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Research paper

An alternative approach to the prevention of doping in cycling

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ABSTRACT

Background: Framed by an overly reductionist perspective on doping in professional cycling as an individual moral failing, anti-doping policies tend to envisage a combination of education and repression as the primary intervention strategies. We offer an alternative approach, which seeks to understand doping practices as embedded in social relations, especially in relation to team organisation and employment conditions.

Methods: We undertake an in-depth analysis of the functioning of nine of the 40 world professional cycling teams, and the careers of the 2,351 riders who were or have been professionals since 2005.

Results: We find that anti-doping approaches rest upon questionable assumptions of doping as an individual moral fault, and have not produced the anti-doping effects expected or intended. Based on an analysis of team practices, and the ways in which riders produce their achievements, we offer an alternative perspective which emphasises doping as a product of social-economic condition. Our findings emphasise employment and business models, as well as day-to-day working conditions, as structural drivers of doping practices in which individuals and teams engage.

Conclusion: Anti-doping requires structural as well as cultural change within the sport of professional cycling, especially in the ways teams function economically.

Introduction

There is a substantial literature on doping in sport. This includes studies of its prevalence (Petróczi, Mazanov, Nepusz, Backhouse, & Naughton, 2008; Strano Rossi & Botrè, 2011), how doping is measured (Lentillon-Kaestner & Ohl, 2010; Pitsch, Emrich, & Klein, 2007), doping which targets young people or its use amongst amateurs and professionals (Laure, 1997; Yesalis & Bahrke, 2000), its prevalence in specific sports (Kartakoullis, Constantinos, Pouloukas, Michael, & Loizou, 2008; Morente-Sanchez, Mateo-March, & Zabala, 2013), and the types of substances or supplements consumed (Lun, Erdman, Fung, & Reimer, 2012). Doping is embedded in the history of sport (Dimeo, 2007), and has important political dimensions. It has often been the subject of advertising and official collaboration between sportsmen and the pharmaceutical industry (Dimeo, 2007; Hoberman, 1992); a collaboration which was boosted during the Cold War (Riordan, 1991). Contrary to what is often claimed by sport organizations, the causes of doping are not external to sport, rather the exercise physiologists, trainers and physicians contribute to doping, its efficacy and its spread (Hoberman, 1992; Waddington & Smith, 2009). This indicates that doping in sport needs to be understood as a *cultural practice*, and not simply as an individual choice of 'immoral cheaters'. Harm reduction requires an appreciation of the social contexts of drug use, and of the interactions between individuals and their environments (Rhodes, 2009).

From the 1960s, the use of doping in sport was increasingly labelled 'deviant', to a large extent by doctors playing the role of 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1963). With more or less conviction, the state and various sporting organizations began to build up the means of repression and prevention of doping. Preventative education was first targeted at young athletes (Houlihan, 2002; Trabal, 2008), although the effects of such initiatives are not easy to assess as the sporting establishment has avoided considering its own responsibility for the persistence of doping (Kayser & Broers, 2012), tending instead to depict such practices in terms of individual morality (Stewart & Smith, 2010).

Yet doping is a product of interaction between individuals and their social and risk environments, as in the case of other forms of drug use (Rhodes, 2009). This paper is framed by such a 'risk environment' approach and combines Howard Becker's sociology of deviance (Becker, 1963) with Pierre Bourdieu's field and habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1984). To understand how doping becomes

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normalized, we observe how cyclists' socialization processes are shaped through their interactions with coaches, physicians, teammates, and other athletes. Becker's sociology is useful for understanding the distinctions between 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives in relation to the meaning of drug consumption in sport. For example, Hughes and Coakley (1991) observe that the interactions between individuals and their environments can explain doping as a 'positive deviance'. Because performance is at the core of the doxa of the cycling field (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979], 549), there is often a normalization of all the means that improve performance, including illegal enhancement products. All organizations and people related to a doped athlete need to be considered in an analysis of doping which seeks to understand participants in a specific "social drama of work" (Hughes, 1976). The sport organizations (such as the UCI; the International Union of Cyclists), the event organizers, the media, the team staff, the teammates, and the athletes all cooperate to produce, in two provinces of meaning (Schutz, 1962, 230), both a sporting and a media performance that includes the practices related to doping and judgements related to it (Aubel, Brissonneau, & Ohl, 2013). Observation of cyclists shows that professional socialization means learning how to manage the contradictions between the profane and the professional world and to engage in "practices that always have double truths, difficult to hold together" (Bourdieu, 1998, 181–182). The risk of doping seems to result from this "drama," which functions as the riders' ecosystem. The actors in this system (*directeurs sportifs*, coaches, doctors, the sporting bodies and the race organizers) may, if not necessarily deliberately, be encouraging the use of illegal substances. Understanding this socialization process is central to understanding how this shapes the young cyclist's habitus through embodied dispositions (Ohl, Fincoeur, Lentillon-Kaestner, Defrance, & Brissonneau, 2013).

