



“The ripples are big”: Storying the impact of doping in sport beyond the sanctioned athlete



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this paper was to extend current doping research efforts by shifting the focus away from a doping-user perspective to examine the experiences of elite athletes that have been personally affected by other athletes' doping behaviours.

Design: This research works within the interpretive paradigm, adopting relativist ontology and transactional/subjectivist epistemology.

Method: Conversational interviews were conducted with 'competitive' (N = 2) and 'retired' (N = 2) elite Track and Field athletes from multiple countries. In order to communicate the findings in a way that captures the complexity of the issue, whilst also appealing to the athletes this issue affects, creative non-fiction stories were used to present the findings.

Results: Two stories were created; one incorporating the 'competitive' athletes' experiences and one presenting the 'retired' athletes' accounts. The stories detail financial, emotional, and relational implications stemming from others' use of performance enhancing drugs. Critically, the impact is not ephemeral; the retired athletes detailed the long-term implications of their experiences. Meanwhile, the competitive athletes suggest that given the current state of sport, they regularly have to defend their status as 'clean athletes'. Thus, the ripples of doping in sport appear to be far reaching and enduring.

Conclusions: Incorporating a novel mode of knowledge production within the doping literature, the stories presented here demonstrate elite athletes' candid accounts of being impacted by others' doping behaviours in sport. This study also emphasises the value of adopting novel and creative approaches to data collection and representation within the field of doping research.

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1. Introduction

Public interest in the doping phenomenon has increased in recent years thanks to breaking media and news stories, and one sport in particular has been routinely affiliated with the issue: Track and Field. The latest doping allegations within Track and Field include systemic doping (e.g. Russian Athletics), corrupt administration (e.g. the International Association of Athletics Federation; IAAF), and leaked personal data. Consequently, the sport is under the media spotlight and is experiencing what has been referred to as a “doping crisis” (Roan, 2015b), with the image of the sport becoming increasingly tarnished. In particular, the IAAF – the global governing body for Athletics – has come under fire. At the

time of writing, the International Federation is facing public (and legal) scrutiny over their alleged neglect to protect the rights of ‘clean athletes’ (i.e. an athlete who has publically denied using doping agents) in the sport (Roan, 2015a). Importantly though, it is not just the IAAF's reputation that is on the line; the sport of Track and Field as a whole, and critically, the authenticity of self-declared ‘clean athletes’ performances are also being questioned.

Media portrayals of the doping phenomenon regularly highlight the implications of performance enhancing drug (PED) use for the banned athlete by broadcasting the personal repercussions of their sanctions (e.g. loss of eligibility, monetary penalties, social consequences, etc.). However, what the accounts commonly neglect to offer are insights into the lives of those in the background who arguably suffer as much – if not *more* – as a result of doping. As Larry Bowers (2014, p. 1), the Chief Science Officer at the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) points out, “cheating is not a victimless crime”. Athletes do not exist in isolation (Dunn & Thomas, 2012), so when an athlete uses PEDs their behaviour inevitably affects a

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range of other people. For example, there are consequences for fellow athletes in the form of lost prize and endorsement monies and opportunities for public recognition and glory.

Surprisingly, such accounts are undocumented within the published doping literature. Likely contributing to this is the fact that – with the exception of research purposes – elite athletes are rarely invited to speak candidly about their (negative) experiences of sport. Instead, vigilantly protecting their public image – along with their sport's – is often necessary in order to satisfy the expectations of numerous stakeholders invested in the sport (e.g. sponsors, governing bodies, etc.). Ultimately, an athlete's behaviour has intrinsic and extrinsic consequences. Additionally, the (potential) ramifications of athletes' behaviour(s) have intensified alongside the media's growing interest in the doping phenomenon. However, it is acknowledged that “the media amplify what they see and, very often, distort what occurs” (Douglas & Carless, 2015, p. 21). Thus, choosing to speak candidly about one's experiences related to doping in sport risks exposing an athlete to increased scrutiny from the media, the public, and the sporting community alike. Substantiating this, recent studies (e.g. Engelberg, Moston, & Skinner, 2015; Georgiadis & Papazoglou, 2014; Kirby, Moran, & Guerin, 2011) exploring athletes' lived experiences suggest that athletes are more willing to discuss doping after receiving sanctions (i.e. after their PED use is made public) as opposed to during their active careers.

