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# Pro-cycling's doping pentiti

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# Pro-cycling's doping pentiti

*Roland Moerland & Giulio Soana*

## Introduction

Several cyclists have published memoirs in which they shed light on their cycling career and more particularly their use of performance enhancing substances and methods. This article analyses such autobiographical accounts in order to come to a better understanding as to why cyclists resort to doping and how they come to terms with this.[1] In contrast to the bulk of research on doping in elite cycling, which originates from the fields of sociology and psychology, this study takes a distinct integrated criminological approach which combines an organizational criminological perspective that focuses on unravelling the criminogenic features of structures (macro level) and organizations (meso level), with a cultural criminological perspective that focuses on individual meaning-making and *verstehen* (micro level). This approach allowed us to reconstruct how individual cyclists made sense of and dealt with the organizational and larger structural forces at play. This approach results in a more comprehensive understanding of the problem of doping.[2] While our study confirms findings from previous research that show how doping was normalized in cycling, we provide additional insights regarding the reasons why cyclists ultimately come clean about their doping use and the various effects that doping has and how it benefits cyclists. Moreover, in contrast to previous literature which characterized the autobiographical accounts mainly as attempts of fallen sports stars to sanitize their spoiled public image, our analysis shows that their accounts are of relevance when it comes to understanding the problem of doping in professional cycling. Those who account for their questionable behaviour in the past are not simply 'masters of spin' who try to save their public image. In contrast, in a world ruled by a strict code of silence, those who confess and break the *omertà* are of *key* importance because they *unlock* this closed world. Their accounts provide important insights about the motivation and opportunity structures behind doping and how such structures are ende-

1 Biographies have been used and referred to in research on doping in cycling. For instance, Falcous & Masucci (2019) analysed biographical accounts of cyclists and reflected on the extent to which these accounts confirm or challenge earlier accounts that mythologized and romanticized cycling as being a heroic endeavour. Smith (2017) and Sefiha & Reichman (2014) also looked into doping confessions, but the authors didn't systematically study and compare biographical accounts. Their studies focused on media statements that were collected via the internet and the authors did not develop a comprehensive comparative criminological analysis of the available bibliographic materials.

2 Other studies have contributed in important ways to our understanding of doping, but they often address specific aspects at a certain level of explanation. The aim of our analysis was to come to a more comprehensive integrated understanding of the problem. Biographical data is very well suited for such a study, as it contains and integrates information related to all three levels of analysis.


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mic to the system of professional cycling. The analysis will first illustrate how substantial the doping problem in cycling was and highlight the role of silence in this process. We look into the reasons why cyclists do speak up and reflect on the nature of these accounts. After a brief note on approach and method, the analysis will highlight several key aspects at the macro, meso and micro levels that lay bare the contours of a criminogenic system, thereby also illustrating the explanatory relevance of the biographical accounts. The article concludes with a brief reflection on several implications that follow from the analysis.

## A sport in crisis

On July 8, 1998, customs officials stopped Festina team soigneur Willy Voet when he attempted to cross the Belgian border into France. Voet was on his way to Calais, where he was supposed to take the ferry to meet up with his team at the start of the Tour de France in Dublin. When officials searched his car, they found 234 doses of EPO, 80 flasks of human growth hormone, 160 capsules of male hormone and testosterone, and 60 pills of blood thinner (Voet, 2001: 1-18). The subsequent inquiry unveiled a system of team organized doping. The case of Festina, however, was not unique and other teams were involved in similar practices. These teams provided their cyclists with substances, medical assistance and all ancillary services needed to enhance their performances. Although the Festina affair triggered much commotion, doping did not end with the scandal. Instead, 1998 turned out to be a turning point in the history of doping in cycling. Doping changed from being a team-based to a cyclist-based practice and after Festina, cyclists were themselves primarily responsible for organizing their doping schemes (Sefiha, 2012: 216; Fincoeur, Cunningham, & Ohl, 2018: 69).[3] Teams were nevertheless often aware of the doping practices and facilitated those by not asking or not being pro-active. After the Festina affair, doping remained a serious problem; many individual doping cases and larger scandals would follow. In 2004, the news broke that members of the French Cofides team were involved in doping. That same year, Jesus Manzano openly spoke about systematic use of doping of the Spanish Kelme team. In 2005, Danilo Hondo of team Gerolsteiner tested positive and later that year Roberto Heras, who won the Vuelta (Tour of Spain) four times, also tested positive. In 2006, the Spanish police launched Operation Puerto to investigate the doping practices of doctor Eufemiano Fuentes who helped cyclists with their doping plans, including blood transfusions. During the investigations, the authorities seized more than 200 blood bags. The scandal implicated many cyclists including top riders such as Ivan Basso, Tyler Hamilton and Alejandro Valverde. In 2007, research into the practices of Team Telekom and its successor T-Mobile would reveal that doping was systematically used in those teams between 1995 and 2006. Among the cyclists involved were former Tour de France winners Jan Ulrich and Bjarne Riis. In 2009, it became clear that

3 For an overview of how cyclists have 'prepared' themselves throughout the history of cycling see Christiansen (2006).


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the Viennese Human Plasma laboratory had been involved in supplying blood transfusions to various top athletes including cyclists Bernhard Kohl, who won the polkadot jersey in the 2008 Tour de France and Rabobank team riders Michael Boogerd, Thomas Dekker, and Michael Rasmussen. In 2012, USADA published the results of its inquiry into seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong and the U.S. Postal cycling team. According to USADA, Armstrong had 'ran the most sophisticated professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen'. The inquiry implicated a score of riders, including Floyd Landis, Levi Leipheimer, and George Hincapie. This overview of 'incidents' is far from exhaustive and in reality, the problem was far worse. Statistics concerning the Tour de France, cycling's most prestigious race, indicate that more than 65 percent of the riders who finished in the top 10 of the Tour between 1998 and 2013 were either found guilty of doping, admitted to doping, or were strongly suspected of being implicated in such practices (Sport Intelligence, 2014). Doping turned out to be endemic and it left pro-cycling in a state of crisis.

