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Limitations and duties: elite athletes’ perceptions of compliance with anti-doping rules

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to examine how elite athletes perceive their own responsibilities and possibilities to be compliant with the anti-doping regulations, and to draw conclusions about what these perceptions mean in relation to the legitimacy of the anti-doping system. A qualitative research design, with interviews conducted with athletes globally, was employed to capture elite sportspersons’ views on anti-doping policy and procedures. The analysis was based on a theoretical framework on legitimacy. The findings show that athletes’ situation is characterized by limited information and a lack of leeway. At the same time, athletes find themselves obliged to be dutiful. We discuss the complex situation of simultaneously facing perceived limitations and duties, and consider the limits that athletes experience in relation to compliance, which may place the legitimacy of the anti-doping system at risk.

Introduction

The work against doping in sports has predominantly focused on the athletes, placing responsibility for compliance at the individual level (Henne 2015). The underlying principle of the anti-doping regulations is strict liability (WADA 2015), which entails that athletes are responsible for any prohibited substance that enters their body, irrespective of their own intent. A much discussed measure, aimed at the athlete, is the Whereabouts system (Hanstad, Skille, and Thurston 2009; De Hon, Eijs, and Havenga 2011; Overbye and Wagner 2014; Valkenburg, De Hon, and Van Hilvoorde 2014), which requires that athletes report their exact location during a 60-minute time slot every day of the year for the possibility of out-of-competition (OOC) doping controls. The storing of test samples and the introduction of so-called “Athlete Biological Passports” (ABP), moreover, carry a potential threat to the individual athlete’s integrity, due to lack of control over sensitive data (cf. e.g., Devriendt et al. 2019). Additionally, the testing procedure itself is a measure that invades the privacy of the individual as it includes procedures such as supervised urine testing when the athlete is required to expose themselves to members of the testing team (see, e.g., Waddington 2010; Elbe and Overbye 2013).
Further, it is primarily the athlete who is blamed, punished and publicly shamed in a doping conviction (Overbye et al. 2015). This emphasis on controlling and sanctioning the individual could mean that other, ambient factors affecting doping behaviour are disregarded (Henne 2015). Recent studies have for example highlighted the impact of athlete support personnel (ASP) on athletes regarding doping and anti-doping matters (Allen et al. 2017; Backhouse and McKenna 2012; Dikic et al. 2013; Engelberg and Moston 2015; Mazanov et al. 2015; Jalleh, Donovan, and Jobling 2014). Parallel to this body of research, the role and responsibility of ASP has been recognized by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA): the latest edition of the global regulating framework for anti-doping, the World Anti-Doping Code (WADC), now incorporates sharpened regulations regarding the athlete’s entourage (WADA 2015). Hence, the question of compliance seems to involve more than just control of the individual athlete’s behaviour.

Even if athletes generally support the policy of anti-doping (see, e.g., Backhouse et al. 2007; Dunn et al. 2010; Sas-Nowosielski and Świątkowska 2007; De Hon, Eijs, and Havenga 2011), there are indications that the abovementioned procedures within the anti-doping system are seen as problematic from the point of view of athletes (see, e.g., Elbe and Overbye 2013; Overbye and Wagner 2014; Hanstad, Skille, and Thurston 2009; Valkenburg, De Hon, and Van Hilvoorde 2014). For athletes to take responsibility and be compliant with anti-doping rules, they need proper prerequisites including access to information and education. Education is stated in the WADC to “preserve the spirit of sport” (WADA 2015, 98), and it is emphasized that all signatories to the WADC have the responsibility to collaborate, and implement and evaluate educational efforts.

Considering the comprehensive measures aimed at the athlete, it could be assumed that there is an interest in how athletes perceive anti-doping procedures and governance. However, empirical research regarding the possibilities for athletes to be compliant with the rules is scant. Although athletes are represented in decision-making bodies, their influence is minimal, which could leave their voices unheard (Houlihan 2004; Schneider 2009; Dimeo 2010; Waddington 2010; Kreft 2011; also, Christiansen and Gleaves 2013; Valkenburg, De Hon, and Van Hilvoorde 2014). A profound concern in policy making, then, ought to be to gain an understanding of how the governed perceive their responsibilities and obligations. If policies are made without recognition of what they mean in practice for the ones they apply to, there is a risk of a gap between liability according to regulations and what is seen as reasonable or possible to pursue. For a system to be recognized as legitimate, it is important that procedures within that system be perceived as just (Tyler 2006b); this will, in turn, have further impact on compliance. Our purpose in this article is to examine how elite athletes perceive their own responsibilities and possibilities to be compliant with the anti-doping regulations, and to draw conclusions about what these perceptions mean in terms of the legitimacy and sustainability of the anti-doping system.

**Procedural justice, legitimacy and compliance**

The anti-doping system has come to be a global enterprise under WADA in its efforts to harmonize rules and create equality for all athletes. The WADC is WADA’s steering document containing the rules that sportspersons and organizations worldwide are expected to adhere to. However, rules and decisions made by authorities will be of little importance
if people do not follow them. Adherence and compliance is central to the function of rules and therefore it is critical to understand what makes people follow them.

