

Editorial

By John Gleaves, The Pennsylvania State University, USA



The Role of Cross-Disciplinary Research on Doping, or: How I Came to Stop Worry and Love P-Values

I begin with a short parable. Two young fish are swimming along when they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. He nods to them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”¹

The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important discoveries can be the ones that are hardest to see and talk about because they appear so familiar. Whether from within the silos of our own discipline or within our own cultural milieu, we often fail to see the world accurately because of our own blind spots, unexamined assumptions and unnoticed limitations. This has proven especially true when it comes to researching the sport doping phenomenon. Dominant culture’s negative perception of performance enhancing substances such as steroids influences—if not the entire debate—at least where the scholarly discussion starts. At the same time, doping-related scholarly research has remained relatively myopic and fragmented, with each scholar proceeding largely unaware of research outside of his or her immediate discipline. One way out of such a situation is to confront, like the young fish in the story, possibilities found outside one’s own comfortable perspective, the world view provided by one’s own discipline.

Such confrontations are at the heart of doping research. The issue of doping and performance-enhancing substances (PES) in sports requires a cross-disciplinary approach that integrates research from three of academia’s

¹ Adapted from David Foster Wallace’s essay *This is Water*. Wallace, D. F. and Kenyon College. (2009). *This Is Water : Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life*. New York, Little, Brown.

dominant cultures—the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—to shed new light on the issue of doping and performance enhancement in sports.² By applying research from the three cultures, I believe the relevant questions in the doping debate significantly change.

To be sure, discussing cross-disciplinary research in an editorial for the International Network of Humanistic Doping Research is a bit like preaching to the converted. The INHDR expressly devotes itself to understanding “the doping phenomenon in its broadest cultural, social and political dimensions.” Consequently, it has hosted some of the best cross-disciplinary doping research. Its 2009 conference hosted academics not just from the traditional humanities disciplines, but from sociology, media studies, and the natural sciences as well as professionals from industry.

Yet the expressed value of cross-disciplinary research on the doping phenomenon has largely gone unexplored. What is the role of cross-disciplinary research? What are its limits? What challenges do cross-disciplinary researchers face? As the organization and its members prepare for this year’s 2011 conference (please note the call for papers), it is important to remember the important role of cross-disciplinary research in doping.

At its core, cross-disciplinary research uses information from other disciplines to inform the questions that researchers ask within their home discipline. This can prove challenging. Cross-disciplinary inquiries, such as those that relate to doping and performance enhancement, require a familiarity with research from different disciplines that often have their own language, methodologies, and professional standards. These differences can be off-putting, and familiarizing oneself with them requires patience. But patience is often rewarded with new insights not possible through silo-bound research.

Additionally, the challenges of cross-disciplinary research can be somewhat mitigated by starting in areas one may be more familiar with. That is because true cross-disciplinary research can begin anywhere. In fact, humanities-based researchers often move subtly between other humanities-based fields. A sociologist may rely on works of history or a philosopher may draw upon social theory. But extending to other cultures such as the natural or social sciences can prove exceptionally rewarding for those in the humanistic disciplines. Using scientific conclusions about PESs to inform more abstract policy discussions may entice more those particularly interested in the philosophical discussions of doping to consider empirical evidence as required steps to any good research. P-values and empirical data can ground academic work often prone to overly theoretical arguments. Conversely, by including research from less abstract disciplines, we may encourage readers not typically concerned with humanistic research to find the practical importance in what may appear to outsiders to be abstruse philosophical issues.

² Within these three cultures fit the myriad sub-disciplines such as physiology, biomechanics, sport psychology, sport sociology, philosophy, etc.

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But the value of cross-disciplinary research is not unidirectional. The humanities have much to say to the social and natural sciences regarding doping research. The natural sciences, for all their empirical data, cannot provide normative claims about policies or ethics. Simply knowing the probability for an error in a drug test does not indicate how sporting organizations ought to use the test. More importantly, in an age where the science of sport has outpaced the ethics of sport, the humanities can play a role in ensuring that sporting practices conform to sporting values.

So what are those of us dedicated to humanistic doping research to make of our future work? First, the study of doping would never have gotten to where it is today without the high-quality research promoted by specialization in disciplines. These disciplines brought intellectual rigor to doping research when previously myth, emotion and assumption dominated discourse.³ Historians, philosophers, and cultural scholars have plied their trades to one of sport's most vexing issues and made great headway. Any promise cross-disciplinary doping research holds depends on the presence of strong disciplines. Disciplines teach techniques needed to conduct high-quality research. They help determine what problems are important. They establish criteria for judging quality and intellectual rigor.

But such discipline-bound research brings mixed goods. These research silos can become too insular, too trapped in old paradigms, and even, as in the case of philosophy, left behind. More importantly, doping research transcends individual silos. No one silo can fully understand the complex doping phenomenon. Thus researchers on the doping issue must begin to familiarize themselves with the language, research methods, and advances of different fields. They need to collaborate (or at least converse) with colleagues from different departments. As the philosopher R. Scott Kretchmar explains, "silo walls, unlike those at Jericho, will not come tumbling down (nor should they), but they will be thinner, lower, and far more permeable."⁴ Doping research is but one area where thinner, lower and more permeable walls are essential.

Citation suggestion

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³ See Paul Dimeo's deconstruction of the myth of the death of Arthur Linton in Dimeo, P. (2007). *A History of Drug Use in Sport 1876-1976: Beyond Good and Evil*. New York, Routledge, and Verner Moller's deconstruction of the myth of the death of Knud Jensen in Møller, V. (2006). "Knud Enemark Jensen's Death During the 1960 Rome Olympics: A Search for Truth?", *Drugs, Alcohol and Sport*. P. Dimeo (ed.). New York, Routledge.

⁴ Kretchmar, R. S. (2008). "The Utility of Silos and Bunkers in the Evolution of Kinesiology." *Quest* 60(1): 3-12.