Tackling Irregularities in Sport through Education on Whistleblowing

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Abstract: Recent years have brought to the attention of sport specialists new challenges in education, aiming to defend ethics and integrity in sport. Doping, match fixing and corrupted sport governance represent ongoing threats to the integrity, good reputation, and societal welfare dimension of sport. At the same time, from the athletes' perspective, abuse, sexual harassment, bullying, violence and psychological pressure are other types of threats to the ethics in all sport domains. Different educational approaches that aim to achieve a culture of ethics and integrity in sport have been designed and implemented. Recently, whistleblowing has been promoted as a useful means in the fight against corruption in sport. This trend called for more educational efforts designed to encourage the participation of those involved in the sport phenomenon (i.e. athletes, coaches, managers, spectators) in whistleblowing in order to prevent the violation of ethics.

The paper is an analysis of the usefulness of an educational material on whistleblowing implemented in Romania. In order to promote models of good practice, information is directly related to the educational rationale through an explanation of not only what knowledge and skills can be expected to be gained, but also what professional capabilities will be achieved. The conclusions of the paper emphasize the need to develop and test new education and training methodologies, promoting whistleblowing in sport, which will be adapted to the needs of the target sport population aiming to induce positive beliefs and behaviours about whistleblowing.

Keywords: *sport whistleblowing; education; training specialists; sport ethics; sport integrity;*

How to cite: Barkoukis, V., Stanescu, M., Stoicescu, M., & Tsorbatzoudis, H. (2019). Tackling Irregularities in Sport through Education on Whistleblowing. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 11(1), 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/92>

1. Introduction

Jacque Rogge, the former chairman of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), noted the extent of the match-fixing and illegal betting phenomenon and how these examples of violation of sport ethics affect sport competitions (Carpenter, 2012). The most affected sports are football, basketball, cricket, horse racing, snooker, sumo, and tennis. On the other hand, the debate regarding the mechanisms that sport has at its disposal to stop these phenomena is becoming more and more topical. Carpenter (2012) highlighted the fact that academics, policy makers and sporting bodies believe that the main measures guiding the match-fixing fight are the “formulation of clear guidelines; compliance with and surveillance of those guidelines; and education.” Representative sporting bodies, such as IOC, WADA, SportAccord, have introduced codes of ethics in gambling related to sports competitions. The content of these measures exceeds the abovementioned irregularity and addresses the issue of ethics and integrity in sport in general. Match fixing is only an example of corruption in sport. Past years have brought to the attention of sport specialists increasingly more cases of violation of sport ethics. From banned substances, sexual abuse, and fixed matches, all these sports irregularities damage the image and credibility of sport.

1.1. Education for ethics and integrity in sport

Education is one of the most valuable approaches in preventing sport corruption. World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) was one of the first international sporting bodies to introduce seminars and workshops to prevent doping, in 2007. In the same line, SportAccord encouraged international sports federations to initiate educational programs to prevent match fixing, illegal sports betting, and other crimes. The implementation of these programs indicated that multi-level strategies in the education of sports actors - athletes, coaches, parents and club officials - lead to long-term changes and increased efficiency.

1.2. Whistleblowing - a method of preventing violations of ethics in sports

Whistleblowing is the action of reporting an irregularity in sport with the intention of keeping the "clean" character of this activity. Whistleblowing is defined as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to

effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1995). Whistleblowing is a complex phenomenon, determined by personal, organizational and situational variables (Miceli & Near, 1988). Numerous public and private sector, professional and managerial groups, investigated whistleblowing utilizing several variables such as organizational structure, laws, culture, decision making and assumed risk processes (Keenan, 2002a).

The organizational culture emerged as an important factor influencing whistleblowing. Personal, organizational and situational factors acted simultaneously and influences people's decision to blow the whistle. Berry (2004) suggested seven dimensions of organizational culture as components of a conceptual model that can explain this decision: vigilance, engagement, credibility, accountability, empowerment, courage, and options. Each dimension makes a specific contribution to creating an organizational culture that encourages employees to militate for ethics and integrity. Hence, organizations are encouraged to promote the use of internal alert mechanisms through educational actions.

