

# **A Multi-Level Legitimacy Analysis of the World Anti-Doping Agency**

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## **Aim**

The effectiveness of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) as an international non-governmental organisation purposed to create and regulate anti-doping policy has been challenged by continued doping scandals in sport. Based on WADA's response to the exposure of state sponsored doping in Russia, the purpose of this paper is to use multi-level legitimacy theory to understand reactive policy making in anti-doping.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Multi-level legitimacy theory (Bitektine & Haack, 2015) suggests that organisations conform to institutional pressures not necessarily because they agree with them, but because they can either profit from conforming or avoid reputational damage from challenging the dominant consensus. The result is that organisations true beliefs about the legitimacy of an institution may be suppressed until an event occurs which presents an opportunity to express views that challenge the status quo. Research suggests that anti-doping policy creation has been reactively prioritised after key events (Brissonneau & Ohl, 2010; Ritchie & Jackson, 2014). It is recognised that in the creation of WADA as an institution, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) lost their monopoly over anti-doping policy in sport due to government intervention after the Festina scandal (Hanstad, Smith & Waddington, 2008). It is argued that following the creation of WADA, organisations conformed to avoid reputational damage because failure to do so would signify to stakeholders that they were not concerned about doping in sport. However, certain events (e.g., scandals) present the opportunity to promote beliefs counter to the dominant consensus. Hence, following doping scandals, suppressed negative opinions may be expressed and WADA's legitimacy can be challenged. Therefore, policy development may be prioritised by reacting to scandals to manage legitimacy rather than necessarily making proactive athlete-centred decisions.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

This research adopted a qualitative case study research design. Thematic analysis was implemented appropriate to the mixed inductive and deductive coding framework used. The deductive codes were derived from performance, value and meaning legitimacy challenges (Deephouse et al., 2017) and Oliver's (1991) typology of strategic responses to institutional processes (acquiesce, compromise, avoid, defy, manipulate). Deductive coding was then used to develop the results. Analysis was based on archival data accessed online from newspaper articles, press releases, WADA meeting minutes and annual reports, and the World Anti-Doping Code (WADC). These sources provided quotes and contextual information about how the legitimacy of WADA was perceived and debated. Additionally, meeting minutes, annual reports and the WADC provided data on strategic responses to institutional processes.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results suggested that WADA is dependent upon two distinct audiences for legitimacy. The first consists of national anti-doping agencies, government representatives, and athletes. This group shares a belief that WADA should have greater capabilities to tackle doping and should be further separated from intrusion by sport organisations. The second group consists

of the IOC, national Olympic committees and International Federations. This group is characterised by a belief that WADA is a regulatory body and its functions should be limited to this capacity. Following the Russian doping scandal, it appears that anti-doping policy changes have reactively prioritised the need to satisfy the legitimacy challenges posed by these group. For example, the creation of a whistle-blower policy only became important after receiving criticism. Further, it appears that greater weight is given to challenges from the second group. This makes sense as the IOC is the major funder of WADA and managing their expectations would be prioritised.

Anti-doping appears to be characterised by suppressed beliefs about anti-doping policy. For example, following the first McLaren report, the IOC members demonstrated a belief that WADA is redundant. Anti-doping policy may, in part, be determined by appearing to be effective rather than making athlete-centred choices. This would explain why other equally valid issues such as doping in amateur sport receive less attention. Based on these findings, it is argued that the WADA's current structure is compromised, and it would benefit from greater autonomy. This could be achieved through long-term financial commitments, changes in governance regulations, and transparency. It is acknowledged that the study was limited to the use of archival data, future research into reactive anti-doping policy should include other sources of data (e.g., interviews).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The legitimacy of WADA is precarious due to the conflicting behavioural expectations it must satisfy. As such, anti-doping policy may be partially determined by the need to appear legitimate, developing previous conclusions that anti-doping policy making is reactive. This finding has wider implications for policy making and governance in sport and supports the utility of multi-level legitimacy theory in sport management research.

### **References**

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