Learning to Dope: Accounts from Professional Baseball Players

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Recent revelations of systematic state-sponsored doping among Russian athletes (McLaren, 2016) demonstrated that doping in sport remains a contemporary sport management issue. An early impetus for investigations into Russian doping began when the German television broadcast station ARD, with the cooperation of two whistleblowers, aired a documentary feature on doping among Russian athletes. This case highlighted the challenges of managing and understanding doping. Without whistleblowers doping scandals, such as the Russian case, may remain hidden. And access to insiders – either those who dope or administer doping substances – is difficult to acquire. The taboo surrounding doping makes it a secretive affair and a code of silence exists among athletes (Fincoeur, van de Ven, & Mulrooney, 2015). This is disappointing as policy makers could learn much about doping practice and the impact on the individual if athletes were willing to openly discuss their introduction to, and continual practice of doping. In this study, we shed light on this topic by interviewing recently retired professional baseball players who have admitted to doping about their practice.

While there has been previous research on athletes who admit to doping (e.g., Engelberg, Moston, & Skinner, 2015; Hoff, 2012; Kirby, Moran, & Guerin, 2010), these studies involved athletes who doped prior to contemporary anti-doping policies (e.g., WADA), sanctioned independent reports (e.g., the Mitchell report, 2007), and from sports with limited commercial value (e.g., powerlifting). Furthermore, previous research has examined individual athletes’ motives to dope (Waddington, 2000), yet it is deemed likely that doping is not an individual affair, but exists within a network of others (Connor, 2009). Knowing how athletes learn about, engage in, and maintain doping practices, while also operating within a network of other dopers and suppliers would provide important insights for policy makers.

To investigate this issue we adopt Wenger’s (1998) community of practice framework. Wenger argues that learning is a social process. It is not a simple process of knowledge transmission and acquisition and is not done in isolation. We learn from practice and from others to whom we interact. Learning need not be formal, and in fact, people may learn with a community without being aware of their own membership. For example, opinions change over time without people realizing how or when this happened. Knowledge is not only shared, but also changed and created through negotiated practices. In Wenger and Lave’s (1991) seminal example, apprentices often learned through observations of, and interactions with other apprentices, rather than just from a master. This also explains how new knowledge can be created by newcomers to a community, rather than just passed down from one generation to the next. Finally, Wenger’s framework argues that learning is inherently tied to identity, and as we learn our identity is influenced. By applying Wenger’s framework to baseball players’ recounting their doping practices we will be able to provide a nuanced account of doping.

This studying is in progress and involves interviewing former professional baseball players (anticipated final sample 8–12) who have admitted to doping during their career. A narrative life history (Plummer 2001) method is being employed where the athlete is interviewed on their life and relationship with doping. Preliminary results indicate that initiation into doping is unplanned, unsystematic, while doping is extolled, rationalized, and non-stigmatized. This is in contrast to Brissonnaeau (2010) model of athletes’ transition into doping, and popular cultural accounts of athletes’ remorse over doping. Furthermore, doping appears to occur as a loosely or uncoupled network with athletes serving as brokers for the initiation of members. As more data is collected we will continue to develop insights, which will be presented alongside implications for policy during our presentation.