Furthermore, the specific cultural influences of each country, which influence how whistleblowing is perceived and adopted within organizations, should be considered in developing whistleblowing policies (Keenan & Xin, 1999). These country-based differences are due to the moral perception of violations of codes of ethics, acceptance and observance of authority, perception of errors in the exercise of the profession, and risk taking in professional activity (Keenan, 2002b). Overall, past evidence and theorizing in this field concludes that encouraging educational programs emphasizing professional ethics is one of the solutions that can lead to optimizing the moral climate of an organization.

Whistleblowing in sports is one of the behaviours that allowed the unveiling of great scandals in sport, namely fixed matches, doping as well as other forms of irregularities. However, the adoption of such behaviour is influenced by many variables. In the world of sport, although moral values are universally recognized and accepted, we face different people's reactions when it comes to recognizing, resisting temptation, and reporting irregularities. Contextual differences in the practice of different sporting disciplines may also influence athletes' attitudes and behaviours when they notice violations of sport ethics, i.e. doping. While athletes are willing to take on the role of whistle-blower, rugby players experienced a moral conflict when it came to report a doping incident. Although they did not agree with doping, they stick to the code of silence and refused to report such cases (Whitaker, Backhouse, & Long, 2014). In this line, Erickson, Backhouse, & Carless, (2017) concluded that direct confrontation was participants'

preferred approach to addressing doping, rather than reporting to an authority.

Taking into consideration the abovementioned research evidence, educational programs should take into account the particularities of sporting groups and sports specialists. The adoption of whistleblowing behaviour allows sports people to exert their social role, to defend the integrity of sport, and also emphasizes the need for protection, the existence of rules and procedures that eliminate personal and professional risks, after the adoption of such decisions. Past evidence demonstrated that developing skills to report doping behaviour irregularities or raising awareness of reporting possibilities can increase the responsibility of individuals to prevent the use of prohibited substances (Erickson et al., 2017; Whitaker et al., 2014).

1.3. Educational material about sport whistleblowing

One of the objectives of the *Sport Whistleblowing of Harmful Irregularities in Sport through Learning and Education project* (Sport WHISTLE; funded by Erasmus Plus call on Sport) was to provide an educational material able to contribute to the development of competencies related to the behaviours of recognition, resistance and reporting sport irregularities. The educational material was developed to address the needs of multiple public sport servants and sport stakeholders in the field of public and private sport sector. The basic objectives of the educational material was to a) increase their awareness about recognizing – resisting and reporting wrongdoing in sports, in different types and levels of sport; b) teach coping skills on identifying, resisting offers and temptations to engage in wrongdoing, such as doping, match - fixing, fraud, bribery, corruption; and c) indicate ways to properly report irregularities [sport incidents], including abuse, violence, harassment, and bullying, to the relevant authorities, such as sport integrity platforms, sport governing bodies, ethics committees and/or sport compliance systems.

The Sport WHISTLE educational material consisted of six modules: definition and presentation of sport whistleblowing; benefits of whistleblowing; what, how and where to report; developing positive norms; self-efficacy and empowerment; how to develop a whistleblowing platform. <https://sportwhistle.eu/sport-whistle-educational-material/>. The material is intended to be used as an open source and is available to all sports specialists, but also to sportsmen, parents, and other categories of actors in the sport world.

2. Aim

The Sport WHISTLE educational material was presented to trainers and stakeholders in specifically designed training sessions. The aim of this paper was to record the opinions of sport stakeholders who attended these training sessions organized in Romania. Being one of the first educational materials on this topic, the paper highlights the opinions of the trainers and participants on the content and delivery mode of the educational material.