## 'Spitting in the soup'

Although there was an excessive doping problem, cyclists remained silent and didn't raise the issue publicly. Paul Kimmage (2007: 229) was one of the first to speak up and observed that the code of silence, the *omertà*, 'exist[ed] not only in the Mafia, but also in the peloton'. The *omertà* operated in different ways. On the one hand, it dictated that cyclists and other insiders, such as soigneurs, managers and doctors, were not allowed to reveal knowledge of doping to outsiders. Riders could talk about the issue among themselves, but one could not disclose information to the public (Marty, Nicholson, & Haas 2015: 24). Paul Kimmage (2007: 229) notes: 'Those who break the law, who talk to the press about the dope problems in the sport are despised. They are branded as having *"caché dans la soupe"*.' The most well-known case in this context is that of Christophe Bassons, who was ostracized by his colleagues for speaking out in public about the issue (Bassons & Hopquin, 2014). Millar (2012: 246) explains that even 'non-dopers were too scared to say that they were doing it clean and they would even go as far as defending the guys who doped, in order not to rock the boat. That's how binding the omertà was'. Cyclists who did dope and were caught, denied the allegations and also remained silent, because if they spoke up, they would find it difficult to stay in their team, or join a new one (Marty, Nicholson, & Haas, 2015: 24; Fincoeur, Cunningham, & Ohl, 2018:69). Cyclists thus remained silent because raising the issue in public would have negative repercussions. There was, however, also another side to the *omertà*. Van de Bunt (2017: 107) explains that it also allowed cyclists to keep others – both insiders and outsiders – at bay. Silence was not only imposed by the *omertà*, but the *omertà* was invoked by cyclists as a reason for not having to reveal sensitive knowledge. Therefore, also among cyclists, silence existed. Thomas Dekker (Zonneveld 2016:50) notes that when he started with the pros and he inquired with a colleague about doping, the colleague made clear that talking about doping was 'a no-go area'. On the same note, Riccò (2018) explains


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how doping was not mentioned, but was always alluded to by 'a word, a gesture, a glance, or a wink'. The Dutch Anti-Doping Commission (2013: 27) in their report on doping in Dutch professional cycling noted: 'Who didn't know or did not ask about somebody else, didn't need to lie about it and also did not need to be afraid of counter questions.' So, in cycling *omertà* involved both a duty and a right to remain silent. The *omertà* was thus a powerful 'silencer' because it pressured and lured cyclists into not spilling the beans. In such an environment, confessions to doping were not encouraged.[4] It is therefore remarkable that certain cyclists have broken the *omertà* and confessed.[5] Several cyclists who have used doping have published biographical confessional accounts, these include among others: Bjarne Riis (2012), David Millar (2012), Tyler Hamilton (2012), Michael Rasmussen (2013), Thomas Dekker (2016), Danilo Di Luca (2017), Riccardo Riccò (2018), and Jonathan Vaughters (2019).

## 'The truth will set you free'

When taking stock of the abovementioned accounts, it becomes clear that the cyclists pursue various aims.[6] The following remark by Hamilton (2012) is relevant in that regard:

> 'That's the story I want to tell, [...], partly because it will help the sport move forward, and partly because it helps me move forward. I want to tell it to people who think that dopers are bad, irredeemable people. I want to tell it so people might focus their energy on the real challenge: creating a culture that tips people away from doping. I want to tell it because now I need to tell it, in order to survive.'

His account ends with the words: 'The truth really will set you free.' Hamilton's words capture the threefold purpose underlying the biographical confessional

4 It is important to add that although the peloton was silent about doping, the issue was nonetheless an 'open secret'. Many outsiders knew about it, but they enabled the silence of the peloton by also remaining silent about these issues themselves. Van de Bunt (2010: 441) notes in this regard that '[s]ecrets do not remain hidden because the people involved isolate themselves from the world, but rather because the actors and their illicit activities are socially embedded'. He explains how 'respected perpetrators can be above suspicion' and that there can be an 'absence of interest to disclose the truth' because we don't want to see our heroes tainted and the sport being vilified. It leads to a concerted ignorance between the offenders and the public. See also Paoli (2017).

5 For a further discussion on the role of *omertà* and how confessions contributed to breaking the silence, see also Dimeo (2014).

6 The biographies were selected because in contrast to other biographical accounts, these predominantly focus on the issue of doping. As will be explained in a later section of this article, all of the above-mentioned biographies were analysed to identify elements on the micro, meso and macro level that were relevant in understanding the motivation and opportunity structure underlying doping use. The data gleaned from the biographies was subsequently compared, in order to come to a more systematic overview and to distil common criminogenic conditions on different levels that help explain how and why cyclists have resorted to doping.


