



What about the clean athletes? The need for positive psychology in anti-doping research



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ABSTRACT

The focus on athletes who engage in doping practices eclipses the fact that elite athletes overwhelmingly support wellness, health, and ethical sporting behavior. Yet very little is known about clean athletes and why they choose to stay clean. This article advocates moving beyond “business as usual” enforcement focused anti-doping efforts (i.e., eradicating “the bad” through the policing and detection of violators) towards enhancing efforts to identify the strengths and characteristics of athletes who choose not to engage in doping behavior (i.e., promoting “the good”). We argue that it is more effective to promote and enhance the continuation of existing healthy behavior than trying to only eradicate and extinguish deviant/maladaptive behavior. Moreover, such ends are best achieved through a positive psychology approach to anti-doping. By employing a positive psychology approach that identifies what clean athletes are doing effectively, this article argues that novel and potentially transformative methods can be developed that better prevent doping and assist athletes who desire to be clean.

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1. Introduction

Anti-doping efforts, such as those created as part of the *World Anti-Doping Agency Code* (WADA, 2015), aim to prevent athletes from using banned performance-enhancing substances mostly through effective drug testing and stiff punishments. As Singler (2015) concludes, “what is understood by prevention in [doping in sport] consists largely of control measures, emphasizing the threat of punishment after positive doping tests and raising fears about the side-effects of doping” (p. 246). These enforcement efforts and focus on harms are important; however, catching athletes after they have used potentially harmful substances is not ideal and relegates anti-doping to secondary and tertiary prevention. Athletes caught doping have already risked their health and contributed to an un-level playing field. So while detection and punishment is vital, ultimately the more sustainable and long-term effective anti-doping strategy is one of primary prevention that asks how anti-doping can prevent athletes from doping in the first place.

Though prevention is the ideal, anti-doping research typically centers on the act of “doping” itself with the existing knowledge base overly problem-focused on athletes’ deficits (Backhouse, McKenna, Robinson, & Atkin, 2007; Hoberman, 2002). Thus the

existing anti-doping knowledge base focuses almost exclusively on athletes who violate or will eventually violate anti-doping standards. Such research provides a roadmap to understand the paths leading athletes to doping, but it offers little insight into how athletes who do not intentionally use banned performance-enhancing substances continue avoiding performance-enhancing substance misuse. Despite the fact that many athletes fit this description (often describing themselves as clean to identify their behavior), even in sports such as cycling where doping has remained a significant problem, little is known about clean sporting behavior and the lives of elite athletes who successfully train and compete clean.

Here, it is important to note the problematic nature of the word clean as it applies to scholarly research. The term “clean” in reference to doping behavior is clearly a loaded term as well as a murky one. This makes using the term especially problematic. Researchers risk importing bias or assuming a certain agenda when using the term. However, in this article the authors intentionally (and consistently) use clean for a variety of reasons. In part, most athletes use clean to identify those who follow anti-doping rules. This is especially true for clean athletes who regularly refer to being clean. Thus when discussing the community in question, it is important to empower their language and their values rather than importing artificial or academic interpretations. Using the language of the community also more clearly translates findings between researchers, participants, and stakeholders. For the purposes of this article, a clean athlete is one who does not intentionally

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violate any anti-doping rules during training or competition. This still leaves open the debate whether past athletes with anti-doping rule violations can ever be considered clean in their future. Various communities have indicated divergent beliefs on this point. For our purposes, however, the attempt to use clean throughout this article is not meant to indicate the authors' ideological positions but rather to use the term in much the same manner as the communities of athletes commonly use this term, which includes some of its ambiguities and connotations.

Returning the focus to clean athletes, few studies have considered why clean athletes choose to stay clean, especially in sports where doping use has pervaded the sporting culture (Chan, Dimmock et al., 2015; Chan, Hardcastle et al., 2015; Chan, Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2015; Erickson, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2015). Might the reasons why clean athletes stay clean be important and provide valuable insights into how to implement individual and community interventions? Such answers, we argue, will provide a foundation to better understand what athletes are doing effectively to stay clean in elite sport.

In this article, we advocate that anti-doping research moves beyond “business as usual” anti-doping efforts (i.e., eradicating “the bad” through the detection of violators) and include efforts to identify the strengths, characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors of athletes who choose not to engage in doping behavior (i.e., promoting “the good”). In simple behavioral terms, we argue that it is much easier to promote and enhance the continuation of existing healthy behavior than trying to only eradicate bad behavior. Moreover, such ends are best achieved through a positive psychology approach to anti-doping. Positive psychology is the study of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions that contribute to the optimal functioning of individuals, groups and institutions (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). By employing a positive psychology approach that identifies what clean athletes are doing effectively, this article argues that novel and potentially transformative prevention methods can be developed that can better assist athletes who desire to be clean.

