

## CHEATING IN SPORTS

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Cheating in sports has become a growing concern. One survey of elitesportsmen found that the vast majority of those surveyed believed that performance can only be enhanced through the use of banned substances (Alaranta, Alanaranta, Holmila, Palmu, Pietilä, & Helenius, 2006). However, none of the athletes admitted to having cheated. Yet, another study found that, in general, the sportsmen surveyed believed that the most successful competitors were using banned substances (Rabinowicz, 1992).

Although a number of studies have examined athletes' attitudes towards cheating through use of banned substances and their decision-making processes on whether to use banned substances (e.g.. Dodge & Jaccard, 2007), research has failed to fully explore attitudes towards others who cheat. Cheating in sports has become one of the major sports headlines over the past several years. Although cheating in sports, and specifically in track and field, is not a new issue, the topic has recently breathed new life with allegations of rampant steroid use amongst a number of elite athletes in other sports disciplines

Several studies have explored an athlete's decision about whether to use steroids and/or their attitudes towards cheating (e.g.. Dodge & Jaccard, 2007). However, surprisingly little research has been done exploring attitudes towards athletes who cheat by using steroids and to what extent the players' performance guides those attitudes.

### **Prevalence of Cheating**

Just how common is cheating in sports? It is nearly impossible to get an accurate estimate in professional sports because asking professional sportsmen and women to honestly and accurately self-report steroid use or other forms of cheating seems unlikely considering the potential consequences. However, a poll of 198 aspiring Olympic athletes in the US revealed that over 98% said that they would take illegal performance-enhancing drugs if it would guarantee victories and if they would not be caught. Perhaps even more alarming was that over half would choose to take the drugs if it guaranteed victories in the short term, even if it eventually resulted in death (Bamberger & Yaeger, 1997). While estimates of actual

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steroid usage vary, it appears to be a growing concern in all sports from the high-school level and above (Gough, 1989).

Since steroid usage appears to be a growing problem, it is critical to gain an understanding of how people view sports people who cheat. What factors determine whether individuals form negative attitudes towards sports cheats and under what circumstances, and to what extent, do individuals wish to punish such cheats?

### **Perceptions of Others Who Cheat**

In order to understand what factors affect participants' attitudes toward athletes who cheat, it is necessary to understand how people in general form judgments of other peoples' behaviors.

Attribution theories have examined the decision-making process people use in providing explanations for behavior. Jones and Davis's (1965) theory of correspondent inference examined the extent to which people use personal or situational attributions to explain the behaviors of others. According to this theory, individuals are most likely to make personal attributions when the behavior is freely chosen, yields distinctive effects, and is low in social desirability.

Other theories of attribution have also focused on consistency of behavior (Kelley, 1967). Previous studies have found that most people are in agreement that cheating is wrong and low in social desirability (Jendrek, 1992). However, occasionally people are willing to "forgive" cheating under certain circumstances, such as when there is extreme pressure (Davis et al., 1992), as might be the case in professional sports. However, if the athlete repeatedly cheats (consistency), it might be difficult for individuals to dismiss the cheater's actions as resulting from situational demands. Rather, people would be more likely to make personal attributions for that behavior.

A number of studies have explored participants' attitudes towards drug use. Surveys of student-athletes have found that a vast majority disapprove of illegal drug use. However, the validity of such reports is doubtful since many athletes may fear being exposed.

Therefore, it may be necessary to explore individual attitudes towards cheating in other domains to understand how people actually view cheaters. In fact Duda and Nicholls (1992) argue that there may be overlap between individual perception and motivation across academic and sports domains.

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A number of situational factors appear to affect peoples' attitudes towards cheaters. Studies have found that perceptions of cheaters were affected by the relationship of the rater to the cheater (Jendrek, 1992) and the perceived need to cheat. Therefore, a player may be more lenient in their attitudes towards a teammate who cheats or for someone who cheats out of desperation. For example, Jendrek (1992) found that raters were more lenient in their response to friends who cheat than to cheaters with whom they were unfamiliar.

Therefore, one would expect a cheater to be more lenient towards peers who also cheat. Wryobeck and Whitley (1999) examined peer perceptions of both cheaters and their accomplices. The behavior of accomplices was perceived as less severe than the behavior of the cheater. Although much research has focused on academic cheating, some of these same psychological principles may apply to cheating in sports as well.

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