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accounts. Firstly, cyclists confess to confront the past to be liberated from it, enabling them to move on. Dekker, for instance, notes that he will find something meaningful in the future, but in order to do so, he needs 'to get rid of the mess in his head' (Zonneveld, 2016: 214, 218). Millar (2012: 3) explains in his account that confessing to the police after getting caught was liberating: 'It is a relief, I am going to be free. It is an epiphany.'

Secondly, from Hamilton's quote above, it becomes clear that by telling the truth they want to help the sport move forward. Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 173) explains how the truth had been festering – 'rotting' – all those years and that he needed to deal with it: 'I want to talk. Not a bit, but all of it. The lies, the false pretensions, the hypocrisy, everything needs to get out. I am done with the fact that cycling, the sport I love, keeps being chased by its past. If the truth doesn't come out, then the stench of the cesspool will hang around the sport and nothing will ever change. I don't want to think about the idea that my nephew, who is also involved in cycling, ends up in the same position.' Riccò (2018) notes that he talks 'about cycling hoping that the truth, that cannot change what has been, may at least contribute to change what will be'. It becomes clear that the accounts are not only supposed to serve the individual cyclists, but also the sport. By unveiling the issues that plague cycling, it becomes possible to address them, but there is more to these awareness raising efforts than doping prevention.

The third purpose that the accounts serve is to make people understand that 'dopers are [not] bad, irredeemable people', as Hamilton noted. The aim is to make the public understand the complex world they inhabited; see it through their eyes. Hamilton, for instance, explains in relation to his confession during the Armstrong investigation in 2010: 'I didn't just want to tell the facts. I wanted them to feel what it was like to be us. I wanted them to think about what they would have done in our situation. I wanted them to understand.' They want to give a detailed account of how they experienced the world of pro-cycling to enable readers to come to a proper understanding and judgement regarding what had happened. They, for instance, want to confront the false image that dopers are lazy and that it was the doping that turned these initial losers into champions. The biographical accounts thus also aim to debunk (mis)understandings about doping and dopers. A common theme in the autobiographical accounts is that cyclists feel stigmatized. They especially reflect on the role of the press, their teams, the race organizers or the UCI, who didn't raise enough critical questions. All these actors knew what was happening, but they were quick to point the finger once cyclists got caught. Riccò (2018) refers to this shaming process as a 'waltz of hypocrisy'.[7]

It becomes clear that for these cyclists telling the truth is liberating. Firstly, secrecy is a tough burden that becomes unbearable at one point. In order to shed that burden and to be able to move on, they need to speak out and confront their

7 Following neutralization theory, one could argue that the cyclists do 'condemn the condemners' as also Sefiha (2015:227) underlines. However, as this section and following sections will show, the accounts are about much more than rationalizations of past questionable behaviour, in an attempt to deal with the negative implications that follow from it.


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past. Secondly, liberation from the past also requires that others are able to set you free and that they do not continue to judge and stigmatize you. Freedom lies in the fact that others come to understand your experiences and the complexity involved. Thirdly, they hope to liberate the sport. Cycling can learn from their experiences, hopefully leading to reforms that help to prevent others from making the same mistakes. Despite the laudable aims, it must be noted that the initial confessions and later accounts were given when these cyclists already had their backs against the wall, because they had tested positive or because others had implicated them or were about to. They didn't confess out of the blue. Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 172-173) explains that he only saw the opportunity to speak when many others were caught and investigations were underway implicating his former colleagues at the Rabobank team, which as a result terminated the sponsorship. After these events he confessed: 'Before I was afraid that if I would open my mouth, I would rob the soigneurs, technicians, and other cyclists and people that didn't have anything to do with it of their job.' Rasmussen (2013) explains that he eventually came to the decision to testify after Leipheimer implicated him when questioned during the Armstrong investigation: 'At that point I knew that it would not take long before I would become the focus of an inquiry. In that case I could put the cards on the table myself.'

## Ulterior motives?

Should we trust these liberating accounts to be honest and sincere or are these memoirs simply instruments for dirty riders to divert blame and responsibility? We ask this question, because criminological literature has long accounted for the effectiveness of blame diversion techniques as instruments to shake off the criminal label and rebuild a spoiled public identity and self-image (Sykes & Matza, 1957; Goffman 1959; Becker 1963).[8] Majid Yar, who conducted an elaborate study of autobiographical doping confessions, is sceptical. Yar (2014: vii) notes: 'for those who have become labelled as criminal and deviant, autobiographical self-narration becomes an avenue for challenging stigma by telling stories [...].' He concludes that the 'autobiographical narratives examined are, [...], concerted exercises in impression management, aimed at swaying public judgment and reshaping the negative definition-of-self with which they have been labelled'. (Yar, 2014: 76-77; see also Thing & Ronglan, 2015 and Sefiha, 2017.) For Yar, autobiographical accounts are 'quintessentially forms of public performance' and he adds that in light of the public shaming that the athletes endure by being labelled 'dopers' 'facing, handling, resisting and transcending the stigma that comes with public shaming becomes a driving force in the narratives offered by fallen sports stars' (2014: 7). Although there is much truth in what Yar explains, such an

8 See for instance Sefiha (2012), for an analysis of how techniques of neutralization are used by cyclists. We do not argue that cyclists do not resort to these techniques. On the contrary, Sefiha's analysis also in many ways confirms our findings. However, as noted before, there is an inherent danger that if neutralization is the main analytical framework, the meaning of the accounts is reduced to simply being a set of justifications and excuses for deviant behaviour.