Laws and regulations can be enforced through rewards and threat of punishment, from a so-called “instrumental” perspective on compliance. During the 20th century, governance in the judicial field mainly focused on this kind of deterrence approach (Tyler 2006b). However, governance, in general, has undergone a change, from being reactive to using a more proactive approach as an instrumental, reactive approach to compliance has been shown to have a minimal effect on how people behave (Tyler 2006b). With a proactive approach based on normative dimensions, the focus is, instead, on finding ways of ensuring that people view the authority as trustworthy and legitimate. A normative view of compliance means focusing on a regulatory system consistent with the values of the people involved. This provides conditions for a legitimate system, which includes acceptance of regulations and rule following of free will (in contrast to fear of disciplinary actions). This ought to be as true for the anti-doping authorities as for the authorities in wider society. However, though there are elements of preventive work, a reactive approach based on detection and deterrence by severe punishment has been found to be the main focus in the governance of anti-doping (Mazanov, Huybers, and Connor 2011; Stewart and Smith 2008). It therefore seems relevant to further examine the legitimacy of the anti-doping system from the athletes’ perspective as a basis for a discussion about regulating performance-enhancing drugs and methods in sports.

Legitimacy can be defined as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). This understanding of legitimacy emphasizes the actions of the authority within a system, which can include the creation of laws, policy making, practical matters and the treatment of those involved. The relationship between procedures consistent with people’s values and legitimacy has been stressed in the literature for several decades under the concept of procedural justice. The notion was originally elaborated by Tyler (1990) based on earlier work by Thibault and Walker and Leventhal (see Nagin and Telep 2017). It has been shown empirically how procedural justice and legitimacy are associated and have implications for how people react in relation to rules and rule compliance (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2006a; Gonzalez and Tyler 2013; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Jackson 2014). The early theories on procedural justice were mainly applied in law enforcement settings but have since been developed further and are now recognized within areas such as jurisprudence, politics, management and working environment (Tyler 2006b). The conclusion to be drawn from this body of research is that legitimacy regarding policy and authority is strongly connected to perceptions of justice and fairness in regulatory procedures. The perception of procedural justice, and its association with legitimacy, has an impact on people’s motivation to act according to the rules (Jackson et al. 2012; Murphy and Cherney 2012). Legitimacy is strongly connected to compliance and has an influence on the degree to which people are willing to cooperate and give up power in favour of the authority and also on their willingness to contribute to solving problems within the system (Hough et al. 2010).

What, then, does it take for a regulatory system to be perceived as procedurally just? Tyler (2006b) describes a number of non-instrumental factors, which he terms relational
criteria, that are important for people’s favourable perceptions of how they are treated and how they judge the actions within a system. The first relational criterion is interpersonal treatment, which concerns people’s perception whether they are being treated with dignity and respect and whether their civil rights are respected, e.g., whether it is possible for an individual to be heard in processes that concern them. Trustworthiness of authorities is the second criterion for procedural justice and denotes that the authority’s intentions are perceived as good and that they appear credible and reliable, e.g., by being in the best interests of those involved. A third criterion is neutrality of decision making, which implies that the authority is perceived as impartial (Tyler 2006b) and that decisions are made in a neutral, transparent and rule-based way (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009). The opportunity to participate in decision making is the fourth criterion and means that people’s perspectives are considered in decision-making processes, i.e., individuals can have a voice and are listened to. A group that is underrepresented or not represented at all in decision making may feel a diminished sense of ownership and perceive partiality in the determination of policy (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009).

These criteria of procedural justice therefore communicate the message that the members of a community are respected and valued. Procedures that are perceived as fair and that are seen as contributing to people’s control in a specific practice are linked to legitimacy and, thus, lead to motivation to meet requirements.

Further, analyses of legitimacy within a social order such as the anti-doping enterprise can be guided by Beetham’s theories of power and legitimacy (1991; 2013). According to Beetham, there are three dimensions of legitimacy that will successively and cumulatively justify and legitimate a power system. The first dimension concerns whether the authority of a certain social order acts in accordance with, and conforms to, existing rules. The second dimension concerns the extent to which the enterprise is formed in accordance with the norms and beliefs of everyone involved. The third dimension, which is of specific interest in the present context, relates to whether there are so-called “appropriate actions” from the subordinates in the system. Such actions are of the kind that work to reinforce the power and the regulations, and confirm the legitimacy of the authority and the enterprise (Beetham 2013).

The research process in this study is based on the described theoretical framework on legitimacy. We did not intend to examine legitimating beliefs; rather, our point of departure in the interpretation of the interviews was the criteria of procedural justice emanating from Tyler (2006b) and Beetham’s (2013) concept of appropriate actions. The abovementioned associations between procedural justice, legitimacy and compliance form the basis of our study.

Method

To capture athletes’ views on anti-doping policies and procedures, and the possible consequences of these for both the legitimacy of the system and compliance, we conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews globally, inspired by a theoretical framework on legitimacy throughout the research process (cf. Brinkmann and Kvale 2015; Patton 2015). The present study was preceded by a quantitative survey study (Efverström et al. 2016), which revealed aspects that needed to be further explored using a qualitative approach.
Sample

Recruitment for this study was done in connection with the abovementioned quantitative survey study, through a voluntary survey question about the respondents’ willingness to participate in an interview (Efverström et al. 2016). Out of the 261 survey respondents, 24 indicated their willingness to participate; and we conducted interviews with 13. The survey sample consisted of elite athletes in the registered testing pool of the international sports federations of athletics, basketball, skiing, and volleyball from different regions of the world. The final sample for the interview study consisted of seven men and six women from the international federations of athletics (seven athletes), skiing (five athletes) and volleyball (one athlete) from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America. When presenting our results, we refer to the athletes by code (e.g., i4 refers to interviewee number 4), sex, age, federation and region. The aim of the recruitment in the survey study and also the present interview study was to cover several sports, both individual and team, and to reach athletes from different regions of the world in order to capture a wide range of information and gain insight into a range of athletes’ perceptions of anti-doping. The purposive sampling in our study yielded variety regarding the interviewees’ background, which provided rich and comprehensive data (Patton 2015).

