The Legitimacy of The World Anti-Doping Agency: A Double-Edged Sword

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The problem of doping has become one of the biggest challenges to the governance of sport. After a myriad of doping scandals in the 1990’s (Hunt, 2011), the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) was designed as a cross-sector social partnership to regulate and monitor the implementation of anti-doping policy across Olympic sports. However, 20 years since the creation of WADA, it appears we are no closer to doping free sport as anti-doping policy remains ineffective (Dimeo & Møller, 2018; Houlihan, 2014). A body of research has suggested the importance of legitimacy for WADA in regulating anti-doping (McDermott, 2015; McDermott, Henne & O’Connor, 2013; Toohey & Beaton, 2017).

Legitimacy is defined as the perception that an organisation’s purpose and behaviours are congruent with the beliefs and expectations of its audiences (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby, Biektime & Haack, 2017). Simply put, when an organisation is legitimate, its role is taken for granted as audiences do not consider alternative arrangements and give their behavioural support to the organisation with minimal scrutiny (Biekteine, 2011; Tost, 2011). There is ample evidence to support the assertion that legitimacy is a key characteristic that underpins organisational performance and survival (e.g., Hamilton, 2006; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyse: (1) how has WADA’s legitimacy been challenged during and following high-profile cases? and (2) how has WADA responded during these periods to manage its legitimacy?

Four high-profile subcases that generated widespread media coverage for WADA were identified: (1) the whereabouts system (2) Lance Armstrong (3) therapeutic usage exemptions (4) Russian Olympic doping scandal. Archival data from media sources and organisational documents were used to source information about the content of challenges and responses. The process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to generate subcase-specific and global themes in the data. Coding was initially deductive using the concepts of legitimacy challenges (Deephouse et al., 2017), multi-level legitimacy theory (Biekteine & Haack, 2015), and a typology of institutional responses (Oliver, 1991). Coded data then informed inductive theme generation.

The analysis revealed that WADA’s legitimacy has faced increasingly severe challenges changing from challenging WADA’s performance to its very existence. The compulsory nature of anti-doping has allowed WADA to dismiss challenges from audiences perceived as unable to effect change and prioritise the legitimacy judgements of audiences that it values for survival. Further, WADA has increased its capabilities from regulatory monitoring to include investigative and sanctioning powers to remain legitimate. These findings contribute to our understanding of the problems WADA has faced in regulating anti-doping supporting WADA’s lack of perceived legitimacy as an explanatory factor. Consequently, there is a need for organisational reform through improved transparency, greater external oversight, diversified funding, and increased representation of athletes to remedy this. Finally, the study of WADA’s legitimacy provides implications for the governance of other transnational regimes.