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approach does have its limitations. Firstly, it makes it seem that biographical confessions cannot be honest or truthful accounts; they are always staged in order to serve impression management. That doping confessions can indeed serve such ulterior motives is for instance illustrated by the first confession of Bernhard Kohl. In the wake of the Festina affair, Kohl was initially seen as spearheading a new generation of doping-free cyclists. Kohl captured the polkadot jersey in the 2008 Tour de France, but was later tested positive and accused of doping to which he admitted during a press conference in 2009. He initially explained that it had been an incident, but later revealed that in his confession he had twisted the truth to keep the possibility of a return to cycling open. It turned out that doping had been a structural feature of his cycling career and such knowledge would have resulted in much harsher repercussions, probably a lifetime ban. With regard to that first confession, he later explained that 'A new lie had to safeguard my return to cycling' (quoted in Crielaard, 2009). He added that the penalty for such incidental use would probably be a two-year ban and that for cyclists such a penalty is not always a bad thing, on the contrary: 'You can draw your blood for two years without getting caught. After which you have ten to twenty litres of blood and you can return to the peloton clean. I am not sure whether a doping penalty is always a nuisance to riders.' Ironically, the penalty that is supposed to deter, is turned into an opportunity to dope. So there might indeed be ulterior motives at play when cyclists confess to doping and in such cases the confession is not about coming clean and repenting, but about damage control, as also Yar concludes.

What Yar however seems to overlook, is that the autobiographies are often the outcome of a long process. Earlier statements and even confessions might have had ulterior motives, but the biographies can also be the result of a process of change that ultimately leads to a more truthful confession and a critical reflection on the lies told earlier. Zonneveld, for instance, writes about Dekker's confession that it took years and that it came in bits and pieces: '[H]e turned like an oil tanker so slowly that at certain points it was hard to discern the progress.' (Zonneveld, 2016: 218). Also, most of the biographical accounts discuss the situation in which cyclists get caught and they address how they initially tried to cover up the truth by denying what happened instead of acknowledging it. Hamilton (2012) in his account elaborates and reflects on how he learned that if he was vague enough, he didn't have to lie. Also Di Luca (2017) clearly and openly discusses in his biography his lies to prosecutors and journalists: 'I have lied, I have cheated, I have done all I had to do to arrive first' (Di Luca, 2017). The authors do reflect on such episodes and ultimately confess often in detail what happened and how. As such the accounts have a criminological relevance in other ways than explained so far by Yar. Brailsford's (2012: xiii) observation in his foreword to Millar's book is relevant in this regard: 'Dave's story reveals what I have long believed – that, in the wrong environment, under the wrong influences, even people with the greatest integrity can make the wrong decisions.' The criminological relevance does not simply lie in the insight that accounts are attempts to excuse or justify what happened. Instead, the accounts have relevance because they shed light on the dark side of cycling offering an exposé of a system that has enticed and compelled


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cyclists into doping. From that perspective, the biographies have explanatory potential.

## A criminogenic system

Comparative analysis of the biographies allows us to distil conditions on different levels that help explain how and why cyclists resorted to doping. From the analysis it becomes clear that doping use is the result of the synergic effect between these conditions.[9] The accounts therefore suggest that this phenomenon may not simply be the action of a few individuals (bad apples) who cynically cheat, but is rather the result of a set of structural conditions (bad barrel) that has dominated the sport and corrupted cyclists. From a criminological perspective, pro-cycling very much resembled what Needleman & Needleman (1979) referred to as a criminogenic system. According to the authors in certain situations crime may not be entirely the result of individual choice but rather the outcome of the affiliation with an organization or system. In their analysis they outline two different systems of *criminogenesis*: a crime coercive and a crime facilitative system. Crime coercive systems 'compel their members to commit illegal acts as the price of successful system membership'. In contrast, in a crime facilitative system 'members are not forced to break the law, but rather are presented with extremely tempting structural conditions – high incentives and opportunities coupled with low risks – that encourage and facilitate crime […]'. Although cyclists often present their situations as having no other choice, indicating that the system was indeed coercive, there are also cases in which cyclists resisted doping, such is the case with Christophe Bassons. Therefore, one could argue that the system was facilitative. The problem is, however, that although cyclists might not have been forced to engage in illegal acts in the way Needleman & Needleman described when defining their crime coercive system, it is also not simply about tempting opportunities that cyclists could not resist. Often cyclists felt that they did not have much of a choice. Rasmussen notes that as a cyclist you 'stood before a choice: either you used doping and you ran the risk that your career was ruined and your life was in shambles, or you never used doping and you would never have a career that would do justice to your talents. If there was a middle way, I have never seen it.' Therefore, although they might not have been 'godfathered' into doping, doping was not easy to refuse.

## Approach

To come to a better understanding and a more comprehensive systematic overview of this criminogenic system, we draw on the work of Coleman (1987), Kauzlarich & Kramer (1998) and Rothe & Mullins (2007) and their approaches to studying various forms of organizational crime. The elements of their approach

9 These insights confirm the results from other research into doping in cycling of authors such as Fincoeur, Cunningham, & Ohl (2018) and Waddington & Smith (2009).