Procedures

An interview guide was developed based on the research aim and the knowledge gained from the quantitative study. This resulted in a scheme of semi-structured questions with the aim of compiling series of open, relevant questions relating to the key topics of interest. The interview guide was assessed in a test interview, which resulted in a few minor changes to achieve a better flow between the different sections of the interview. The test interview also familiarized the interviewer with the interview procedure for this study. Ethical approval was obtained from the regional ethics board in Uppsala, Sweden, and ethical considerations were central to every step of the process.

Ten of the semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call and three were performed face to face. Though face-to-face interviews are desirable, the fact that video calls made it possible to reach athletes from all over the world led us to combine live interviews, where economically and temporally possible, with video call interviews. The video calls allowed for communication including verbal and facial expressions and gestures, and the possibility to notice feelings of e.g., discomfort or confusion (cf. Brinkmann and Kvale 2015; Bryman 2012). There were no differences between the different types of interviews with regard to the provision of comprehensive data. The average duration of each interview was 1 hour. The sample of interviewees from geographically dispersed countries made us consider the advantages and disadvantages of using an interpreter in all interviews with non-English speakers. For example, to use a foreign language in an interview situation can affect the precision and authenticity of the data (Welch and Piekkari 2006). Also, using interpreters for interviews with non-English native speakers would potentially affect the outcome by introducing a third party (Welch and Piekkari 2006). In the context of video call interviews, a third party was considered to complicate the interview situation to the extent that we decided against using an interpreter. Nevertheless, one of the interviews was assisted by an interpreter because the interviewer and interviewee did not speak a common
language that both mastered. In twelve of the 13 interviews either one of, or both, the interviewee and interviewer did not speak their native language. In cases of possible language deficits, we have chosen to disregard the statement, while in some cases we have corrected obvious grammatical mistakes. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, a well-known qualitative approach (Bryman 2012) that offers the possibility to present the data in detail, depth and complexity (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcription of the material was part of the first step in the analysis, which entailed familiarization with the data (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999; cf. Braun and Clarke 2006). This was followed by checks of transcription accuracy, repeated reading of the text, and tentative identification of segments of interest for the study.

Initial coding, in which units of meaning were identified, was done by the first author (X.X), using the software program ATLAS.ti (Berlin, Germany) which aided the iterative coding process in which codes were constantly compared and refined (Patton 2015; Bryman 2012). Relationships between the codes were developed and codes were grouped into sub-themes and themes, where a single code could belong to more than one superior unit. All through the process of creating codes, themes and sub-themes, we constantly compared the material, both within each unit and between the units, identifying the distinguishing features. The sub-themes and themes were elaborated in a process, involving all authors, of mind mapping and reviewing the units at different levels (codes, themes, and sub-themes).

The analysis led to two overarching themes related to the subject of this study, the limited athlete (limited in terms of issues of compliance), and the dutiful athlete. For example, as an illustration of the construction of themes, the three sub-themes under the theme of the dutiful athlete were: contribute to anti-doping and sport; be disciplined, and be responsible. The two codes that formed the last of these sub-themes were: guilt and anxiety; and prove one’s innocence. See Appendix 1 for a schematic overview of the construction of sub-themes and themes.

The themes of the limited and the dutiful athlete, respectively, are presented below as different aspects of the athlete’s position, with illustrative excerpts from the interviews quoted. Both themes contain elements discussed by all the participants, and it was conveyed that the topics they discussed are of concern to all athletes. Although our sample is small this implies common experiences and perceptions among athletes worldwide.

**Analysis**

The analysis of the interviews showed that the athletes’ situation regarding compliance with anti-doping regulations is complex. On the one hand, it is evident that athletes have little leeway, which restricts their opportunities to be compliant. In this way they are limited as athletes. On the other hand, the interviewees discussed obligations to promote anti-doping; together with being disciplined and at times expressing anxiety and guilt, this constitutes the theme of the dutiful athlete. Below, we will elaborate on these themes of the athlete’s position and analyse how the experienced conditions may jeopardize perceptions of the legitimacy of the anti-doping system.
The limited athlete

For athletes to be able to conform to anti-doping regulations, they ought to be able to take responsibility and have control over their own situation. In other words, the athletes’ obligations could be expected to be commensurate with their opportunities. For instance, in the interviews there were athletes who reported that they had knowledge and access to information and support, which enabled them to take control over their sporting lives, including the anti-doping processes and procedures. Several interviewees, however, described a lack of control, which limited their leeway. This was mainly due to insufficient access to information, an unequal situation in relation to the sports entourage, and minimal influence in decision making. To investigate what the perceived limitations could mean for the legitimacy of the system, we employed theories of procedural justice (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2006a; also, Gonzalez and Tyler 2013; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Jackson 2014) to analyse results in this section.

