Competitor – an offender or victim of doping control as viewed by young athletes

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Summary

Study aim: To evaluate the perception of motivations and responsibility for doping abuse by young athletes.
Material and methods: A group of male volleyball players (n = 44) and of female combat athletes (n = 26), all aged 15 – 17 years and having 4 – 8 years of training experience, were studied. By applying questionnaire technique, two issues were studied: responsibility of the athlete and of the coach/medical team, and the motivations of doping abuse.
Results: Young athletes decidedly declined to pronounce either side not guilty of doping abuse, the male subjects being more critical and severe than the female ones. All of them attributed doping abuse to exaggerated ambitions of athletes and, to a much lesser extent to the pressure of sport environment.
Conclusions: The results enable a better understanding of psychological mechanisms of giving in to the temptation of doping abuse and, thus, may help preventing it.

Key words: Doping finding – Motivation – Responsibility

Introduction

This report was inspired by the results of psychological analysis conducted following the doping abuse incident at the Olympic Games in Beijing (2008) when the 4th place won by Polish kayakers had been revoked due to positive result of doping tests revealed in one athlete. It was found that young athletes, about 17 years old, perceived the consequences of positive doping control as a non-random risk and, thus, as a definite personal responsibility [8]; they considered guilty, first of all, the athlete, the laboratory personnel and hosts – to a minor degree. Those views were suggestive of a simplified perception by young subjects, who paid little attention to external circumstances that were beyond control and awareness of the athlete. However, the authors did not consider internal causes, as defined by the theory of attribution, of those directly implicated.

Another fact that prompted this study was a charge of doping abuse of a Polish cross-country skier at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the banned substance detected at test and re-test being erythropoietin (EPO). The objective of the study was an evaluation of the attitude of young athletes as to what extent the detected doping abuse evidences the abuser’s guilt and responsibility and what might be her motivation. Further, their attitudes might, indirectly, throw light on the ethical and social maturity of young athletes, on their sense of tolerance or disagreement with breaking norms and rules, on their sense of freedom and responsibility for their actions, or, their feeling of being influenced by social or sport structures [2,5,6,12,15]. When asking questions affected by sudden, unexpected circumstances, the objective, external factors are essential as these determine the form and mode of psychological observation [9,13], although no predictions and hypotheses as to the answers are made.

One of the first factors to be considered is the spread of information on the incident. Doping exposure of the Polish skier had been widely known and commented; the young people whose views were evaluated were fully aware of the object of their interest. The next important factor is the moment of psychological analysis – this ought to precede all official statements and explanations as the time lag and the associated “information noise” directly affects the evaluators. It should be emphasised that at the time of preparing this paper, all the circumstances of that doping incident were far from being elucidated; the accused skier and all the personnel implicated declined to admit a conscious doping abuse and the prosecutor’s...
office refused to start the proceedings. Moreover, the undertaken analysis focused only on a wilful doping abuse, presuming that an intentional offence results in a moral and legal liability [17]. Of course, no attempt has been made at verifying the truth in media reports or the views of commentators as this is the basic principle, all the more the soon expected verdict of WADA may be in favour of the accused athlete.

Generally, one overestimates own freedom of choice and the capacity to control the events until negative effects of own actions have been experienced. In contrast, in case of unfavourable events, the freedom of choice and the control capacity become underestimated and the resulting negative effects are being attributed to the incorrigible and non-modifiable external factors. That pattern is characteristic of young people who usually idealise and simplify the reality, being convinced of world’s fairness [8,10]. That belief distorts, however, the consistency of our assessment of incidences with the more general view that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve. Such belief enables regarding the reality as stable, predictable and controllable which has been contradicted by history. Considering all those deliberations, the aim of this study was to acquire knowledge about the feelings of adolescent subjects, at the onset of their sport careers, related to attributive (causal) considering the observed events. It was also hoped that the collected data might throw light on the perceived freedom of choice and the responsibility of their senior sport mates.

Material and Methods

A group of 44 male volleyball players and of 26 female combat athletes (taekwon-do and boxing), all aged 15 – 17 years and having 4 – 8 years of training experience, volunteered to participate in the study. They were requested to fill anonymous questionnaires twice, within a month after the verdict of doping laboratory had been announced. At the time of the study there was no official statement as to who had been responsible for doping abuse. An experimental questionnaire “Perception of the risk of doping abuse” was applied and two batches of information were obtained:

– Ranking of 4 hypothetical motives of doping abuse (pressure of family and friends, athlete’s ambition, pressure of sport community, athlete’s financial status) and

– Responsibility of the athlete and her coach/medical team, by putting a mark on a 0 – 100% analogue scale.

For computational purposes, ranks were converted to rank points: 4 points corresponded to Rank 1 and 1 point to Rank 4. Chi-square function in the logarithmic form [13] was used in data analysis. The level of p≤0.05 was considered significant and that of p≤0.10 as indicating tendency.

