

To cheat or not to cheat? Researchers uncover the moral dilemmas of doping

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Elite athletes are less likely to take banned substances if they consider the morality of what they are doing, and not just the health consequences of doping, according to a new study led by the University of

Birmingham and funded by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

In the study, conducted in UK, Denmark, and Greece, 1,500 athletes were asked to complete a questionnaire about two hypothetical [doping](#) situations. Participants were male and female elite football players, competing just below professional levels.

In the first of the hypothetical scenarios, the athletes were asked to imagine they were trying to improve their performance after a period of disappointing results, while in the second, they were asked to imagine themselves in a situation, where they were recovering from an injury. Following each scenario, they were asked to indicate how likely they were to take the banned substance if they were in that situation.

Across the three countries, footballers indicated a relatively higher likelihood of doping for injury recovery than for performance enhancement.

The researchers looked specifically at the emotions and attitudes toward doping anticipated by the survey participants. They found that decisions were likely to be made based on how much guilt a person was expecting to feel. Some athletes found they were able to disengage, or distance themselves from the moral aspects of doping, leading to lower feelings of guilt. For example, they thought that doping is acceptable because it helps their team, and is a way to maximize their potential. Or they might feel it is acceptable because other athletes also dope. These justifications suppress the guilt athletes expected to feel, which is what prevents us from cheating. These lower feelings of guilt, in turn, were associated with greater likelihood to dope.

Dr. Maria Kavussanu, in the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Studies at the University of Birmingham, who led the study explained: "If an [athlete](#) can justify their actions to themselves,

they will feel less guilt, which makes them more likely to dope. If we reinforce the message that doping is cheating, athletes are less likely to do it."

The researchers were also interested in finding out what factors might reduce these justifications, which would ultimately allow athletes to suppress their feelings of guilt and use banned substances. The key factor which seems to protect athletes from doping was moral identity. This means how important it was to the players to be a moral person, and how strong their moral values, such as being fair or honest, were. Those players who had a strong moral identity did not use justifications for doping, expected to feel more guilt for doping, and ultimately were less likely to dope.

The researchers also found that coaches' behavior, and the 'performance climate' in which athletes were training also had a significant effect on their doping likelihood. If coaches were creating a climate in which players who made a mistake were penalised, or if they gave undue attention to the best players, athletes were more likely to turn towards banned substances. The coach can therefore play an important role in doping prevention.

The research findings are forming the basis for anti-doping interventions aimed at challenging players' attitudes towards banned substances. Funded by the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Olympic Committee, the team has developed a series of interventions which highlight the moral angle through stories of athletes who have been affected by these issues, and what it has meant for them, and for their team mates and families.

"A lot of anti-doping messages warn athletes about taking supplements and stress the consequences of being found out—you might be fined, or banned from the sport," adds Dr. Kavussanu. "But our research shows

there could be a powerful moral message that is being overlooked in current anti-doping interventions worldwide. This type of messaging teaches athletes that doping is cheating, and that it has consequences for fellow athletes and team members, as well as for your own health."

Tony Cunningham, Senior Manager, Education at the World Anti-Doping Agency, says: "This study is another important step in further understanding the behaviour of doping and it gives valuable insights into how interventions can be tailored to more effectively prevent it from happening. Engaging athletes at a moral level is important, but how to do this and the types of messages an athlete should receive can be difficult to know. The research team have helped to better understand how these messages can be framed.

"The study also highlights another important aspect in the prevention of doping, that of the athlete's environment. The type of climate that is promoted by coaches and those closest to the athlete can have a significant impact on how likely someone is to dope, and this may be done unwittingly, making it all the more important for education interventions to address going forward."

Published in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, the study was led by Dr. Maria Kavussanu from the University of Birmingham, with co-investigators from California State University, the University of Leipzig and the University of Thessaly.

More information: Kavussanu, M., Yukhymenko, M., Elbe, A. M., & Hatzigeorgiadis, A. (2019). 'Integrating moral and achievement variables to predict doping likelihood in football: A cross-cultural investigation.' *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*.

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