Limited information

Some interviewees testified about athletes’ lack of information and lack of knowledge about anti-doping procedures, the prohibited list, and other regulations. This could have a substantial impact on an athlete’s ability to adhere to anti-doping regulations and be compliant. Some interviewees explicitly mentioned a lack of education, as in the following:

I think that in clubs … and in sports colleges, there is very poor information. […] I think that it would have been good if the [National Anti-Doping Organization] would have provided clear information about what’s OK and what is not OK … .

i13, female, 21–26 years old, International Ski Federation (FIS), Western Europe

In this quotation, the athlete expressed concern about how education is provided. Although she considered herself informed about the anti-doping regulations she described a situation where, in her experience, upcoming elite-level athletes do not always get the requisite information. Another example of criticism towards organizations related to anti-doping education is the following statement:

I think that WADA should give more education to the athletes. Especially about this programme for filling out the Whereabouts form. At first it was very difficult for me to know how to fill it out. So it would be good to have more education there. And of course I would like to have more information about the rules, how the tests are carried out and what the rules are. Because often there are these rules, but they’re in English, they aren’t translated. And I think it would be useful to get this kind of information about what we can do and how it should be done.

i9, male, 21–25 years old, International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), Central Asia

This athlete emphasized the need for more education and information in his own language. There were also athletes who had apparently had no preparation for anti-doping procedures. They described their first encounter with a doping control as a total surprise.
and as causing discomfort. Describing his first urine doping test, one of the interviewees said,

Yeah … I got tested. By then I was … I didn’t understand what was the meaning of that. But I accepted it because I love my … my sport. […] So … so I listened to them, thinking many things about it. But when they had briefed me, I accepted it.

i7, male, IAAF, 21–25 years old, Africa

At first, this athlete was obviously not comfortable with the procedure, especially as he had not been informed about it. When athletes do not have information and basic knowledge about things that directly affect them, such as anti-doping matters, experiences of lack of control are likely. Some interviewees described troublesome situations they found themselves in because of lack of information. The following interviewee very clearly expressed how she experienced her lack of knowledge and control:

I don’t know about prohibited drugs and … I don’t know anything. So, my Federation … gave my coach some drugs and they say to us: “These are vitamins, take this.” And we don’t know what they … are giving us. After that the doping control comes. So I ask myself, “What did he give me?” Maybe he gives me these things, I don’t know, because I don’t know what he gives me. I don’t have any idea about what they do … or nothing. I don’t know about these things. Oh, these vitamin things may have something … that’s why maybe they see some things in my … when they check me, maybe they find something.

i12, female, 21–25 years old, IAAF, West Asia

The athlete expressed powerlessness, caused by insufficient information and knowledge, with regard to her coach. Her lack of knowledge and control made her scared to be caught in a doping control for taking banned substances, and be blamed for something she had little influence over.

Athletes’ limited opportunities, emanating from scarce information and knowledge, are therefore reflected both in perceptions of how anti-doping education is provided at different stages in sports and in the personal experiences of individual athletes. There is an obvious risk that athletes experience procedures as unjust when the trustworthiness of the authority responsible for providing education is questioned (cf. Tyler 2006b). Athletes’ possibilities to participate in decision making regarding anti-doping will also decrease if relevant education is lacking. Even more serious are perceptions of negative interpersonal treatment (Tyler 2006b), linked in part to the withholding of information, where athletes’ rights including the right to independence are neglected. These findings, showing a lack of procedural justice, must be considered a risk for the legitimacy of anti-doping procedures. This is especially so, considering that anti-doping regulations are mainly aimed at individual athletes, some of whom therefore have no control although they have full liability.

**Limited leeway**

Another aspect that could limit athletes’ possibility to be compliant is limited leeway due to lack of autonomy. The athletes we interviewed often seemed to view themselves in an inferior position, with little scope for action, in relation to their entourage. They described situations where doctors provided mandatory supplements or “pills” to athletes who were part of a team. Athletes could thus find themselves in a precarious situation with limited
control of their own, when belonging to a team and surrounded by coaches, physicians, etc. Below is an example of this unequal relationship between an athlete and their entourage:

Normally, it’s like this: the trainer is a trainer, and the athlete is an athlete. And the trainer often says to us athletes that “you must not even think about anything when you’re training”. So we just do what we’re told to do, and we concentrate all our time and effort on doing what we should be doing.

i9, male, 21–25 years old, IAAF, Central Asia

This interviewee apparently viewed himself “in the hands of” the coach, which left him with little room to take his own decisions or full responsibility for his actions. Our interviews furthermore show perceptions that athletes are repressed for control of their behaviour. One interviewee described how her refusal to take the medication provided by her entourage resulted in disciplinary actions and, eventually, in her quitting the team. There were other descriptions of unequal situations, characterized by unjust procedures, where athletes lost control in favour of their sports entourage. The interpersonal aspects (Tyler 2006b) of the situations described in this material are by all accounts not favourable for the athletes. It is clear that the athletes did not experience being treated with respect or dignity and in many instances their civil rights were restricted. The opportunity they had to make their voices heard in processes involving the entourage appear largely limited. This situation can be described as a discrepancy between the athletes’ obligations and their opportunities to take responsibility for their behaviour. Such indications of other people’s impact, at the expense of the athletes’ control, and the risk of sanctioning can negatively affect athletes’ perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy.