Results

The percentage distributions of responsibility attributed to the presumably guilty athlete and to her coach/medical team by young athletes are shown in Fig. 1. No differences between male and female athletes were found in that respect but the distribution pattern was more even in case of the coach/medical team compared with the accused athlete herself. In that latter case, male athletes tended to attribute full responsibility to the athlete (not shown in the graph) more frequently than the female ones (41 and 19%; p<0.10) and the same was true for the coach/medical team: male athletes more frequently than the female ones attributed to that team at least 75% of responsibility (43 and 23%, respectively; p<0.10). Attributing (all subjects combined) full responsibility to the doping abuser was significantly more frequent than that of the coach/medical team (33 and 14%, respectively; p<0.01) Average percentage attributions of responsibility to the athlete or the coach/medical team amounted to 70 and 61% by male athletes, respectively, and to 69 and 49%, respectively, by the female ones. No significant gender- or object-related differences were noted.

Fig. 1. Percentage distributions of responsibility attributed to the athlete and to her coach/medical team by young male (n = 44) and female (n = 26) athletes

Mean rank points assigned to various motives of doping abuse by young male and female athletes are presented in Fig. 2. Athlete’s ambition was considered highest, the pressure of sport community being nearly as high. Male athletes tended (p<0.10) to put more emphasis on the ambition motive and less on the financial one, compared with the female athletes. When the evaluations of male and female athletes were combined, ambition proved significantly (p<0.05) more weighing than athlete’s financial status.
In addition, the frequencies of ranking various motives highest (Rank 1) were analysed (Fig. 3). No male subject ranked financial motives first in contrast to 5 female athletes; that difference in frequency proved significant (p<0.001), otherwise no gender-related differences were noted.

Fig. 2. Mean rank points assigned to various motives of doping abuse by young male (M) and female (F) athletes

Legend: FF – Pressure of family and friends; A – Athlete’s ambition; SC – Pressure of sport community; FS – Financial status; * Male and female athletes tend to differ (p<0.10); ** Significantly (p<0.05) higher compared with FF or CS

Fig. 3. Percentages of young male (M) and female (F) athletes who ranked various motives of doping abuse as most important (Rank 1, i.e. 4 rank points)

For explanation of symbols see Fig. 2

Discussion

The presented analysis of opinions of young athletes on the responsibility and possible motives for doping abuse ought to be viewed with caution due to the relatively small number of respondents. Nonetheless, in view of the attribution theory, the results give some ground for a prospective explanation by young athletes of what the respondent, an evaluator, might do under similar circumstances; this contributes to the understanding of psychological mechanisms of giving in to the temptation of doping abuse [1,7,10,11,14]. It is to be mentioned, however, that the sports the studied subjects were practicing might have affected the results – team games are decidedly less prone to doping abuse than combat sports but the subjects were considered too young to make that issue important. Yet, further studies are needed to clarify that issue.

The presented analysis suggests that a full innocence of the doping abuser and her coach/medical team (CMT) is, in the eyes of young athletes, purely incidental; yet, the CMT tended to be judged more leniently as followed from the significantly lower frequency of putting full responsibility on CMT than on the abuser.

According to the attribution theory, the perpetrator’s intention determines the extent of his/her responsibility. In view of that, the intention-guilt relation was markedly lower in case of CMT than of the athlete, as presumed by the young athletes. That, in turn, would confirm the so-called attributional inclination, i.e. overestimation of internal (e.g. personality) factors and underestimation of the external (circumstantial) ones [3,12,16]. Irrespective of the side to be blamed, both male and female athletes similarly avoided acquitting opinions although differed in the degree of accusing them, male athletes being more uncompromising than their female mates.

Another objective was to investigate into the self-knowledge of young athletes on giving in to the temptation of doping abuse – how they understood the abuser’s decision and the motives that prompted her to break the barrier of unlawfulness. In that latter case, ambitions were thought to be the predominant motive, the pressure of the sport community coming next, other motives playing a secondary role. The three non-dominant motives could have been regarded as factors enabling understanding, rationalising and even justifying the doping abuse. Those motives are secondary and instrumental and, to some extent, are beyond the internal motivation, being thus only loosely associated with the intention and guilt. Those observations emphasise the criticism of respondents with regard to the abuser’s ambitions.

It was expected that the results of this study would throw light on the ethical and social maturity of young athletes, on the feeling of responsibility of the abuser and of her managers, as well as on some more general issues: whether young people involved in sport structures perceive themselves as free, autonomous and independent, or, as being manipulated by those responsible for their sport activities [1,4]. That latter possibility is associated with the not uncommon depersonalisation or “learned helplessness” [3], when a young athlete resigns from personal subjectivity. An answer to that question
is contained in emphasising the significance of pressure exerted by specific structures of sport community, and is suggestive of the awareness of young athletes of insufficient observance of social norms and of the “victory at all costs” attitude.

When assessing gender-related differences in opinions, male athletes proved more critical and uncompromising than the female ones; as many as 64% of male respondents considered the abuser’s ambitions the principal and decisive motive while female subjects were less categorical in that respect, the ambition motive being indicated by only 15 – 50% of them. Moreover, no male athlete indicated financial motives as dominant, while nearly 40% of the female respondents considered that motive important or very important. That might suggest that female athletes were more realistic than their male counterparts. In conclusion, the results enable a better understanding of psychological mechanisms of giving in to the temptation of doping abuse and, thus, may help preventing it.

References