2. Current anti-doping research

In 2007, the work of Backhouse et al. (2007) undertook a significant review of the international literature surrounding athletes' attitudes, behaviors, knowledge and education that existed between 1990 and 2006. Their work showed that a “weak evidence base undermines strategic planning and limits the capacity to target appropriate and efficacious education programmes to abate doping in sport” (Backhouse et al., 2007).

As Backhouse et al. explained, the vast majority of literature prior to 2007 focusing on the decision to use drugs centered specifically on use of anabolic steroids in young people (Backhouse et al., 2007). Since 2007, additional work has explored general factors influencing athletes who choose to use banned performance-enhancing substances. This research has largely suggested that outcome-oriented views (e.g., win at all costs) help predict athletes' decisions to violate the banned substance list (Gucciardi, Jalleh, & Donovan, 2010; Hodge, Hargreaves, Gerrard, & Lonsdale, 2013; Morente-Sánchez & Zabala, 2013; Petróczi, 2013a; Zelli, Lucidi, & Mallia, 2010). Additional literature examines instances where athletes understand that their use of a particular substance violated anti-doping rules. Findings from these studies all indicate athletes show moderate to high levels of awareness when a substance's use constitutes a doping violation (Backhouse, Whitaker, & Petróczi, 2013; Kondric et al., 2011; Morente-Sánchez & Zabala, 2013; Petróczi, 2013a, 2013b; Petróczi & Aidman, 2008). In summary, barring cases of inadvertent ingestion through tainted supplements,

most athletes are conscious and aware of their use of banned substances.

Though scholars continue to produce research focused on the causes of doping behavior, many have largely ignored why clean athletes choose to stay clean. However, a few notable exceptions exist. Chan, Dimmock et al. (2015), Chan, Hardcastle et al. (2015), Chan, Lentillon-Kaestner et al. (2015) and Erickson et al. (2015) examined protective factors keeping athletes from doping or factors that lead to doping avoidance, though these studies did not specifically limit their participants to clean athletes with no doping history. Additionally, some evidence indicates that deterrence strategies focusing on athletes' values can help prevent later deviance (Morente-Sánchez & Zabala, 2013; Petróczi & Aidman, 2008), yet these findings were not the direct focus of the research, which was to identify and incorporate vulnerability factors into models that may explain the emergence of doping behavior.

Most anti-doping education research uses the theory of planned behavior (TPB) model to analyze attitudes towards doping, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control (PBC) (Ajzen, 1991; Chan, Dimmock et al., 2015; Chan, Hardcastle et al., 2015; Chan, Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2015; Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). Adding sport specific factors (affordability, availability), the “Sport Drug Control Model” adds elements to the TPB (Donovan, Egger, Kapernick, & Mendoza, 2002; Gucciardi, Jalleh, & Donovan, 2011; Jalleh, Donovan, & Jobling, 2014). Another common approach uses principles of “Criminal Theory” to explain how perceptual deterrence and law compliance prevent deviant behavior in sport (Sefiha, 2012; Strelan & Boeckmann, 2006). Self-determination theory is used to explain athletes' motivation for sport and the influence of sportpersonship on doping behavior (Vassilis Barkoukis, Lazuras, Tsorbatzoudis, & Rodafinos, 2011; Chan, Dimmock et al., 2015; Chan, Hardcastle et al., 2015; Chan, Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2015).

Many studies identify protective factors and risk factors that either aid in doping prevention or in doping behavior (Backhouse et al., 2013; Erickson et al., 2015; Kondric et al., 2011; Petróczi, 2013b; Petróczi & Aidman, 2008). Although models like the TPB and Sport Drug Control Model use social cognitive factors, social cognitive theory sees doping behavior as a product of environment and subjective perceptions (Johnson, 2012). TPB studies often target a specific element and its influence on doping behavior (i.e., influences on youth; Irving, Wall, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2002; Lazuras, Barkoukis, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2015; Wichstrøm & Pedersen, 2001), the influence of the news/media (Quick, 2010), and social desirability's influence on doping behavior (Gucciardi et al., 2010). The “Strength-Energy Model” explains the role of self-control and self-regulation (Chan, Dimmock et al., 2015; Chan, Hardcastle et al., 2015; Chan, Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2015; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). The athlete's career is also examined for the timing of interventions (Barkoukis, Lazuras, Tsorbatzoudis, & Rodafinos, 2013; Mazanov, Huybers, & Connor, 2011).

Thus, the growing empirical base on anti-doping largely focuses on the factors that produce doping behavior or on athletes that are either already or on the path to doping and the methods for changing their existing illicit behavior. However, Backhouse (2015) recently noted “a move away from anti-doping to Clean Sport,” such that “the anti-doping discourse is also seemingly evolving and the term ‘Clean’ features more noticeably in the language of education programmes delivered by NADOs” (p. 235). Missing from the literature are methods for identifying clean athletes' existing attitudes and structures that support clean behavior. By identifying the tools that clean athletes use to stay clean, anti-doping education can focus on strengthening these tools in future athletes to better support these athletes' desires to remain clean.

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