

“What about us?” - A qualitative exploration of athletes’ lives, support needs and solutions after an anti-doping rule violation

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Tier: 1

Anti-doping rule violations (ADRVs) can be committed through intentional performance enhancement, but also out of negligence without any intention to enhance performance. Both groups of sanctioned athletes are specified as a mandatory target group for education provision by the International Standard for Education (ISE) 2021. The ISE states that the content of the education should be research informed, based on a thorough understanding of target groups’ needs and motivations. However, to date little is known about sanctioned athletes as barely any research has focused on them. This makes it almost impossible for Code signatories to provide tailored education programs. Additionally, up until now, WADA’s approach to administer justice in case of an ADRV was merely based on punishing and excluding these athletes from sports. The prerequisites of the ISE now open up the chance for a restorative process. Sanctioned athletes, if reintegrated into the community and supported during this process, might play an important role in advocating clean sport in the future, yet for that, they need to be heard.

Thus far we lack the basis for a restorative justice approach since the perceptions and needs of sanctioned athletes have not been thoroughly explored by research. The proposed multi-country project aims to address this gap, within two years’ time adopting a qualitative research design. The project will be split into two stand-alone phases which will be carried out consecutively. Phase One will investigate sanctioned athletes’ experiences, ensuring representation from a range of sports and at least eleven countries, via semi-structured interviews conducted by trained athlete co-researchers. The results will be fed back to the community, which is directly engaged in Phase Two in the form of a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach, conducted under the guidance of, and in collaboration with, the research team. Together we will discuss how the relationship of sanctioned athletes to sport, clean sport and anti-doping is shaped and how rehabilitation and space for reparation can be incorporated into anti-doping.

Thus, the component of restorative justice and how to achieve this in the context of anti-doping is embedded within this project. The objectives of this study are to gain a deeper knowledge about sanctioned athletes, their feelings, perceptions and handling of their ADRV as well as their needs especially in view of support from the community and wider society. Additionally, by means of a CBPR process the study will build the ground to consider how positive penal power with athletes’ rehabilitation and reparation can be established from an athlete’s community and society perspective. The results will be included into the efforts of protecting clean sport, inform future education programs for sanctioned athletes and will therefore enhance anti-doping legitimacy in the long run.