Our material shows that athletes’ leeway may be restricted as they have limited possibility to make their voices heard. Some of the interviewees stated that their reason for participating in the interview in the first place was to put forward their views. One way athletes could potentially have a formal impact on the anti-doping system is through athletes’ representatives in different commissions and organizations. However, many athletes in this study were either unaware of any representatives or critical towards their work. There were perceptions that the athletes in decision-making bodies are too few, that they have very little real influence or that the representatives lose contact with the athletes. One of the interviewees voiced his scepticism about an athletes’ committee by saying,

… like, I haven’t seen any real change. I just think those committees, like, are … what really gets done? I don’t know ⋯ [laughs]

i2, male, FIS, 31–35 years old, North America

The quotation suggests that he found the impact of the athletes’ committee to be minimal. Further, the interviewees also expressed concern about the process of selecting athletes’ representatives to decision-making organizations:

For athletes’ representatives ⋯ It’s like politics in [my country], ⋯ the president himself maybe chooses who is the best athlete for him ⋯ but not in the best interests of athletes so we have that problem again ⋯. I think they have to ⋯ give us a chance to choose who’s going to be the athletes’ representative, rather than for the bosses to choose one. They have to give us that chance ⋯ That’s the problem.

i5, female, 26–30 years old, IAAF, Africa
Obviously, this interviewee had suspicions that the representatives were hand-picked by the sports federation or politicians, rather than being real spokespersons for the athletes.

Another issue regarding athletes’ representatives was brought forward by athletes from non-English-speaking countries, who highlighted the difficulty of taking part in decision-making processes due to language barriers. Taken together, all these ways in which athletes do not have a substantial impact on anti-doping matters additionally contribute to the inferior situation that sportspersons find themselves in, of having limited leeway, which can affect their opportunities to be compliant. In an anti-doping system where procedures are recognized as just, one important factor is that athletes perceive the impersonal treatment as respectful (cf. Tyler 2006b). Not being given the opportunity to be heard or to put forward suggestions and criticisms could lead to a questioning of the impartiality and neutrality of decision making. Furthermore, when athletes find that their representatives in organizations have little influence, they might question whether their perspectives are being considered at all in decision-making processes (cf. Levi et al. 2009). Thus, perceptions of a limited leeway by being placed at the margin of decision making, in the ways shown above, could lead to distrust of the fairness of procedures (Tyler 2006b).

In conclusion, the experiences and perceptions connected to lack of information and leeway, seen in our material, could render a situation where the control of athletes’ sporting lives lies beyond themselves. If athletes perceive practices and measures they have to face in everyday life as procedurally unjust they may view the system as not entirely legitimate, which could in turn affect their compliance (cf. Tyler 2006b).

The dutiful athlete

Many athletes experience limitations in relation to control and compliance yet are ready to take on any duty connected to anti-doping. In the analysis of the empirical material an additional theme was identified: that of the dutiful athlete. This theme will be presented below and further analysed in relation to the concept of appropriate actions (Beetham 2013) to enhance the understanding of athletes’ dutifulness. The theme of the dutiful athlete was developed based on the interviewees’ descriptions of duties that athletes have to fulfil, namely to: contribute to the anti-doping system, be disciplined, and take responsibility for any doping mistake. The eagerness with which the interviewees took on duties shows to what extent they had taken on obligations that they thought come with the role of the elite sportsperson.

The duty to contribute

It is relevant to consider that many of the interviewees said they conformed to the anti-doping regulations, not just by adhering to the rules, but also by going beyond the requirements and themselves contributing to the system in different ways. There were perceptions among the participants that the elite athlete has a special responsibility to adhere to the anti-doping regulations in an almost overconforming way. This includes a willingness to be ready for doping tests “anywhere, any time” and to support anti-doping education programmes, as well as the motivation to take part in the present interview study (which is a possible bias).
The following interviewee replied to the question about his reason for participating in the interview by saying,

Oh, because I think [… ] what can you do to make it better, a better place? I do love sports, I am a dork, and I want it to be better for the next generation and I want it to be cleaner and cleaner. And just a … more supportive community around athletes that are pushing themselves to be the best they can be. I put my name to that. One hundred per cent!

i2, male, 31–35 years old, FIS, North America

It is clear from the interviews that many athletes have taken on the role of supporting, and participating in, the work against doping in sports. Some interviewees said that they, as top athletes, should contribute especially to justice in sport and to legality and legitimacy in the sporting world by doing their duty. One of them highlighted, in particular, the responsibility of Olympic athletes in this regard, because the Olympic Games are “a beautiful, and the biggest, competition” and because the whole world follows them. These views seem to suggest that athletes have to contribute to the bigger cause of preserving the legality of sports.

An overall impression from the interviews was that the athletes were taking on responsibilities for many activities connected to anti-doping, from keeping track of the prohibited list, to informing and influencing other athletes not to take supplements or drugs and even setting up their own education programmes.

… I actually started last spring in [my country], that I challenged every A-team skier in our team that they should give … one anti-doping lesson in their club or … or … it can be in some other sports club or in school or somewhere, for the children. Because … I think we athletes also have our responsibility for the future athletes.

i3, female, 31–35 years old, FIS, Western Europe

This athlete’s commitment to the self-imposed task of providing anti-doping education adds to the picture of the contributing, dutiful athlete.

Even when the interviewees stated that anti-doping activities at the individual level cause problems and difficulties, they acknowledged to varying degrees that this type of inconvenience is “part of the game”. Some saw it as their duty to actively support the regulations while others merely accepted the rules for participation in sports. There were interviewees who said they found no reason not to embrace the rules and willingly agreed to whatever was demanded of athletes. An example of this unquestioning acceptance is the following description of OOC tests:

… we were living in a flat in a blockhouse and I remember that always when the doorbell rang and I didn't know who was coming … […] it felt like … bad. Or … it feels like … OK, there is somebody coming that you don't know, some stranger to your house. It's not so nice actually … the anti-doping test. I don't like the … when they are taking the blood. And … of course, nobody wants to go and pee in front of somebody … So, that's like … not nice. But I know that's just the way it is.

i3, female, 31–35 years old, FIS, Western Europe
Even though the experience of testing was negative, this interviewee still accepted the situation. This can be interpreted as meaning that she felt it is an athlete’s duty to consider any negative aspects as part of the deal and thereby to contribute to the anti-doping system.