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serve as a sensitizing framework for our research in which we combine an organizational criminological perspective that focuses on unravelling the criminogenic features of institutions, systems and organizations, with a cultural criminological perspective that focuses on individual meaning-making and *verstehen* (Ferrell, Hayward, Morrison, & Presdee, 2014). This allowed us to reconstruct how individual athletes from within the system made sense of and dealt with the organizational and larger structural forces at play.[10] Following the work of the earlier mentioned scholars, we assume that doping use results from a coincidence of goal attainment, the availability and attractiveness of illegal means and weakened or absent control mechanisms. We analyse these elements across three different levels of analysis. The micro level focuses on personal environment and addresses intrapersonal aspects. The meso level focuses on the direct organizational setting in which the actor resides and it addresses interactional aspects and organizational configurations, processes and mechanisms. The macro level focuses on the broader structural and institutional environment and it addresses societal, historical, political, cultural, economic factors and developments. The list of factors determined at each level is long and the scope of the article does not allow for an exhaustive discussion. Therefore, several key elements are highlighted at the three levels to lay bare the contours of the criminogenic system in order to illustrate the explanatory relevance of the biographical accounts.

## Macro – The world of elite cycling

The accounts confirm that a culture existed in which doping was normalized. The authors describe that when they became professionals, they entered a world in which both questionable legal and illegal products were accepted, condoned and even encouraged.[11] Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 50) describes how he started taking sleeping pills when he joined the pros: 'With the semi-pros this would have been unthinkable, but it turned out to be normal with the pros. After the race, the doctor does two rounds: one after the race to administer an intravenous drip with vitamins, minerals and other (legal) recuperation substances, and one in the evening to hand out sleeping pills.' When Riccò went pro, a friend and ex-professional explains to him 'how the system works': 'Riccardo, maybe the moment has come for you to start doing this profession for real.' Riccò (2018) describes the moment in which he started to dope as the moment when he started taking cycling for real. It reveals how professional cycling is, in his account, inextricably interlinked to doping. Due to the fact that it was accepted or condoned by the

10 It is part of an ongoing research project, the aim of which it is to come to a better understanding of how and why athletes who competed in a sport in which doping use was endemic were able to stay clean and resist the many criminological factors that enticed so many other athletes to use doping. To gain such an understanding, the project first of all aims to analyse biographical data of doping users in order to identify elements on the micro, meso and macro level that contributed to their doping use. The resulting overview of criminologically relevant factors will subsequently inform further research into resisters by studying how they were able to successfully cope with these pressures.

11 On the importance of socialization when it comes to doping see also Ohl et al. (2015).


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vast majority of participants, doping practices could take place for a prolonged period, spanning multiple generations of cyclists (Marty, Nicholson, & Haas, 2015: 22). This doping culture has historical roots as Rasmussen (2013) explains:

> 'Don't forget that the vantage point is an insane sporting competition. […] From the beginning the route was inhumane. These races could only attract half-crazy characters. Lance Armstrong, Floyd Landis, nor me invented the idea of using epo or blood transfusions. That is something that has been hatching since the time they used strychnine, amphetamines, anabolic steroids, rat poison and cognac to ride. Throughout the years it only became more sophisticated.'

The accounts furthermore indicate that entering the world of pro-cycling came as a shock. Millar (2012:63) notes: 'Being the best amateur in the world guaranteed you nothing when it came to racing against the pros.' The challenge to keep up was immense, taking the body beyond its capabilities. Millar notes how he could only make sense of this if they were all doping. Dekker notes in relation to his experiences during his first Giro:

> 'For the first time in years I am just filling up the peloton. […]. In smaller races I can measure myself with the best, but in the Giro I am nowhere. […] In the last week I suffer like an animal. […] I am disappointed and looking for answers. I see doping as one of the most important reasons for not being able to keep up with the pace uphill. There, during that Giro, the fundamental believe is created that without forbidden substances, you are not in it for the real prizes.'

The accounts not only reveal that doping was an accepted requirement when performing at a pro-level, but they also address how the regulatory framework that was supposed to prevent such practices was full of loopholes and how control mechanisms were dysfunctional and coherent enforcement was lacking. The accounts furthermore discuss how the professionalization, commercialization and globalization of pro-cycling result in enormous pressures on teams and cyclists to outperform themselves in order to safeguard the existence of the teams and their jobs, and that all year round.[12] Not only are they confronted with an increasingly packed race schedule, races are made extremely demanding to increase the attractiveness of the competitive events. The contract and payment structure puts riders in a vulnerable position in which they need to perform in order to safeguard bonuses and their contracts. Certainty is only guaranteed through performance. Di Luca (2017) explains: '[…] in such a system the sponsor needs results to make its investment fruitful, the managers needs results to keep the sponsors and the cyclist needs results to get a contract.' Another issue that

12 The importance of the contract structure as a motivating factor for doping is also reported by Fincoeur, Cunningham, & Ohl (2018: 70-71), Sefiha (2012: 229), Ohl (2015: 39), and Schneider (2006: 217) .


