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

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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.

Key words: performance enhancing substances; decision-making; prototype willingness model; prevention; anti-doping education

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; Petróczi & 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 and colleagues (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 doping 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; Petróczi, 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

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.

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 influencing 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 and colleagues (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 findings stimulate open and honest discussion within the research field and the sporting community so that the blame for doping in sport begins to shift away from the athlete’s door.

2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim although identifying information was removed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then used to analyse the data. The first author read and reread the transcripts a number of times to ensure familiarity with the data before codes were assigned to key words and phrases. Codes were then grouped according to similarity to establish the main themes within the data. Finally, the co-authors reviewed a selection of the transcripts and the interpretations to safeguard against the analysis being unduly affected by the viewpoints of the first author. Although we have abstracted athletes’ observations from their full accounts, we have tried to keep faith with their sentiment and reasoning.

3. Findings

Here we focus on three key dimensions of the analysis: 1) situations when athletes may be willing to dope, 2) rationalising the use of PES and 3) ways to counteract doping. It is important to emphasise that most of the findings represent athletes' beliefs and insider observations/perceptions rather than their own behaviour (although some were happy to volunteer that). Participants were not asked to reveal whether they had personally engaged in doping and none said that they had done so. Nevertheless, due to the contemporary nature of the topic, they were still able to relate to and acknowledge some of the challenges faced by individuals within their sport in relation to doping.

3.1. Situations when athletes may be willing to dope

Three critical circumstances that the participants thought could influence athletes' willingness to dope in athletics/rugby league emerged from the interviews: 1) "they don't have a choice if they want to remain in the sport"; 2) "suffering an injury may tip them over the edge"; and 3) "they are under pressure from those around them to dope".

3.1.1. "They don't have a choice if they want to remain in the sport"

During the interviews, participants could relate to the idea that sometimes an individual may find themselves in a position where their goals/desires limit their freedom of choice. Within the context of doping, participants described the idea that if an athlete wants to continue to compete in their sport at their current level (i.e., their goal/desire), they may feel they have no choice but to dope. Charlie (A) summarised this viewpoint:

...You've been performing well for a few years. You're actually on a salary, that's your life, and then you have a bad year and you think if you have another bad year

next year you're going to lose funding and you're going to lose your contract. You're basically going to have no money coming in. I think that's when the pressures start, cos if you think oh I will take this drug I can keep getting paid and stuff but if I don't take this drug I'm going to have to find a normal job... A lot of it I'd say is contracts, like if you've got a house to pay for and I know for a lot of people, money is everything. Money makes the world go round so like, at the end of the day, they might change their morals just because they need some money... I reckon a lot of it is just goals as well. If you've had a goal all your life to get Olympic gold medal, and you've dedicated the last 25 years of your life to try and get that thing, some people just can't let it go and can't accept defeat... they have to do something about it and take drugs.

In athletics, situations revolved around obtaining funding and meeting/maintaining performance standards. Gemma (A) described her own personal difficulties in obtaining funding in athletics, and as a result, acknowledged how that could lead athletes to dope in order to earn the income to allow them to compete:

...You've got to be one of the best to get funding through your governing body or through companies and so I think people would genuinely turn to drugs to try and get this because athletics can... it might not be seen as an expensive sport but when you're going everywhere and competing everywhere and having to pay for competitions and stuff like that, it does get quite expensive so I can see people going down the route of drugs just to get the funding.

Both Gemma (A) and Nathan (A) also emphasised the importance of meeting standards in order to be invited to major competitions; they saw such invitations as a foot in the door to help secure funding. Specifically, they both commented on how sponsorship tends to go hand in hand with appearances at major championships. As a result, the track and field athletes all emphasised the pressure individuals feel to reproduce the same performance levels. Being unsuccessful at hitting performance targets or being unable to deal with the pressure to recreate set times/distances over and over (particularly after a period of success) was seen as a time when an athlete may perceive reduced options, leading them to dope.

Similarly, the rugby league players also identified selection and contracts as well as trying to prolong their career. In his interview, Harry (R) drew upon his personal experiences to talk about the pressures faced by professional rugby players and how not being selected can affect other aspects of a player's life:

You feel pressure from everyone... That's probably one thing that people don't realise is that even though it is a dream to compete at, it becomes a job, it becomes a hassle. You go home and you're worried. You're worried about your position, you're worried about how the coach views you, whether he's going to pick you this week... Some lads are on pay as you play so they get a lot of money if they play. If they don't play, they're on hardly anything and struggle to pay their mortgages so obviously there's pressure from home, you know, your wife and kids. Like I say, we're not footballers so if you don't play as much, you might be struggling to pay the mortgage, your car that month...

