athlete's age or competitive level (Backhouse et al., 2016). For example, elite athletes (e.g., Olympic, International-level) have reported risk factors including team selections, career transitions, and

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financial reasons (Backhouse et al., 2016), whereas less competitive athletes have reported reasons such as improving physical appearance and weight management (Özdemir et al., 2005). A systematic review by Nicholls et al. (2017) involving athletes aged nine to 21 years and across all levels of competition, identified nine factors that predict doping: gender, age, sports participation, sport type, psychological variables, athletes' entourage, ethnicity, nutritional supplement use, and health harming behaviors. Although these studies have identified numerous predictive factors of doping, they have mainly relied on questionnaires and cross-sectional study designs. As a result, there is a need to move away from rather simplistic explanations of doping (Kirby, Moran, & Guerin, 2011) and consider how multiple risk factors can interact and lead to doping initiation.

Researchers have acknowledged that there is no single risk factor that predisposes an athlete to dope (e.g., Engelberg, Moston, & Skinner, 2014). Rather, risk factors accumulate and act individually, in sequence, or in combination leading an athlete to initiate doping (Backhouse et al., 2016). The complexity, diversity, and interaction of doping determinants can be difficult to capture in quantitative study designs, limiting the extent to which we understand athletes' use of banned substances. In an attempt to address this gap in the literature, qualitative studies have been conducted to gain a deeper understanding of athletes' attitudes, motives, social, contextual, and personal risk factors that may influence or lead an athlete to initiate doping. Five elite athletes (ages 29–46 years) from various sports who admitted to or were caught doping were interviewed to identify the individual psychosocial factors that led to their initiation of doping (Kirby et al., 2011). The “admitted dopers” discussed the internal and external factors that contributed to their doping initiation, including perceptions that doping was widespread in their sport, pressure to please fans, prolonging athletic careers, ease of access to banned substances, and financial stability (Kirby et al., 2011, p. 212). This study provides a notable contribution to the literature by documenting actual motives to dope from admitted dopers who competed professionally or at the Olympics. Given the wide array of risk factors that can lead to doping initiation, younger athletes, or athletes competing at lower levels of sport may face different risk factors.

A number of studies have been conducted investigating the incentives and deterrents to doping among other sub-groups of athletes. Bloodworth and McNamee (2010) conducted focus groups with 40 young adult athletes ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.6$ years) to explore their attitudes and perceived pressure or temptation to dope. Athletes discussed incurring an injury and the economic pressure of elite sport as potential pressure points that may lead to doping initiation. Similarly, Whitaker, Backhouse, and Long (2017) conducted interviews with nine rugby and track and field athletes ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.75$ years) to explore the decision-making processes about whether to dope or not. The athletes competed at the national level or had a professional contract, but were not subject to out-of-competition testing. The athletes spoke about three situations in which athletes may be willing to dope: (1) to continue to compete at their current level, (2) suffering from an injury, and (3) external pressure from coaches and peers. Athletes may rationalize doping with the perception that if others are using performance-enhancing substances, it becomes normalized and it is necessary to level the playing field (Whitaker et al., 2017). These qualitative studies have helped move beyond simplistic explanations of doping, and deepened our understanding of the complexity of athletes' decisions to dope; however, there is a scarcity of research among sub-elite athletes.

Smith et al. (2010) interviewed 11 athletes, including six elite and five non-elite athletes, to explore their attitudes towards doping and the contextual factors that influence their attitudes. The athletes identified factors that shape doping attitudes, including themes such as personality and identity, influential people, sporting culture, and early sporting experiences. Results demonstrated that the athletes' attitudes were fundamentally shaped by their sporting culture (i.e., the prevailing values and beliefs of the sport, such as masculinity, risk-taking,

aggression, and social engagement) as well as the physical performance requirements of the sport, (i.e., team versus individual, elite versus non-elite; Smith et al., 2010). These findings indicated that elite and non-elite athletes may experience different factors influencing their attitudes towards doping, warranting further investigation into athletes' views at sub-elite levels. Adolescent athletes at sub-elite levels may not relate to the pressures described by older or elite athletes, and may face unique pressures that predispose them to dope. With approximately 7.2 million adolescent athletes aged 15 years and older participating in sport on a regular basis in Canada (Canadian Heritage, 2013), there is surprisingly minimal research focusing on the risk factors, determinants, or motives that lead to the initiation of doping among sub-elite adolescent athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the personal and situational factors that contribute to the initiation of doping among adolescent athletes.

2. Methods

2.1. Philosophical assumptions

Our research was guided by a social constructionist epistemology and a relativist ontology. These guiding assumptions suggests that reality is co-constructed, interpreted, and sustained based on social interactions (Daly, 2007). We acknowledge that our research process and findings are constructed within our current ways of understanding the specific historical, social, cultural, and political circumstances surrounding us (Burr, 2006; Gergen, 1973). Thus, this research is characterized by the subjectivity of the multiple realities that co-exist between researchers, participants, and readers in this study (Burr, 2006; Daly, 2007).

2.2. Participants

Athletes were eligible to participate in the study if they (a) were above the age of 18 years, and (b) had competed at the provincial level or higher as an adolescent athlete. Young adult athletes were chosen as the participant age group for two primary reasons. First, many adolescent athletes have not yet experienced pressure or situations that lead to doping initiation. Through pilot discussions conducted with adolescents, we found that they did not have the experience or contextual knowledge to provide in-depth or meaningful responses on the topic. Second, young adult athletes were able to reflect on their experiences throughout their entire adolescence as an athlete, which provided us with the potential of capturing a wider range of personal, contextual, and situational factors that may influence or pressure an athlete to begin using performance-enhancing substances.

The 21 recruited athletes ($n = 11$ females and $n = 10$ males) had a mean age of 22.24 years ($SD = 1.84$, range = 19 to 25) and competed in 13 different sports including: football ($n = 4$), track ($n = 4$), water polo ($n = 3$), synchronized swimming ($n = 2$), volleyball ($n = 2$), gymnastics ($n = 2$), badminton ($n = 2$), baseball ($n = 2$), basketball ($n = 1$), hockey ($n = 1$), soccer ($n = 1$), rugby ($n = 1$), and wrestling ($n = 1$). Multiple athletes competed in more than one sport as an adolescent, therefore, discussed their experiences within a variety of sport contexts. In regards to competition level, the majority of the athletes competed at the provincial level during their early adolescence, and then competed at the national level during later adolescence. Two athletes went on to compete at the international level during their adulthood. At the time of the interview, thirteen athletes competed at the university level in Canada (i.e., U SPORTS) as a varsity athlete, three athletes competed outside the university league, and five athletes were no longer competing in sport, having retired from either university sport and/or an outside league.

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