

Research Title: The “selves” in doping: A multi-country study

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Tier: 3

Psychological factors, such as personality traits, can influence athletes’ vulnerability and resistance to the temptation to dope. Two such traits are narcissism and self-compassion, which to date, have received little empirical inquiry in this context. Narcissism and self-compassion are ‘competing’ personality traits prevalent in athletes (Mosewich et al., 2019; Zhang et al., in press). Athletes high in narcissism desperately seek opportunities for performance enhancement to maintain an inflated self while being hypersensitive to ego threats (Zhang et al., in press). As such, narcissistic athletes tend to set aside ethical norms (vanDellen et al., 2011) and take unnecessary risks (Foster et al., 2009) in pursuing self-enhancement, and thus are more likely to use banned substances for performance enhancement (Nicholls et al., 2019).

In contrast, individuals demonstrating a compassionate mind towards themselves are more accepting of failures and are more resilient to adversities without having to protect or bolster their self-image (Neff, 2003). Athletes who are self-compassionate demonstrate better mental health and coping skills (e.g., Amemiya & Sakairi, 2020; Ceccarelli et al., 2019), which may prevent doping. However, little research has investigated the role of narcissism in doping (cf. Nicholls et al., 2019), and no current study has examined the usefulness of self-compassion in deterring doping. Importantly, the underpinning mechanisms of the two self-concepts in doping are unclear, leaving a dearth of knowledge on how these important psychological factors may mitigate risk factors of doping. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to investigate the relationship of narcissism and self-compassion on indices related to doping behavior, while accounting for potential underlying mechanism of these two self-concepts.

To achieve this, a quantitative survey design will be employed to investigate the influences of narcissistic and compassionate selves in risks factors for doping among national and international level athletes.

The project will also examine the psycho-behavioral explanations of how narcissism contributes to doping (i.e., via indulgence in sport fantasy) and how self-compassion helps prevent doping (i.e., via enhanced coping). In addition, data will be collected from athletes from the United Kingdom, China, and the United States, enabling cross country comparisons. To fulfill statistical rigor, 159 athletes will be recruited from each country (total sample size = 477).

The project will provide insights into psychological characteristics that may influence doping behavior by identifying risk and protective factors for doping, which is one of the key social science research agenda priorities (Boardley et al., 2021). In particular, understanding the role of self-compassion in developing resistance to doping may provide anti-doping educators with an additional method to assist athletes who may display narcissistic personality traits and/or are prone to over conforming to norms associated with sport (e.g., a win at all cost mindset). Furthermore, by taking a multi-country approach, implications for practice and deterring doping in both western (e.g., United Kingdom, United States) and eastern (e.g., China) countries will be developed. This aligns with WADA’s 2020-2024 social science research strategic priority of taking a global insight to understand doping and informing the development and implementation of anti-doping programs.