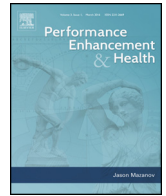




Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Performance Enhancement & Health

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/peh



Doping vulnerabilities, rationalisations and contestations: The lived experience of national level athletes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 February 2017
Received in revised form 15 June 2017
Accepted 16 June 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Performance enhancing substances
Decision-making
Prototype willingness model
Prevention
Anti-doping education

ABSTRACT

Behaviour is shaped by the interactions between a person, their social sphere and their environment. Yet research into doping in sport has largely focused on the athlete and the individual factors that influence prohibited substance use. Owing to the stigma associated with doping, it can be difficult to undertake research with those who have committed anti-doping rule violations. However, a lot can be learnt from the experiences and reflections of those who are immersed within a specific context and sporting environment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore national level athletes' perceptions of what influences willingness to dope in athletics and rugby league. Through semi-structured interviews, nine national level athletes drew upon their sporting histories to identify specific situations in their sport where they thought athletes might be willing to dope. Whilst considering the behaviour of others, they also drew upon their own personal experiences and the resources available to them as national level athletes to consider how these might give rise to doping vulnerability. In doing so, participants were empathetic and shared their perceptions of why some athletes might intentionally dope in their sport. These shared perceptions further our understanding of the complexity of doping in sport and underscore the importance of optimising the environment in order to help athletes cope with the demands of sport and thwarting the development of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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1. Introduction

The use of prohibited substances and methods – known as doping in sport – is one of the most hotly debated issues in sport. Yet the stigma attached to doping in sport means that voices remain silenced and researchers can experience difficulty in persuading sports men and women to take part in research about such an inflammatory issue. Like [Stewart and Smith \(2008\)](#), we believe that if we are to understand the nuances of individual decision-making in the context of doping in sport, it is essential to appreciate the situational factors involved. Theoretical models exist (e.g., [Donovan, Egger, Kapernick, & Mendoza, 2002](#); [Petróczy & Aidman, 2008](#)), which highlight that doping is influenced by multiple factors including personal, social, emotional and situational circumstances. Thus it is important that these multiple influences are considered when investigating doping in sport ([Overbye, Knudsen, & Pfister, 2013](#)). In particular, there are calls to take into account the overall sociocultural context and sport culture

when attempting to understand doping behaviour ([Donovan, 2009](#); [Jalleh, Donovan, & Jobling, 2013](#)).

Yet to date, research has tended to investigate doping by focusing attention on the individual athlete rather than the behavioural context ([Kirby, Moran, & Guerin, 2011](#); [Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010](#)). To understand why some athletes intentionally use prohibited substances we need to move beyond an athlete-centred approach and explore the interactions between personal, situational and structural influences in sport. Aligned with [Overbye et al. \(2013\)](#), we uphold the view that intentional doping (knowingly using a banned substance) is a dynamic process whereby athletes' behaviours and perceptions can change dependent on their social and cultural circumstances. While we acknowledge that doping frequently occurs inadvertently (e.g., through the use of nutritional supplements), our focus in this paper is on trying to understand the factors that might bring about the intentional use of a prohibited substance.

Recent research has brought into focus the need to eschew established concepts of deviancy as unhelpful in understanding the processes being discussed ([Aubel & Ohl, 2014](#); [Henning & Dimeo, 2015](#)). Deviancy implies that an individual is not conforming to values and norms within a community ([Dziubiński, 2009](#)). Although doping is deviant according to the rules of sport, it may not be deviant according to social norms. For example, if others are dop-

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ing or perceived to be using prohibited performance enhancing substances (PES), then doping itself may be seen as the 'norm'. Equally, sport encourages performance enhancement, particularly through the Olympic motto, "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (faster, higher, stronger). As advances in sports science have enabled athletes to improve their performance, some have come to regard PES use as just another outcome optimising behaviour (Petróczi, 2007, 2013). In this instance, doping may be seen as a functional act rather than a deviant act, supporting the viewpoint of Stebbins, Rojek, and Sullivan (2006) who stipulate that the principle of drug taking can be viewed as wrong but the act of doing so may not be. For example, athletes may not use PES to outperform others but simply as a means to 'keep up' (Pappa & Kennedy, 2013; Sefiha, 2012). Nor need it necessarily be deviant in terms of being an irrational decision. Stewart and Smith (2008) contend through their systems approach to drugs in sport, that athletes' decisions are not always rational. Our argument is that while they may not conform to the decisions of Simon's (1947) conception of rational economic man¹ [sic], a recognition of the wider context contests the derogatory connotations of the irrational. Indeed, it would be sporting organisations that were irrational if they were to overlook these contextual factors in devising strategies to benefit athletes and sport.

