Trustworthiness and doping behaviour from elite athletes’ point of view

Over the last decades, numerous doping cases have revealed that doping in the field of high-performance sports and in particular cycling is an endemic problem (Houlihan, 2008; Bette, Kühnle & Thiel, 2012; Haug, 2006). Negative headlines in the media or the exit of public broadcast stations from live coverage of the Tour de France emphasize the fact that doping represents a great danger for the trustworthiness of sports itself (Meinberg, 2010).

National and international anti-doping agencies (NADA/WADA) and corresponding jurisdictions are assigned to fight against doping to establish doping-free and equal conditions in high-performance sports (Haug, 2006; Augustin, 2007). In many cases, anti-doping agencies and sports federations are criticized by the public for their inability to fight against doping because of an ineffective anti-doping program with insufficient drug-testing frequency and quality. Some institutions are even seen as unwilling to fight doping as the result of a lack of integrity (Bette & Schimank, 2006). Regarding athletes’ attitudes towards doping, it is important to realize the athletes’ degree of perceived trustworthiness, which consists of ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995) in regard to competitors on the one hand, and the perceived trustworthiness of various teams, organisations and supervisory and control authorities within and outside the field of sports on the other hand (Petroczi & Strauß, 2015). If an athlete believes his or her competitors are acting in an untrustworthy way, or believes that sports' organisations are unable or unwilling to fight doping, it would involve considerable risk, from an athlete’s point of view, for such an athlete to remain ‘clean’. This is because of the athlete’s acceptance of a competitive disadvantage compared with athletes using doping substances. Trust is a relatively rare explored field in sport research apart from the adapted trust model in the context of doping by Dreiskämper, Pöppel, Westmattelmann, Schewe & Strauß (2016). Hence, this paper aims to contribute first empirical data concerning (a) the perceived trustworthiness of the athlete’s environment, (b) the
doping behaviour in elite-sport and (c) the effectiveness of anti-doping measures from the athletes’ point of view.

Therefore, we asked professional cyclists from Germany (n=45) and elite-athletes from the German national squad in track and field (n=104) about their perceptions of trustworthiness in various actors in professional cycling respectively track and field. We further asked them to evaluate the effectiveness of different anti-doping measures. Furthermore, we collected data about doping behaviour in their sport using the randomized response technique (RRT) (Warner, 1965) to guarantee absolute anonymity. All athletes are testing-pool-members and have a high level of expertise and performance in sports that have high doping prevalence. The data was collected by a partial-standardized interview.

In the first step, findings show that the perceived trustworthiness of the German national anti-doping agency is rated very similar by both groups. The ability and integrity are rated relatively high, whereas benevolence is rated relatively low. These results are adequate, because an anti-doping agency should have strict rules and act accordingly. By contrast, we identified a crisis of integrity for the German track and field federation. This result goes in line with the public debate about the international track and field federation (IAAF). A very high ability is attributed to all competitors but opponents from foreign countries and other teams face a lack of benevolence and integrity, which leads to a low perceived trustworthiness of these competitors.

Up to 8% of the participants admit that they have been offered doping and even up to 12% admit that they have previously used banned substances and/or methods. The RRT results confirm the low perceived trustworthiness of the competitors. 22% up to 44% of the athletes think that their German competitors are doping sinners and even 73% up to 88% think that their opponents from foreign countries cheat by using doping.

In the third and last step, athletes rated different anti-doping measures, which could also be used to (re-)build trust in elite-sport. From the elite-athletes’ perspective, improved diagnostics to
enhance detectability of banned substances and methods is by far the most effective weapon in the fight against doping. As second and third important measures, cyclists rated an anti-doping law that criminalises the usage of doping and the application of an Athlete Biological Passport (ABP) to identify doping indirectly. Compared to that finding, athletes from track and field believe that raising the frequency of control and executing follow-up controls to analyse old samples with improved detection methods are the next best options. Both groups agree that a leniency program or increased fines are the least effective measures to fight the doping issue.

The environment of elite-sport is afflicted with doubt. The competitors are perceived as less benevolent and integer. In addition, especially the track and field federation is attributed a low amount of integrity. Therefore, major changes are necessary to fight the doping issue effectively and rebuild trust. This study presents the first empirical results in this field and may reform elite-sport and in particular the design of anti-doping work.

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References