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they raise is the scientization and medicalization of cycling. Where cycling used to be a sport in which experience and intuition were important, now everything seems to be controlled and analysed in order to be able to tweak and improve performance. This affects the materials cyclists use, how they train and ride their races, but also their diet and medication. Hamilton, for instance, notes about his encounter with doctor Ferrari that cycling had turned into a scientific and medical endeavour in which each ride was a math problem, changing the sport from a 'romantic experience' into a scientific strategic endeavour.[13] Lastly, the accounts reveal how cycling is permeated by a culture in which risk and injury are accepted and how abnormal practices are normalized.[14] According to the riders, everything about bike racing is more dangerous than doping, so it is not considered a health issue. Rasmussen (2013) captures it aptly:

> 'If the Tour de France was a workplace, it would have been closed down before you could blink your eyes. A place of which you know that in the course of the upcoming three weeks would result in three broken collar bones, two perforated lungs, a broken thighbone, concussions and an occasional death once in a while, would never be approved. It would have been closed down immediately. But the Tour exists for more than one hundred years already.'

Rasmussen (2013) concludes:

> 'in professional cycling we go far beyond what is normal. It is not normal to starve yourself; not normal to cycle 200 kilometres every day; not normal to eat pasta every morning for three weeks in a row; not normal to put a needle in your arm and draw blood; not normal to pee in the presence of officials who you have never seen before, not normal to take sleeping pills at night and caffeine pills in the morning.'

Lastly, the above-mentioned factors play out in a setting that is all about competition and winning. These conditions do not automatically lead to doping, but they greatly facilitate its use by affecting the motivation and opportunity structure. They contribute to the perception that doping is a normal necessity that can be used without major repercussions.

13 The outcomes of our analysis are similar to those of Waddington & Smith (2009) who identified four main root causes behind the diffusion of doping: competitiveness, politicisation, commercialisation, and medicalization.

14 See also Albert (1999) for an analysis of how in cycling risk is normalized. The author argues that cycling is inherently dangerous and cycling sub-culture has incorporated this danger and much about cycling is about managing and minimizing that risk through processes that ultimately also normalize it.


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## Meso – The cycling team and the peloton

By reading the memoirs it is immediately apparent that the peloton and the team are more than just a group of people. Cyclists spend most of their time away from home with the team and the peloton as their only companions. According to Millar (2012: 47-58), one of the challenges was loneliness, being isolated and away from family and friends. The accounts convey how the team and more broadly the peloton come to constitute a totalizing presence for the athletes. They sleep together in the same hotels, they travel in the same buses and planes, they eat in the same restaurants. They live in a bubble in which the team and the peloton become their family. From the accounts, it becomes clear that cyclists not only live and ride together, they also dope together. With regard to that last aspect, it turns out that the peloton and the team are an important source of knowledge and technical expertise, while at the same time being a strong force of peer pressure.[15] Rasmussen (2013) explains how, when having been confronted with the power of several Italian riders during the Giro, he inquired about this with his team: 'It was via these cyclists that all new methods were introduced to me. It didn't take long before I was knowledgeable.' They describe how they learn which substances and methods to use and how, when and who to go to for advice and further treatment. They not only learn what to use and how, but they also learn how to avoid getting caught: how to circumvent controls, fake your whereabouts, and mask doping, etc. They furthermore describe how their teams, due to their denialist stance greatly facilitated these practices. Millar (2012: 259) explains:

> 'I had seen it at Cofidis, where the team management had their heads firmly buried in the sand, considering their responsibility fulfilled if we signed a meaningless piece of paper promising we wouldn't dope. Yet they allowed us to use whatever doctor we wanted and to race with incredibly suspicious blood values. If the rider was caught, it was his responsibility and the team would claim it had done everything possible to prevent it. In fact, all the team had done was protect itself. That was how the system worked.'

Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 108) further elaborates on how the team managers made use of the doctors to help guide doping use of the cyclists in order to minimize the risk of being noticed: 'That I use doping is not a problem, that I take the risk to get caught is. I can use cortisones, blood bags and epo, but I cannot discredit the team.' From Millar's (2012) account one can furthermore convey how in the close-knit team there is a pressure to conform and dial yourself up; it is part of being a professional cyclist and the responsibilities that come with it. A team is only as strong as its weakest link. The culture of competition greatly affects team dynamics and there is competition in and between teams. There is a constant

15 In their research among young elite cyclists Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs (2010: 341) also discovered that young riders come to ride among older more experienced riders in the peloton who have histories of doping and who still have power in cycling and thereby have considerable influence over younger riders. On the socialization of cyclists see also Ohl et al. (2015).


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'white noise of expectancy', as Millar referred to it. Cyclists perform to beat other teams, but they also perform to beat team members in order to be chosen to race in high profile races. Dynamics on the meso level therefore also affect the motivation and opportunity structure. The intimate groups in which they reside provide the environment in which they learn the requisite skills and techniques for engaging in doping practices and these environments do not sufficiently control such behaviour.