In sum, there were athletes who clearly expressed their intention to contribute to the anti-doping system, no matter what, sometimes in an almost visionary manner. Reasons for doing so were to preserve the legality of sports and even if the system entailed inconveniences, these were accepted as part of the game.

**The duty to be disciplined**

The interviewees generally expressed an accepting, or even docile, attitude towards anti-doping regulations and what these demand from athletes in practice. They mostly saw it as their obligation to obey the rules and said that they had no other choice. There were athletes who were concerned about having an ABP, where several biological parameters of the athlete are registered and stored, but nevertheless they felt they had no choice other than to obey the rules. Another aspect of the duty to be disciplined was that athletes had to show respect for authorities, according to some interviewees. For example, one athlete commented on the experience of giving a urine sample under supervision:

“… it’s OK because that’s their work and we must respect what they are doing.”

i5, female, 26–30 years old, IAAF, Africa

Therefore, even when athletes expressed feelings of discomfort about having a doping control officer in their home or giving a urine sample under direct observation, they said that it is an athlete’s duty to accept the circumstances out of respect for the officers and the anti-doping system.

A disciplined approach was also conveyed when interviewees said that their job as athletes was to perform in sports, follow the directives of coaches and physicians and leave the decision making to the authorities. During a conversation about the appropriate length of suspension for a doping violation, one interviewee said,

“It’s WADA’s job to do such regulations and to decide if it should be 2 years or 4 years. […] It isn’t our business, as athletes, to do that. Our business is to work and train to show high results.”

i9, male, 21–25 years old, IAAF, Central Asia

This athlete acted according to what he thought was expected of him and thus conformed to the role of the dutiful athlete. In a similar vein, some interviewees seem not to have reflected on the possibility of having their voice heard and affecting the regulations. The possibility for athletes to take an active role in anti-doping policy making was apparently not obvious to most of the interviewees. Rather, they said that athletes should be disciplined and act according to the rules.

In sum, the duty to be disciplined formed part of the theme of the dutiful athlete, as seen in interviewees’ perceptions regarding the obligation of athletes to obey anti-doping rules and show respect for the authorities, as well as leaving decision making to the authorities.
The duty to be responsible

Several interviewees talked about stress connected to following the procedures and doing “the right thing”. Furthermore, in the event of transgression, they were ready to take responsibility for the incident. One of the athletes talked about how she had forgotten to revise her Whereabouts information when she had changed plans for one weekend, and the doping control officer for an OOC test had tried to contact her:

… and I had turned the sound off [on the phone] because I wanted to sleep. Woke up and had, like, 15 missed calls … So that person had been nice and called. They don't have to call, they can just knock on your door, but this one had still called. I panicked … I'd really totally forgotten […] Well, I got a failure … and if you get three failures you get suspended … . It was really clumsy of me … but after that I got a bit more careful.

i13, female, 21–25 years old, FIS, Western Europe

The guilt this interviewee expressed about forgetting to update her Whereabouts information is obvious; the quotation also shows how, after the incident, she tried to improve in line with the regulations. This kind of guilt and anxiety for not being compliant with the rules, despite good intentions, recurred throughout our material. In one of the interviews, an athlete revealed that he had recently served a 2-year ban for taking doping substances, prescribed to him for medical reasons by a physician with apparently no special knowledge about sports and the prohibited list. The athlete himself did not seem to know where to find information about the prohibited substances list. Still, he claimed responsibility for the incident and said that it was his mistake, regardless of the complex situation involving an uninformed physician. Responsibility, or even guilt, was also expressed by some athletes who wanted to clear the name of their country or sport after doping incidents, by contributing to the anti-doping cause, e.g., by setting up anti-doping education for young athletes.

Several interviewees highlighted that athletes ought to prove their innocence in almost every way possible. A common view was that if you are “clean”, you have nothing to hide and therefore it is acceptable and appropriate to have an extensive control system. For example, many athletes did not mind having even an extended Whereabouts reporting system, as this enabled them to clearly show that they were innocent of any rule violation. Asked about the possibility of wearing a global positioning system (GPS) device for Whereabouts reporting, one athlete commented on the invasion of privacy of the Whereabouts information system. Nevertheless, he accepted this invasion and even said that a GPS transmitter was a good idea.

I think that if you're on that system, and you are an athlete … on the Whereabouts programme and drug testing, that's great. I mean, it keeps sports fair … and I don't have anything to hide, at any point, so … I think it's an invasion of privacy but … I think it's a better way to do it. And it's actually easier for everybody …

i8, male, 26–30 years old, FIS, North America

This interviewee accepted the invasion of privacy that he perceived in OOC testing, because it provided a means to prove his innocence. Taken together, a willingness to accept responsibility can be seen in athletes’ eagerness to “do the right thing”, in the expressions of guilt for and anxiety about making mistakes resulting in non-compliance, and,
furthermore, in their eagerness to prove their innocence even under conditions of comprehensive control.