Players highlighted that they experience increased pressure when they are approaching the end of their current contract. Some players would be motivated by their situation and

therefore perform better, while others would perform worse due to feeling nervous about the implications of not receiving a new contract, particularly if they have a family to look after. As a result, Harry (R) discussed why he thought concerns over contracts can lead to doping:

I think this is one that the majority of people go through really... If he doesn't get a contract he has to find himself a whole new career path and he can't support himself. You know, a lot of people have families and they can't support them. You feel like a bit of a failure at home so there's pressure to get that contract from different avenues really. ... it probably would push you more towards it because you would be thinking well I'm on last chance saloon really... if I don't play well, I don't get a contract anyway...

Alex (R) suggested that different levels of the sport bring different pressures that could influence perceptions about freedom of choice and the necessity of doping. Particularly, he felt that those players who earned a living from playing rugby may be more likely to feel they have no choice but to dope:

For a Super League player, you're looking at contracts every two or three years if you want to stay at this good level of salary and... obviously make good money but if you were a semi pro player you might have a good job as well so if they lose their rugby playing career it's probably not as significant, but to a Super League player it might be everything he's got...

Alongside that, Simon (R) used his friend as an example of a player who wanted to prolong his career because rugby was his life. His friend did not dope to increase his performance above his team mates/opposition, he did so to maintain his proven ability and prolong his career:

I get back to my friend... His big thing was he had been one of the best players in his position in the world for the last 10 years and his body was, his knees were hurting, he wasn't recovering in time for games, he could feel his performance going down and from being one of the best players to going down... I think that it hit him. He obviously started taking HGH [human growth hormone] I think it was and it just made him feel so much better - let his body recover and he just felt strong again and great and his performances were getting better... he wasn't doing it to try cheat, he was just trying it to help him prolong his career if you know what I mean.

In the examples illustrated above, the participants highlighted times in their sport where they believed some individuals would feel that doping was their only choice. The context here is crucial in determining athletes' perceptions of whether doping is a choice or necessity. For example, coming to the end of a rugby contract may be more likely to lead to doping for a player whose identity, livelihood and income revolves around rugby than a semi-professional player who makes a living elsewhere. Equally, in athletics, those athletes who hope to be invited to major competitions may be more willing to dope than those who are regularly invited to important meets.

3.1.2. *“Suffering an injury may tip them over the edge”*

Six participants (two track and field athletes and four rugby players) identified injury as a pressure which might lead to doping. Jack explained in the context of rugby league: *“Just the fact that it’s a tough sport... it’s probably one of the toughest team sports in the world so injuries are quite common so to speed up the recovery rate...”* Similarly, Harry (R) recalled *“the demons”* he had experienced during his own injury battles and how the psychological impact of injury (self-doubt) could lead to doping if a player thinks they will never return to the level of performance they were at before their injury. Like Harry (R), Rachel (A) also emphasised the psychological impact of injury and described having an injury as losing everything and being *“rock bottom”* so you *“might just want a little extra boost to just get you back on form again”*. Similarly, Nathan (A) emphasised how context is important when suffering an injury and how injury is a main pressure that leads to doping in athletics when competition dates are looming:

Like if it’s for the Olympics, if someone was injured in like last November, and they wanted to be ready for the Olympics, they might have taken it to get ready... Injuries can last a long time... and if you want to be ready for a season or for a competition then I think that would be a big factor. Especially if you’re injured, you’re not going to be tested maybe for drugs so you might think well I might get away with it.

3.1.3. *“They are under pressure from those around them to dope”*

Participants identified two key groups in athletes’ networks that could create pressure to dope; coaches and peers. First, six participants (three from each sport) believed doping takes place in clusters within a team or training group, with two of the rugby league

players suggesting that peers can create pressure to dope and that *“there’s a few sheep that will just follow the shepherd”* (Harry, R).