One of the difficulties in arguing the significance of the culture of sport is that there is no single sporting culture. Cultural differences exist between sports as interactions between participants and the environment contribute to the formation of a particular culture (Smith et al., 2010). It is not surprising that an individual's behaviour, cognition and performance can be significantly shaped by group culture (Johnson, 2012; Krane & Baird, 2005; Quested & Duda, 2010), resulting in a link between risk-taking behaviours and an individual's environment (Fischer et al., 2011). Even within a single sport, individual teams (or clusters of individuals within a team) may share distinctive ideals, motivational guidelines and views on what governs acceptable behaviour (Mankad, Gordon, & Wallman, 2009). Thus without the presence of social consequences (Overbye et al., 2013), it is possible that PES use could become a normalised, acceptable behaviour among some athletes, which could encourage doping, or at the very least, remove some of the barriers and the perception of 'deviance'.

Acknowledging that a single sporting culture does not exist, this paper reports on the experiences of individuals within two rather different sports; athletics and rugby league. The focus was on those competing at national level, following previous research highlighting this group as most vulnerable to doping (Pitsch & Emrich, 2011; Whitaker, Long, Petróczi, & Backhouse, 2014). We use a small scale qualitative study to examine perceptions of what underlies athletes' preparedness to use PES and what it might take to turn that willingness into action at critical junctures. Our goal is to advance the debate beyond statistics and moral assertions to produce a more ethnographically informed basis for the actions of sports authorities. Raising the voices of athletes will not only provide context to the existing literature, it will also help to inform and challenge the anti-doping community in relation to policy and practice.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This research complemented a more quantitative approach that used the prototype willingness model (Gibbons, Gerrard, & Lane, 2003) to investigate athletes' willingness to dope and the influenc-

ing factors (Whitaker et al., 2014). The previous study suggested that athletes are most willing to dope if they suffer an injury, a dip in performance or believe others in their sport are doping and getting away with it (Whitaker et al., 2014). However, that quantitative study lacked the richness of personal experience. Therefore, this study utilised semi-structured interviews to access national level athletes' experiences and perceptions of doping willingness within their sport. Specifically, participants were asked to consider their own circumstances (e.g., experiences, available resources, culture) and how these factors could influence athletes' willingness to dope (encourage/discourage its development) within their sport. Responding to calls for research to be sport-specific (Mohamed, Bilard, & Hauw, 2013) and because of the need to acknowledge the influence of the environment on an athlete's willingness to dope, rugby league and athletics were chosen as they have a history of doping (yet have received little attention previously in comparison to sports such as cycling) and represent a team and individual sport respectively. In its final form, the interview consisted of three main sections: (1) sports career, (2) doping-related perceptions and (3) willingness to dope. Following the main sections, participants were presented with three scenarios where an athlete was dealing with a particular situation (suffering an injury, struggling with recovery and believing everyone else is doping, contract/funding under threat). These scenarios were constructed following the results from the aforementioned quantitative study (Whitaker et al., 2014), which suggested athletes were most willing to dope in these situations. By offering participants the chance to project their personal experiences of sport onto a fictional third party, they could discuss willingness to dope without revealing their own behaviour. For the interviewer, it was fascinating to observe athletes through the course of the interview trying to rationalise what they witnessed in their sport. All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author.

2.2. Sample

The study involved nine athletes in total; four track and field athletes (A), including two females, aged 19–22 ($M=20.5$ years; $SD=1.3$) and five males from rugby league (R) aged 24–34 ($M=29$ years; $SD=4.0$). Participants had either competed in their sport's national championships or held a professional contract but were not required to provide 'Whereabouts' information (information provided to anti-doping organisations on athletes' movements which allows them to be located for out-of-competition testing without notice) as part of UK Anti-Doping's National Registered Testing Pool. The study received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee and expectations around informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw were complied with. Participants were initially recruited via known insiders, then by referral to potential participants from a different club/training group to ensure that individuals were situated within different environments.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are context-bound and are not intended to be representative of all athletes, as the specific context cannot be duplicated. Therefore, the transferability of the findings to other contexts and populations is left to the reader. Consistent with Mazanov, Hemphill, Connor, Quirk and Backhouse (2015, p. 221), our aim "was to find coherent explanations of the data rather than achieve consensus". As data analysis ran alongside the data collection, recruitment stopped at nine participants as salient themes were emerging from within the rich data. Indeed, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argue that the basic elements of meta-themes emerge within six interviews. Through the themes identified, and by raising the voice of the athlete, this research brings to the fore the challenges faced by athletes within the context of rugby league and athletics. In doing so, we hope the

¹ He in fact only posited the concept of the rational economic man in order to put forward the idea of 'bounded rationality' that was considered a more realistic means of decision-making.

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