In sum, the above descriptions of athletes’ perceptions of their *duty to contribute, be disciplined* and *assume liability* together form an image of an elite athlete who works hard to be dutiful and adapt to the anti-doping system.

Viewing the dutiful athlete through the lens of Beetham’s (2013) concept of appropriate actions shows that the theme fits well with subordinates who recognize the legitimacy of the authority and its regulations. By acting appropriately and accomplishing performative acts such as setting up anti-doping education programmes, being clear about “playing true” and showing their innocence by stating that they – if required - would be willing, to accept to wear a GPS tracker for surveillance, athletes can be said to show acceptance and support of, and thereby justify, the anti-doping system. Furthermore, these acts will have a binding force on the athletes themselves as performative acts create a normative engagement for the ones performing them (Beetham 2013). Through this internally binding force the acts will reinforce the athletes’ commitment to anti-doping. Therefore, the athletes’ dutifulness – that is, the performed appropriate actions – can be seen as signs of legitimization and are of significance for maintained legitimacy of the anti-doping system.

**Discussion and conclusions**

We have identified factors that limit athletes’ possibility to be compliant even though our interviewees showed a dutiful attitude towards anti-doping regulations. It has been proposed that athletes who are found to break the rules in some way – therefore, non-compliant athletes – are either cheaters or negligent (see, e.g., De Hon and Van Bottenburg 2017; WADA 2014) while our study relates to opportunities for and obligations of sportspersons. The two themes – showing a tension between limitations and duties – in fact reveal a complex situation, to which we will devote our final discussion.

Access to information and sufficient leeway to gain control is of importance for opportunities in relation to compliance with the anti-doping system. This was also the case for some of the athletes in our study, but certainly not for all. The lack of information and knowledge that many of the interviewees reported can be viewed in relation to the regulations stipulating that it is the responsibility of all signatories that information is accessible to all and that cooperation in this area is required (WADA 2015). In fact, the rules also emphasize the athlete’s own responsibility, but if there is no basic information and education from e.g., coaches, clubs and federations, even the most basic responsibilities may not be known to the individual athlete. It should be borne in mind that the interviewees in this study were elite athletes who were at the top of their sport and could be presumed to have encountered education during their careers. However, it has been shown in previous studies that athletes’ entourage, who presumably are responsible for making information available, often themselves have a low level of knowledge (Mazanov et al. 2014). The perceived lack of information and knowledge we found in our study could be seen as non-compliance at levels beyond the athlete, which, however, has consequences at the individual level. If sports and anti-doping organizations do not deliver information and education as stipulated in the WADC, this non-compliant behaviour will affect the level of the athletes. This discrepancy, between obligations and opportunities to follow regulations, can affect an athlete’s
trust in the authorities’ ability to provide prerequisites for compliance. As it further is not clear how preventive work and education should be designed to provide desired effects (Backhouse 2015; Singler 2015), efforts to develop applicable learning programmes and implement and harmonize regulations on education ought to be a priority, to create just and equal conditions for athletes worldwide. Reactive and instrumental rationalities have to date constituted anti-doping strategies (Mazanov, Huybers, and Connor 2011; Stewart and Smith 2008). We argue that a focus on what the athletes find procedurally just in the efforts against doping is essential (cf. Tyler 2006b). A proactive approach to anti-doping with emphasis on prevention, education and legitimacy provides a good basis for compliance.

Athletes’ limited influence in anti-doping matters has received much attention (Houlihan 2004; Schneider 2009; Dimeo 2010; Waddington 2010; Kreft 2011; Christiansen and Gleaves 2013; Valkenburg, De Hon, and Van Hilvoorde 2014) and our findings highlight the potential consequences of lack of influence with regard to legitimacy and compliance. The limited influence of athletes and their questioning of the fairness of procedures, shown here, connects to questions of transparency (cf. Tyler 2006b). The anti-doping enterprise has elsewhere been criticized for not being transparent (Kornbeck 2016; Møller 2014), while new features of anti-doping are being developed that could further decrease transparency and athletes’ influence. These include intelligence activities to collect information and an investigative approach towards sports and athletes (WADA 2018). There have also been discussions on anti-doping developments towards increased use of forensics and police methods (Moston and Engelberg 2017). Additionally, the transparency and proportionality of the ABP measure have been debated from both ethical and legal perspectives. It has been argued that information in the passport not should be disclosed to athletes due to an increased risk for the use of the biological information in avoiding detection. However, to withhold information from the athletes have been criticized from perspectives of integrity, so has the measure itself (the collection, processing and analysis of personal data) (Anti Doping Danmark 2015; Devriendt et al. 2019). Such developments towards an anti-doping system that lacks transparency and does not acknowledge the importance of procedural justice for athletes would place the legitimacy of the system at risk.