Coaches too were perceived to create pressure to dope in a number of ways. First, coaches were perceived to do this implicitly through their expectations of athletes (e.g., in rugby for players to get bigger and stronger) and how their expectations could impact on athletes within the group:

I think in certain training groups, if the coach has got high expectations of the athlete and if they don’t achieve the expectation, they’re going to get thrown out of the group or they won’t have the same privileges as people who do perform well, then I think yeah that pressure would definitely lead to people considering using drugs. (Nathan, A)

Equally, two of the track and field athletes believed coaches could explicitly create pressure to dope by advocating doping themselves. There was a strong perception that athletes do not come up with the idea of doping themselves but rather it is the coach who suggests doping to the athlete. Two participants had specific experiences of strength and conditioning coaches promoting doping (one rugby player and one track and field athlete). For example, Nathan (A) recalled:

I was having a conversation with my strength and conditioning coach and he was saying what’s to stop someone cos in athletics, you only get drugs tested when you’re at the top of the game, like when you’re on proper funding, whereas if say you’re not on the list kinda thing, then you can go take drugs for two weeks or a

year and then train, just train and not compete and then leave it a year and then start competing. By the time you start competing, the drugs are out of your system but you've obviously got the advantage.

Equally, Harry (R) went on to explain that although he had never had a coach push it on him, one conditioning coach had been a firm advocate of doping because of the consequential boost to players' incomes.

3.2. Rationalising the use of PES

One way in which the participants acknowledged PES use could be rationalised was through the doping behaviour of others. They offered the view that if athletes believed others were doping, they might think that it is acceptable for them to use PES, either because doping becomes normalised or it is the only way to level the playing field. For example, Charlie (A) referred to group behaviour and how that can normalise doping:

I think it's down to your group really... cos if you're in an isolated group but no one's doing drugs or anything, you're going to find it hard to come by drugs and you probably wouldn't take it... If you happen to be with a drug dealer who is going to supply you with some drugs and everyone in your group's doing it, you get all the pressure of your group. Like you either leave that group or you do what they're doing and it becomes more normal. It's more acceptable cos if they get caught we all get caught and it takes some of the pressure off you, whereas if you're in a group and it's just you doing drugs then you'll feel wrong every day.

Unlike the other participants, Harry (R) talked at length about his personal experience of others doping, including how it made him feel, but also how he developed a willingness to dope in an environment where he thought doping was commonplace:

I spoke to my mum about it four years ago cos I came home infuriated by the fact that I found out that another lad had been on it in my position. He'd just been picked in the England squad and I hadn't... My mum's response to me was, I mean she's not like this, she's quite law abiding and everything else but my mum's thing to me was take it then. If everybody else is taking it the risk of getting caught is virtually none she said, so why shouldn't you be on it? Why should you be doing everything right and not on a level playing field... That was the time that I went home to my mum and dad and sort of said I don't know if I should because everybody else seems to be taking it and it seems to be acceptable... At that point there didn't seem to be much of a stigma attached to it... I'll be honest with you... it makes you start thinking well if everyone else is then why shouldn't I?

In the event, he followed his father's advice, kept true to his own principles and did not take PES.

While in track and field, Gemma (A) was the only athlete to mention her experiences of hearing rumours about doping, the rugby players collectively described their personal experiences of hearing rumours in their sport and how they envisaged rumours could encourage some players to dope by constructing a particular version of the culture of the sport:

There's a lot of hearsay in rugby league and they take it as being right...I think its massive who your friends are in rugby league and who you hang around with. That has a massive bearing on if you're going to use drugs or not cos you get to hear rumours that certain groups of mates or certain areas will, they will use drugs more than others (Jack, R)

The volume of rumours spread about doping within rugby league was seen as a catalyst to establishing an 'imagined' culture in which 'everyone else is doing so'. Again, context, this time in the shape of the network that constituted an athletes' personal community, emerged as key to determining whether doping would be perceived as acceptable or normal to an athlete.

3.3. Ways to counteract doping

Although we have argued here that in certain situations, there may be nothing irrational about the decision to dope, the track and field athletes and rugby players interviewed still believed that ultimately, the responsibility lay with the individual. The perception was that if an individual is strong-willed and believes doping is morally wrong, they will be able to focus on themselves rather than using the rumours about others doping to justify that behaviour for themselves. This would lead an athlete to choose an alternative to doping. Yet if an athlete used the behaviour of others to rationalise doping, then they may feel doping is the only option available.