However, it is not sufficient to understand the socialization that precedes entry into a professional team: this gives too narrow a view. That is why it is necessary to observe the interactions among the actors in relation to the structural and cultural conditions that shape everyday practices and the riders' habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Although some socialization favours dispositions – conducive or not to doping, mainly through the influence of the family and the amateur clubs – a professional secondary socialization can alter the previous norms. One main stake is to understand in what circumstances some of the socially acquired dispositions can be activated or deactivated. It is crucial, then, to question the cyclist's environment in order to decipher the context of activation of the habitus, as suggested by Lahire (2011). The 'team' plays a crucial role because of its influence on cyclists' everyday practices. We do not argue that a cycling team is a "total institution" in Goffman's sense, but one can recognize that top-level sport takes possession of individuals by dispossessing them of part of their time and space, and imposes a specific universe that tends to envelop them (Goffman, 1961). That is why our research focuses both on the macro environment that organizes their activity and on the microenvironment that influences cyclists' daily practices.

This theoretical frame allows us to move beyond a view of doping as a question of individual ethics and to identify conditions that may be conducive to the genesis of doping practices. Our theoretical approach and our empirical observations of cyclist culture (see Method section) question the relevance of anti-doping policies and show them to be ambiguous and relatively ineffective. If a policy is aimed at solving a problem, in this case doping, it is important to question its pertinence by examining the policy instruments to which it gives rise. This is done by works that argue for a liberalization of doping (Kayser & Smith, 2008). Observing doping as the result of the interaction between the athlete and all component parts of the production of the sporting performance, make it clear that the real nature of the problem has not been correctly identified. That is why we aim to show that the educational and repressive edifice of anti-doping is based on a debatable definition of doping as an individual moral fault.

While earlier socializations may facilitate the transmission of a doping culture, not everything hangs on an ethics already shaped in the cycling culture of doping (Waddington & Smith, 2009). Certain conditions of work, employment and organization offered by the teams can induce a recourse to prohibited methods and substances. Thus, it is important to consider closely the conditions of production of achievement in the work of professional cyclists. Our data indicate that the risk of doping varies according to three main dimensions: (1) structural factors, mainly a 'political economy' dimension, that influence the precariousness of cyclists; (2) the consequences for working conditions offered to professional cyclists; and (3) the specific team culture of training that is at the core of riders' everyday experiences. Our analysis seeks to contribute to guidelines for a new harm reduction approach to doping.

Method

This study is part of a project funded by the UCI with a view to changing its anti-doping policy. The results presented here are based on a survey conducted among teams of professional cyclists from the top two world divisions, supplemented by qualitative interviews.

We collated four independently compiled quantitative databases established each year by the UCI: the file of punished riders (2005–2012); season results race by race for all professional riders (2010–2012); files describing demographics and employment of 2351 professional riders' (2005–2012); and a database describing teams (2005–2012). The linking of these databases and their coverage of the period 2005–2012 offers a unique view of the population of professional cyclists and their teams. Database linkage and analysis was carried out using Excel and R software.

In addition, we analysed the operation of 10 professional teams in the first (Pro teams) and second (Continental pro) world divisions. For each team, we sought to conduct eight qualitative interviews: the team manager, two sport directors, the trainer or head of performance, two riders, the physician or head of medicine, and the sponsor. These personnel were not available for interview in every team because of absence or, in the case of four financial partners, refusal. In total we conducted 72 interviews. Transcribed and then processed using the software *N.Vivo*, these interviews were analysed with a thematic method based on prebuilt indicators relating to organization, work and employment. The analysis was vertical in the sense of aiming to understand each teams' functioning. The analyses were then compared, which led us to build two ideal team types: the first focusing on the practices producing a higher risk of doping; the second, concentrating on practices with the lowest risk of doping.

In addition to these individual interviews, in the framework of our support for the change in UCI anti-doping policy, we conducted group interviews with three groups of 23–25 sport directors. The aim of these meetings was to discuss with them the research findings. The significance of these data are both in the interactions we observed and in the more informal discussions that followed each meeting. We also participated in six meetings with international stakeholders of professional cycling about reform: race organizers, riders, teams, and UCI members. In both cases (group meetings and official stakeholder meetings), ethnographic notes were used to complement the data from the interviews.