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that stories of this nature are rare within the field. Critically though, that does not mean they do not exist. Rather, it points to the fact that stories must be *told* before they can be *heard* (Douglas & Carless, 2015). Existing research has failed to provide an opportunity for such stories to be told. Consequently, our understanding of the (potentially) widespread implications of doping in sport is restricted. This research was conceived to qualitatively address this gap in the literature by: 1) providing a platform for elite ‘clean athletes’ to share their personal experiences in relation to doping in sport, 2) raising the voices of ‘clean athletes’ who have been personally affected by others' use of PEDs in sport, and 3) highlighting the potential ripple effect (i.e. direct/indirect impact on subsequent events/situations/people) that PED use in sport can have.

2. Methodology and method

2.1. Philosophical underpinnings

Working within the interpretive paradigm, this study adopted relativist ontology (reality is socially and experientially influenced and shaped) and transactional/subjectivist epistemology (the investigator and investigated co-create the findings as the investigation unfolds).

2.2. Procedures

After receiving ethical approval from the host institution, purposive sampling (Smith, 2013) was used to identify and recruit participants who: (1) were aged 18 and over, (2) represented the sport of Track and Field at an international level (competitive or retired), and (3) had been personally affected by doping. Whereas we initially aimed to recruit one participant for this analysis, four athletes from multiple countries were identified in a short period of time and all agreed to participate (personal details have been removed for anonymity purposes). A face-to-face interview lasting between one and two hours (average 82 min) was carried out with each participant at a time and location of their choosing, and all interviews were conducted by the lead author. In line with other scholars (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011),

conversational interviews (i.e. unstructured) were utilised. Generally, conversational interviews commence with an open-ended question regarding a particular topic (e.g. the experience of being affected by others' use of PEDs) and the interviewer follows up on the interviewee's responses as they see fit (based on the interview aims) (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For the purposes of our research, conversational interviews were considered useful because they: a) provide participants with a high degree of control over the stories that are shared, and b) allow the researcher to respond to the participants' stories. Equally, conversational interviews allow both the researcher and the participant to engage in a more participatory mode of knowing (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015). In adopting this approach, storytelling is invited rather than suppressed (Chase, 1995), which is critical since stories provide insights into biographical events unique to peoples' lives (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Although the interviews utilised a conversational approach, before each interview the lead author familiarised herself with background information on individual participant's careers through publically available stories. The purpose of this procedure was two-fold; (1) to confirm that participants satisfied the inclusion criteria, and (2) to develop general guiding topics to prompt discussion during the interviews. Despite being familiarised with available media stories, the only structured question presented during the interviews was the opening question: *How have you been personally affected by others' use of PEDs?* Individualised questions (e.g. What was your initial reaction when you heard that your competitor had used PEDs? Did you have any suspicions that your competitor was using PEDs?) were then posed based on participants' responses and the guiding question. Consistent across all four interviews, the participants provided the majority of the dialogue.

2.3. Data analysis and representation

In light of the original aims of this study, the high profiles of the participants, and the sensitive nature of the topic, a storytelling approach was chosen, building on an emerging tradition in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Carless, Sparkes, Douglas, & Cooke, 2014; Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Specifically, creative non-fiction (CNF) stories was considered the most appropriate way to represent the data on the basis that they can: (1) help protect anonymity, (2) present findings in an engaging, accessible, and understandable form for a wide range of audiences, (3) elicit emotional responses, (4) be useful for exploring taboo, silenced, and ‘dangerous’ issues that are often excluded from research and practice in elite and professional sport, (5) preserve the integrity of participants' words and accounts, (6) facilitate vicarious learning for the readers, (7) provide the possibility of portraying a complexity of lived experience, and (8) minimise interpretation and theorising (Blodgett et al., 2011; Carless & Douglas, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2015; Smith, 2010, 2013; Smith, Papatomas, Martin Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2013; Sparkes, 2002a). Essentially, CNF stories are grounded in research findings and based on actual events and people (Sparkes, 2002a).

Notably, the term ‘fiction’ denotes varying meanings amongst researchers (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Consequently, failing to acknowledge distinctions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ in research can create tension for some authors (Sparkes, 2002a). For the purposes of our research, we have adopted Sparkes' (2002b) stance on the issue. Specifically, he contends that the difference between ethnographic fiction (i.e. CNF) and creative fiction (i.e. fiction) is that the former draw upon “actual data gathered by the researcher in the field” (p. 2); the authors claim to have ‘been there’ in the data collection process. Meanwhile, authors of the latter (i.e. fiction)

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