Furthermore, if athletes have limited scope of action, due to the behaviour of the entourage, yet are responsible for any rule violation, their situation cannot be considered procedurally just. The ASP’s impact on athletes regarding doping and anti-doping matters has previously been discussed (Allen et al. 2017; Backhouse and McKenna 2012; Dikic et al. 2013; Engelberg and Moston 2015; Mazanov et al. 2015; Jalleh, Donovan, and Jobling 2014) and our study gives an understanding of what this could mean in practice. The individual athlete’s lack of leeway has been highly topical during the last years, with findings of institutional and team-mandated doping cases revealed. One example is the case during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games that ultimately led to Russia being barred as a country from the 2018 games (Altukhov and Nauright 2018); and other cases have occurred both at club level, e.g., the Essendon Football Club, and at the level of international federations, e.g., the IAAF (Skinner and Engelberg 2018). When there are this kind of institutional forces at play, and individuals have limited leeway, they can become pawns in a game. With the responsibility that comes with the role of the athlete it is, in many cases, the individual who ultimately has to “take the hit”. The latest edition of the WADC (WADA 2015), with sharpened rules for the athletes’ entourage, can be seen as a step towards acknowledging that surrounding factors may affect doping behaviour and focusing on larger bodies and
organizations (cf. Henne 2015). Nevertheless, our study reveals a reality for sportspersons, with experiences of being controlled by coaches, doctors or team staff, leaving no leeway for the athletes to adopt the strict liability that comes with their role. If there is a lack of compliance at levels beyond the athlete, this will affect the individual and possibly result in a discrepancy between obligations and opportunities for the athlete. Implementation and harmonization processes have their difficulties, as shown through the years by globalized anti-doping rules (Houlihan 2014, 2015). Yet the results of this study show the potential outcome of harmonization deficits at the athlete level, which could put legitimacy at risk as the procedures are perceived as unjust and unfair by those involved.

Given that an anti-doping system is seen as desirable, anti-doping regulations aimed at athletes are unquestionably necessary. However, the main focus on individuals can be seen as misguided as there are other forces and circumstances that affect an athlete’s ability to adhere to regulations. Following from the risk of reduced legitimacy discussed above is the question of how experiences of procedural injustice might affect further compliance from the athletes. It has been shown that fair procedures and legitimacy are closely linked to, and even are antecedents of, compliance (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2006a; see also Gonzalez and Tyler 2013; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Jackson 2014). Considering this link, it is possible that insufficient conditions for athletes’ compliance could not only limit their opportunities, but also lead to decreased will to be compliant. This would, in the long run, have an impact on the stability and sustainability of the anti-doping enterprise.

The question, then, is how the second theme – the dutiful athlete – can be comprehended in light of these experienced limitations for compliance? Would not the regulations and constraints imposed on athletes, and their outcome in practice, result in less willingness on the part of athletes to “do their duty” with regard to the rules? One interpretation of the athletes’ dutifulness is that the appropriate actions that are performed by the athletes are signs of legitimacy (cf. Beetham 2013) and, therefore, that the anti-doping system is perceived as fundamentally legitimate. The restricting factors evident in the theme of the limited athlete, with their potential to decrease the perceptions of procedural justice, may not be severe enough to have a negative influence on the system’s legitimacy. Similarly, perceived flaws regarding procedures could be overlooked by an athlete if they have knowledge about and approve of the overarching principle of anti-doping (cf. Efverström et al. 2016). If the anti-doping system is seen as legitimate, athletes can be assumed to be more willing to cooperate, give up power in favour of authorities and themselves contribute to solve problems within the system (cf. Hough et al. 2010). These features well match the description of the dutiful athlete in our study. Following this line of reasoning, the dutiful acts of athletes could be said to confirm the legitimacy of the system (cf. Beetham 2013; Tyler 2006b).

Another way to view the dutiful athlete is to consider the unique social practice of elite sports, and the scarce possibilities for athletes to choose their working environment (Overbye 2018). If they want to compete in sports there is hardly any option other than to accept the regulations within this social order. Furthermore, athletes often face suspicion of doping when they perform well (Ryan 2015). One way to counter these suspicions is for them to show their devotion to “playing true”. Several of our interviewees emphasized the importance of proving their innocence by showing that they had nothing to hide and that they were
“clean”. This urge to prove their innocence has elsewhere been described as a *credibility contest* (Møller and Dimeo 2014) where questioning of the rules itself can open up for suspicions about the use of doping. Athletes show their innocence and purity by “imposed-voluntary compliance” (Ryan 2015, 647): by giving legitimacy to extensive control and supporting anti-doping policy they show their accountability.

In sum, taking these two depictions of the athlete in combination, it can be concluded that, in spite of limitations with regard to compliance, athletes strive to be dutiful and compliant. Thus they accomplish performative acts that confer legitimacy on the anti-doping system. To determine whether these acts emanate from a legitimate system in principle or a credibility contest is beyond the scope of this article. Although we cannot claim that the results of this study are valid in all sports settings, we nevertheless believe that this study adds to the understanding and consideration of athletes’ perspectives in anti-doping settings. Our findings show that the elite athlete’s situation with regard to anti-doping is complex. It is not a straightforward question of “just following the rules”, nor is it a simple matter of identifying “negligent” athletes. The everyday life of athletes contains possibilities and difficulties that affect their ability and, possibly, willingness to comply (cf. Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2006a; Gonzalez and Tyler 2013; Tyler and Huo 2002; Tyler and Jackson 2014). Therefore, in order for athletes to be compliant, they must be given the necessary conditions. To have no access to required information, to have limited leeway, and simultaneously to be the primary target of measures and punishments within the anti-doping system can affect long-term perceptions of the fairness of the procedures, the athletes’ support of these and the system’s legitimacy.

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**References**


**Appendix 1. Schematic overview of the construction of Sub-themes and themes.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Example of sub-theme coding</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The limited athlete</td>
<td>Lack of control</td>
<td>Existence of own control</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of own control</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Doctors have control</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Entourage have control</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Athletes are a pawn in a game</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence and communication with authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>The dutiful athlete</td>
<td>Contribute to anti-doping and sports</td>
<td>Guilt and anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be disciplined</td>
<td>Prove one’s innocence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be responsible</td>
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