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THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEXT ON PLAYER AND ATHLETE ATTITUDES TO DRUGS IN SPORT

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This paper reports on nine case studies which sought to uncover the attitudes of players and athletes to drugs in sport, and how the commercial and cultural realities of sport affect attitude formation. The aim was to understand whether these factors are likely to affect behaviour as it relates to drugs in sport. The theoretical approach of the research is informed by social ecology theory. It assumes that attitudes and behaviours are not driven exclusively by intrinsic factors at the level of the individual, but that player or athlete decisions to use drugs are influenced by pressures which are context specific. Data compilation and interpretation employed Zinberg’s (1984) model, which states that in order to understand what impels individuals to use drugs, and how drug affects users, three determinants must be considered: 1) drug: the pharmacological action of the substance itself; 2) set: the individual user, their attitude at the time of use, and their personality structure; and 3) setting: the influence of the physical and social context within which the use occurs. Zinberg’s model highlights the importance of the social setting in influencing drug usage through social rituals surrounding the use of a drug and social sanctions which define whether and how a particular drug should be used. ‘Drugs’ were defined as any substance that can be used to artificially modify the processes of the body and/or mind. Drugs may be used to enhance physical appearance and mental performance, treat an illness or injury, improve recuperative powers, change states of mind, or stimulate social interaction. The population for this study consisted of players and athletes across Australia currently engaged in competitive and recreational sport at the elite and non-elite levels. A theoretical sampling frame was derived using two key variables as discriminators: 1) the level of the sport’s commercialisation, and 2) the sport’s cultural foundations. These variables were specified at two levels, high and low, to generate four sampling categories. One male and one females participant was selected from each category and one interview was used as a pilot. A narrative-based case-history was utilised as the analytical method, in which each case comprised a single informant situated within a network of macro-influences and micro-relationships examined over their sporting lifetime. The results confirmed that commercialisation and culture had an influence on attitudes of informants. In particular, highly masculine, combative, and risky sports encourage more liberal attitudes towards drugs in sport. In addition, respondents from highly commercialised sports reported greater pressure to perform, and therefore regarded drugs in sport as necessary and effective in improving performance. Results also showed that alcohol, nicotine and caffeine are endemic to the sporting cultures examined.

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