When participants were discussing the three willingness scenarios (suffering an injury, struggling with recovery and believing everyone else is using, contract/funding is under threat), they highlighted how each fictional person had alternative means to deal with the

situation that did not involve the use of PES. For example, resting was perceived as a possible solution to each of the scenarios. Simon (R) talked about his personal experiences and knowing when he needed to rest when struggling with recovery or a dip in performance:

All our coaching gets monitored – how far we’ve run every day, how hard us heart rate you know, how hard we’ve worked and things like that so they know exactly how hard we’re working and if somebody does look a bit tired, they look back at the data and if he’s had a really tough week lets you know, give him a day off... sometimes you just need to have a couple of days off, let your body recover... I’d know in myself if I was shattered, if I was too fatigued. I’d know and say look boss, I’m done here, I need a week off, I need to rest.

However, resting is not what competitors like to do.

In relation to dealing with injury, rehabilitation was the main suggestion. As Charlie (A) highlighted through his personal experiences of dealing with injury: *“just physiotherapy and stuff... yeah just stretching and physio... you just make physio appointments and just put a lot of time into doing boring stuff like rehab”*. Similarly, Ben (R) emphasised that injury *“happens to the best of us”* and *“you just have to get down to your rehab and hope you can come back quicker than suggested.”* Drawing upon resources available to the participants, various recovery techniques were suggested including ice baths, recovery sessions, sports massage and physiotherapy.

In contrast, when an athlete was suffering a dip in performance, participants suggested training harder or changing coach as possible solutions. Alex (R) emphasised that rugby players (him included) often do extra training when they are struggling with

performance: *“They’d be doing extras at training – extras after training or before. Maybe keep working hard to improve themselves – do the little things like watching videos, speak to coaches, extra training...”*

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the decision-making context surrounding doping via the lived experiences of national level athletes. Participants raised two key needs that could aid doping prevention, which also raise questions for current anti-doping policy and practice.

4.1. Optimise the environment to buffer against periods of instability

Participants believed an athlete is more likely to develop a willingness to dope during periods of instability. This is what Overbye and colleagues (2013) referred to as ‘setback situations’ and others have referred to as tipping points, or periods of personal distress (Hauw & Bilard, 2012; Kirby et al., 2011; Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010; Mazanov, Huybers, & Connor, 2011). Injury was commonly perceived by these national level athletes as pressure that could lead to doping in order to recover quickly, corroborating previous research (Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010; Mazanov et al., 2011). Because injuries are often perceived to be ‘unfair’, athletes may justify doping as ‘re-stabilising’ rather than enhancing performance (Overbye et al., 2013). Yet building on previous findings, this study highlighted that the period of instability alone is not the trigger for doping but it is the circumstances behind it – and appraisals that follow - that are important (e.g., the timing of the injury in relation to major competitions).

From the point of view of sporting organisations, it is concerning that participants felt some athletes may believe they have no choice but to dope due to their own personal

circumstances. This is what Sefiha (2012) refers to as an 'occupational necessity'. Indeed, some athletes may feel doping is necessary to maintain their lifestyle (Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010; Kirby et al., 2011; Overbye et al., 2013). For example, the rugby players highlighted that players (themselves included) often have concerns about supporting their family, paying the mortgage or retiring from the sport with no qualifications to fall back on. The consequent pressure on players to obtain/maintain contracts to secure a source of income for professional rugby players therefore has the potential to trigger doping as seen in cycling (Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010; Outram & Stewart, 2015). The equivalent for track and field athletes was the pressures of needing to hit performance standards to be invited to competitions or to obtain/maintain funding, which is essential for athletes who wish to train full time again highlighting the importance of the circumstances behind the period of instability. As illustrated here by the rugby players, this need not be from pure greed, but can stem from trying to match the social norm embodied in an expectation of providing for the family.

While the concept of strict liability forces policy makers to view doping as an individualised behaviour, these findings illuminate the importance and influence of broader social relations. Indeed, they support Stewart and Smith's (2010) notion that investigations should adopt a holistic perspective, which takes into consideration the sporting culture and context. The findings also stress the complexity of doping and the need to move beyond the cheating ideology (Henning & Dimeo, 2015) with sports organisations taking responsibility for their role in doping. Moving forwards, sports organisations should have a duty of care towards their members to optimise the environment within which they operate to ensure that all members are supported through periods of instability, and therefore have the resources needed to cope effectively with the demands placed upon them.