## Micro – The cyclist

From the cyclists' accounts it becomes clear that in their youth, they developed a romanticized perception of pro-cycling. The heroic superhuman efforts triggered their fascination and it became an obsession that led them to pursue their dream of a career in cycling.[16] Rasmussen notes: 'I remember that in school we had craft workshops. While the girls had embroidered flowers, I had embroidered the names of cyclists: Bernard Hinault, Greg LeMond and Laurent Fignon.' Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 11-14) explains how he felt attracted to cycling because of its rawness and the suffering. He notes how compared to cycling, other sports were only a game. He was captivated by the heroic performances of Indurain and Riis: 'I knew for sure. I wanted to become a cyclist too.' The accounts subsequently convey how they give up everything to pursue this dream, but they were misled from the start as Rasmussen (2013) notes: 'Nobody had ever told me what was necessary to become a professional cyclist. When I was eight years old, I didn't have a clue what doping was.' Vaughters (2019) explains: 'when I started bike racing in complete ignorance of the fact that, from its early days, the sport had been tainted by cheating in many forms.' Millar (2012: 30) notes the downside of this naïve and romantic view: 'it leave[s] you incredibly unprepared for the harsh realities of that world when you get there.' As noted earlier, the dream is seriously challenged when the reality of pro-cycling kicks in.[17] Not being able to compete, having to give up, having to get off your bike and being stripped of your number is humiliating. 'It is the most soul-destroying moment a cyclist can have,' Millar (2012: 152) concludes. Millar (2012: 115-118) explains that being clean in a dope-infested climate is highly demoralizing. If you want something that bad, if it's your dream, not being able to reach it is catastrophic and this causes a strain which puts cyclists in the market for alternative means of achieving their dream. The accounts furthermore reveal how at a very young age they already show the ambition and drive to win. Moreover, they turn out to have a remarkable ability to endure suffering and push themselves. Heavy competition or injury were not going to stop them. They see themselves as tougher, better, more talented than the rest. Their talent and attitude result in an eagerness that initially propels their career and their rise through the ranks, but they hit a wall when they go pro. It is the frustration and the feeling of unfairness that accompanies the first

16 On a similar note see Smith (2017: 104-105).

17 Lentillion-Kaestner et al. (2010: 339) also found in their research among young elite cyclists that the temptation to dope arises when cyclists experience setbacks.


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defeats, when entering the pro-races, that triggers the need for doping. 'Even the fatties passed me [...] it looked like they were flying,' says Riccò (2018) about his first professional run. This sense of unfairness generates strain in cyclists who feel that their potential is being squandered by a doped competition. It comes with disappointment and frustration. In order to deal with the challenges, they initially tend to resort to more training, more rigorous diets, etc. But eventually, when all else fails, they resort to doping. According to Hamilton, they go through a process of excitement first when they become a pro-cyclist, subsequently there is frustration and realization and lastly clarity that doping is the only solution. Hamilton (2012) notes: '[...] I had been cheated out of my livelihood, and there was no sign that things were going to get better. So I did what many others had done before me. I joined the brotherhood.' Millar (2012: 154-155) about the decision to dope: 'I was weary – too weary to fight anymore. All that resistance – all the fighting I'd been doing, all the idealism that at first came so naturally and had slowly grown into a futile and isolating stance – was now behind me.' At that point, Dekker (Zonneveld, 2016: 78) noted that he didn't feel guilty: 'I made myself believe that I am not being dishonest. That the others do the same. I pretended that I only did what was necessary to get along with the big boys – nothing more, nothing less.'[18] An important factor is that to chase their dream they risked everything, and there appears to be no exit strategy. Cycling involves a totalizing preparation, which means that most cyclists arrive to their debut in the pro-world without other viable career alternatives: cycling is the only thing they know and that makes them vulnerable.

When combining the aforementioned micro elements with elements that can be gleaned from the macro and meso analysis, a highly criminogenic constellation emerges. On the micro level it became clear that personal characteristics, such as the cyclists' fascination, focus and drive, are certainly strengths, but as their careers develop these same factors also turned out to foster their vulnerability for doping. Their individual rationalisation regarding doping took place in a broader context. On the macro level, in the world of cycling, the dominant perception was that doping was a normal necessity that could be used without repercussions, while on the meso level, in the closer environment of the team and the peloton, there was a pressure to conform and perform, while the skills and knowledge required to dope were often readily available.

18 The importance of the 'everyone else is doing it' as a neutralization technique for doping users is also underlined by Sefiha (2012: 226-227).



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## Survival

In order to survive in this harsh reality, the mentioned cyclists resorted to doping because it allowed them to deal with a combination of challenges that cycling at an elite level generated.[19] Hamilton notes:

> 'Objectively, I knew what had happened: the red egg – which I found out later was testosterone – had gone into my bloodstream and kicked off a cascade of beneficial changes: added fluid to my muscles, repaired tiny injuries, created a feeling of well-being. It wasn't just me going up that hill, it was an improved me. A more balanced me. As [my soigneur] would say, a healthier me. […] I took the pill, and it worked – I rode faster, felt better. I felt good, and not just physically. The red egg was a badge of honour, a sign that [my soigneur] and the team saw my potential. I felt like this was a small step toward making the A team.'

Hamilton's statement aptly captures what we can also glean from the other accounts, namely that doping has physical, psychological, social, and economic effects.[20] Doping helps to increase their performance during training and races. It also helps them to recover better and faster from such efforts. Regarding this last aspect, it is relevant to note that cyclists value doping also for its medical and healing characteristics. Instead of seeing doping as harmful, they tend to see it as a means to help their bodies to better cope with the extreme efforts. It is about safeguarding their health.

In addition to aiding physical performance and recovery, it also helps them to deal with psychological challenges of cycling performance. Trainings and races not only affect the body but also the soul. It wears them out and doping helps them to feel better and stronger. Moreover, in a culture of doping, where use is commonplace, being clean becomes a liability to those who do dope. Being clean can generate social challenges and doping use leads to social acceptance in the team and/or the peloton. It also helps cyclists to fulfil team expectations. In addition, doping allows them to level the playing field and therefore safeguard their careers. The accounts furthermore reveal that doping is not only used by cyclists to gain more success. It is also used to prevent them from losing what they have. Doping is therefore not only about winning as Riccò (2018) observes: '[A]s battery chickens we train and we "cure", some to win, the most just to keep up, to be one of the Group.' Taking into account the abovementioned elements, one can con-

19 Smith (2017: 103) highlights that 'survival' also provides riders with the ultimate rationalization for their behaviour: 'Using the idea of survival therefore granted cyclists the opportunity to legitimate their doping by suggesting this was the only option in the competitive arena. Rather than suggest their performance was below par, which would have led to them being dropped, cyclists also passed the responsibility of doping on to their competitors. Cyclists viewed their competitors as deviant and it was because of these other cyclists' behavior that they needed to dope. Their positions drew on a historical and cultural narrative that sport should be 'fair'. They believed that if they did not dope then they would have been immediately disadvantaged.'

20 Smith's (2017) study of confessions came to similar results.


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clude that for these cyclists, doping was a way to gain control over one's destiny, enabling them to survive in an uncertain hostile environment.

## Conclusion

In contrast to what Yar argued, confessional accounts are not merely exercises in impression management. Their authors are not simply 'masters of spin' who try to save their public image. In contrast, in a world ruled by a strict code of silence, those who confess and break the *omertà* are of *key* importance because they *unlock* this closed world. They provide important insights that help us to better understand the problem of doping. As Millar (2012) noted: 'One of the biggest sources on doping is a doper.' The accounts shed light on the motivation and opportunity structures behind doping and they show how many of these structures are endemic to the system of professional cycling. As a result, explanations of doping should not be limited to individual failure (bad apple). They should also pay serious attention to system failure (bad barrel).[21] This is in line with knowledge from the field of organisational criminology that acknowledges the importance of systems for our understanding of crime, because they greatly influence the actions of their members (Gottschalk, 2012). Approaches to combatting doping should therefore not only address the individual culprits, but they should also be geared to addressing the criminogenic features of the system of professional cycling. In the aftermath of the earlier discussed crisis, cycling authorities and anti-doping organizations have developed a multi-faceted approach to tackle the problem. When taking stock, it becomes clear that the approach includes a variety of initiatives, ranging from stimulating research on the issue and raising more awareness about it, to improve athlete guidance programs and so-called clean team initiatives. However, what came to characterize the fight against doping most, was a strong punitive turn involving a more coherent and stricter anti-doping policy in terms of regulation, control and enforcement (Anderson, 2013). The current approach sees doping predominantly as an individual crime, which is at odds with the insights that doping results from a criminogenic system, in which elements beyond the individual also play an important role. A constructive approach would extend the focus beyond the bad apples and address the bad barrel.[22] Also, given the fact that silence is a core feature of the doping culture, one could argue that a strong punitive approach might not be effective in tackling the problem. Van de Bunt (2010: 435) has noted that in scenarios where silence is an important explanatory variable, '[t]he strengthening of supervision is unlikely to be effective without simultaneous efforts to encourage people to speak out and to give them incentives to want to know and to tell the truth'. Counterstrategies should therefore not only focus on punitive control and regulation, but also on breaking the

21 Smith et al. (2010: 195) also indicate that contextual factors greatly influence doping use by athletes.

22 The zero tolerance approach, according to Fincoeur & Van de Ven (2015: 246) also has the unintended consequence that 'the increasingly clandestine nature of doping practices has led consumers to increasingly consider the 'black market' as a potential source for PIEDs'.



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silence. A constructive strategy, according to Van de Bunt, creates structures and incentives that facilitate disclosure. Meanwhile due to several doping scandals, including the Russian scandal, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has undertaken several reforms and implemented a whistle-blowing policy in 2016. Athletes now have the opportunity to get their sentences reduced if they provide substantial assistance in discovering or bringing forth an anti-doping rule violation by another person. Despite the fact that the development of a whistle-blowing policy is a positive development, the question remains whether a whistle-blowing policy is the appropriate mechanism to address the culture of silence. Whistle-blowing basically expands the existing control measures when it comes to detecting anti-doping rule violations. Other disclosure mechanisms, such as truth commissions, might be more appropriate when it comes to achieving disclosure. A truth commission aims to create a safe environment for people to speak up about what has happened. It goes beyond incidents and investigates patterns of violations in an attempt to unearth the deeper-lying causes, mechanism and processes regarding what has happened. As such, it has the potential to come to a more meaningful and profound understanding regarding what has happened, which in turn can inform constructive changes in the world of cycling so that doping can be better prevented in the future. According to Cohen (1995: 15) such a 'truth phase' is relevant because after a history of denials, evasions, cover-ups and lies, people want and need to know what has happened. Cycling has, however, missed out on this important truth phase. Although, after the Armstrong affair, there were calls for a truth commission, due to struggles between sport governing bodies and because of the implementation of the new strict regulatory structure of WADA, a truth commission did not materialize. Given the fact that the *omertà* was one of the major problems, the above described developments are regretable.

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