Analysing the accounts of these athletes suggests ways of combatting some of these periods of instability that could include: equipping athletes with coping skills such as self-control, resilience and decision making (Botvin, Griffin, Wagner, & Waldron, 2001; Haegerich & Tolan, 2008; Kondric et al., 2011); providing access to resources (e.g., sports science support, social support, rehabilitation; Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Mitchell, 2011); and putting action plans in place. In this last regard, the rugby players emphasised the lack of career options available to some players, which makes them fear retiring from the sport due to an over-reliance on athletic identity and difficulties in continuing to provide for their families. With the exception of autobiographical insights (Alker & Stott, 2012; Newton & Wilkinson, 2010), these findings are the first of their kind to highlight the needs of professional rugby league players in terms of having an identity and qualifications beyond rugby to protect them from doping in sport. They do however match the concerns of cyclists who felt their career options were limited beyond cycling due to their lack of qualifications (Sefiha, 2012). To assist with transitions out of sport and to recognise the precarious nature of sporting careers, national level athletes might be encouraged to develop career plans (Aubel & Ohl, 2014; Hardie, Shilbury, Ware, & Bozzi, 2010). One example would be through the promotion of dual careers and training opportunities that would help athletes to pursue their sporting talent while also preparing them for a career once they retire from sport (Aubel & Ohl, 2014; EU Expert Group "Education & Training in Sport", 2012).

Equally, the participants interviewed did not see doping as the only option available to an individual to help them deal with injury, recovery or a dip in performance. Yet some of the solutions described (e.g., physiotherapy, performance analysis, ice baths) are not easily available to all athletes at all levels of all sports. Although all the participants interviewed were national level athletes, the rugby players appeared to have greater access to sports

science support than the track and field athletes (e.g., physiotherapists on hand at the training ground). Athletes without access to such services may be more vulnerable to doping. Reducing the inequality and increasing the reach of sport science and medicine to more athletes may be one way of reducing doping behaviour (Mazanov et al., 2011). Aubel and Ohl (2014) suggest that in order to increase teams' ability to detect and manage cyclists' periods of vulnerability, more money could be put into the supervision and support of athletes. However, financial resources available for sports science support may be limited within National Governing Bodies (NGBs), thus, one way of increasing sport science support might be to provide services to athletes at a reduced cost or free. Registered training providers could be required to support supervised work experience for individuals training within the profession before they become qualified (e.g., physiotherapy, dietetics). Services could then be advertised directly to local clubs and/or through NGBs to increase awareness among athletes at all levels. Offering the kind of alternative which will do less harm physically and to reputations may prevent athletes becoming willing to dope, particularly if it can be targeted at periods of instability (greatest vulnerability) in an athlete's career.

4.2. Preventing doping becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy

Participants believed that some athletes rationalise the use of PES on grounds of the behaviour of others. As with previous research, this study highlights the role that social networks and cultural norms play in influencing doping behaviour (e.g., Donovan, 2009; Overbye et al., 2013) and the need to move beyond the idea that doping is an individualised behaviour (Aubel & Ohl, 2014). Specifically, participants highlighted that when an athlete believes others are doping, they thought that the use of PES may become more normalised and acceptable to them. Whilst previous research has demonstrated that cyclists could justify

and neutralise their own behaviour through the actions of others (Sefiha, 2012) via ‘diffusion of responsibility’ (Boardley & Grix, 2013; Boardley, Grix, & Dewar, 2014; Boardley, Grix, & Harkin, 2015); this study extends previous findings. Harry (R) confessed to starting to think doping was normal and acceptable because he believed everyone else was doping, yet he refrained from doping because of his father’s advice and the reminder he received about his personal principles. In addition, the participants interviewed emphasised the importance of the behaviour of those close to them (i.e., within an athlete’s team or training group).

Participants highlighted that an athlete would be more likely to dope if they were involved in a group who were using PES. For example, Harry (R) described how he contemplated doping because of his beliefs that so many people around him within the teams he played for were doping. Being in a group who abstain/engage (or are believed to abstain/engage) in a specific behaviour (i.e., doping) can make it difficult for individuals to do anything but conform to group norms if they wish to remain in the group (Kirby et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2010), particularly if they identify strongly with their training group and fear exclusion (Morier, Bryan, & Kasdin, 2012). As a result of this research, we argue that if it is the athletes’ social network that is advocating or legitimising the use of PES, then it is the network rather than individual athletes who need to be the target of anti-doping initiatives. Equally, if athletes’ social networks oppose the use of PES, anti-doping initiatives need to provide them with the knowledge and expertise to intervene effectively at times of crisis to aid doping prevention.

4.3. Limitations and future research directions

Although sample sizes in qualitative research are typically small, we appreciate that the voices of the nine individuals interviewed may not echo all national level athletes competing in athletics or rugby league. However, the aim of this study was never to

generalise but instead to offer insight into to the predicament of athletes facing decisions about PES. What the nine voices do illuminate is that the environment surrounding the decision to dope is substantially more complex than appears to be recognised by drug enforcement agencies. The second limitation lies with the male domination of the sample. Whilst attempts were made to recruit female rugby players, these were unsuccessful. However, this was not seen as a major limitation due to the maleness of rugby league at national level. Moreover, research reports that males are more at risk of doping (e.g., Alaranta et al., 2006; Backhouse, Whitaker, Patterson, Erickson, & McKenna, 2016; Moran, Guerin, Kirby, & MacIntyre, 2008). Third, in order to illuminate the sporting context, it was important to focus on specific sports. The choice of athletics and rugby league was because of their history of multiple doping cases. Although the findings may not apply to other individual/team sports, they can help to inform specific anti-doping education efforts in athletics and rugby league and represent an invitation to other sports to consider their own position. We argue that the study also highlights the importance of narratives in understanding the complexities of doping. Further research is warranted to investigate the sporting histories of athletes and how their experiences, perceptions and context shape doping behaviour at different stages of sporting careers.

4.4. Conclusion

We have shown here how athletes are positioned in a social context where a number of factors influence their behaviour (e.g., performance, injury, sporting culture, networks, responsibilities to family and other athletes). As a result, doping is influenced by personal and situational factors, which can prevent it from being a purely planned action (Melzer, Elbe, & Brand, 2010) resulting from free choice. None of these participants had knowingly taken PES

and they did not approve of athletes doing so, yet they did not find it difficult to understand why some athletes might. Specifically, participants perceived there to be four main factors which could influence an athlete's willingness to dope at national level. These included: 1) concerns about leaving the sport, 2) injury woes, 3) pressure from others and 4) believing everyone else is doping. Thus, athletes' doping behaviour may not be driven by a desire to 'cheat', per se, but instead a perceived need to 'keep up'. What this study has shown is that, in circumstances when 'everyone' is perceived to be taking PES, fairness becomes reconstructed as allowing me to compete on a level playing field with others.

This study demonstrates the significance of appreciating the dominant values of sporting cultures in different sports. Careful attention to the construction of local variants of sporting culture might pay dividends in strengthening athletes' resolve not to use PES. Regardless of whether athletes' perceptions are 'true', expectations and beliefs shape reality and can affect behaviour to create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Moston, Engelberg, & Skinner, 2014). Even if they were mistaken in their initial belief, by taking the decision to dope, they would help to justify the belief of others that such behaviour is the norm in their sport. One way in which to challenge this perception might be to encourage athletes to question and speak out about any rumours. Because of the sense of community within rugby league, people may be unwilling to inform on others within the game, but if they were encouraged to discuss the rumours openly, it might help to foster an alternative community responsibility, one that challenged doping.

While sport is dominated by a competitive ethos that exhorts athletes to push limits, we should not be surprised that some athletes resort to PES. Sports organisations have collective responsibility for the dominant ethos and a duty of care, not just to individual athletes, but to sport as a whole. Recognising that anti-doping organisations and NGBs should

not characterise doping simply as a deviant act but instead recognise that it may just be regarded as a functional way of optimising performance, doping could be counteracted by promoting and providing 'acceptable' alternative performance enhancing methods (Petróczi, 2007; Petróczi, 2013).

The accounts of the research participants in this study highlight how situational factors (which could emerge at any point during an athlete's career) influence willingness to dope. Rather than harm minimisation as advocated by Stewart and Smith (2008) and Kirkwood (2009), the participants within this study put their faith in athlete support being available at critical points. They saw harm protection coming from arming athletes by promoting resilience. By providing athletes with acceptable alternative options (e.g., access to physiotherapy, nutritional support, strength and conditioning and psychological support) or skills (such as self-control, resilience and refusal; Botvin et al., 2001; Haegerich & Tolan, 2008) to help them overcome these issues, they will be less likely to feel that they have 'no choice' but to dope.

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