3. Research design and methods

The educational material was presented within a national launch event, on the 14th of June 2018, to a group of 20 multipliers. The selected multipliers agreed to contribute to the dissemination of the material in other 20 local events; one per multiplier. Both a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the educational material was performed. For the qualitative evaluation a focus group was organized with six of the multipliers. An interview matrix was developed assessing whistleblowing attitudes, beliefs and willingness to engage in whistleblowing. These six multipliers who participated in the interview were sports specialists: two university professors, two coaches, and two sports club directors.

For the quantitative evaluation of the educational material, participants in the training events completed a survey measuring awareness of the whistleblowing concept, skills to recognize and report irregularities in sport, and attitudes towards whistleblowing. A pre-post design was employed where participants completed the survey before and immediately after the training event. Furthermore, in the post training event measurement participants evaluated the quality of the educational material. Participant's responses were anchored on 5- and 7-point Likert scales.

IBM SPSS v25 was used to analyse the participants' responses. Both descriptive (i.e., frequency of responses, mean, mode and median of the responses), and inductive statistics (i.e., an ANOVA to test for differences between the measurement points, and crosstabs analysis to identify correlations between answers and demographic variables such as age, field of study, years of experience, sports discipline).

3.1. Target groups

The training sessions organized in different cities in Romania (one training session in Bucharest, at Giurgiu, at Nanov, Craiova, and two in Constanta), and 125 specialists from the field of sport participated. As

shown in Figure 1, the majority of the trainees were coaches (44%) and physical education and sports teachers (32.8%).

In terms of vocational training, 49.6% of the participants were higher education graduates with a bachelor's degree, 32% had a master's degree, 14.4% had only baccalaureate degree and 4% had a doctorate degree. The majority of the participants (68%) had more than 10 years of professional experience, with most of them being involved in football (24.8%) and track and field (15.2%; Figure 2).

Figure 1. Target group structure by professional activity criteria

Figure 2. Sports specialization of the target group

4. Results

Following the training session, the six multipliers had the opportunity to choose which modules, out of the six, they wanted to present at the training sessions which they would organize.

Their choices are represented in Figure 3. Several multipliers chose to present 2 or 3 modules. The most commonly chosen modules were *Module 1: Defining the concept of whistleblowing* and *Module 2: The Benefits and Need for whistleblowing*. *Module 6: Creating a reporting platform in your own organization* was chosen by one multiplier only.

Figure 3. Number of modules choices of the multipliers

The descriptive analysis showed that multipliers have chosen to present modules that provide knowledge about the sport whistleblowing phenomenon and highlight the benefits and the need for such behaviour. They opted to a lesser extent for the module that offered solutions for implementing a whistleblowing platform in sport organizations. This information demonstrates the fact that their experience and job tasks were not relevant to the implementation of such a system, even if two out of the six multipliers were sports club directors. However, the acquired knowledge has contributed in raising awareness about sport whistleblowing. Also, the multipliers' responses to the question *How did you feel about each of these modules* provided insightful information. More specifically, the multipliers responded that the information was very useful, consistent, and quite new; part of the course cannot be applied because of people's resistance to report; usually people are afraid of consequences; most people have information about irregularities, but they prefer to stay away from these issues.

For multipliers, the educational material was totally new and challenging. Most of them suggested that it should be largely promoted by sports organizations and should be integrated into professional sports professionals' professional education. They have decided to use only

declarative and procedural knowledge from the material, because sports people do not have the habit to blow the whistle. At the end of the local training session, multipliers become more aware about this topic. They have to admit that many people will not take the attitude to face irregularities, even if they have participated in the local training session. The multipliers suggested that the educational material could be improved with other topics, practical examples, and more references. In the question *Did your thoughts and feelings about the modules change over time?* multipliers appreciated that the educational material had a positive influence; however, a deeper search was needed on their behalf in order to effectively address the issues raised by the trainees. This was explicitly stated by one multiplier who said: *Sometimes I thought the people were afraid to speak about irregularities and I have tried to give more examples from my experience; I was feeling myself less confident when people asked me about the consequences of whistleblowing on their career and personal life.*

As regards the trainees in the training sessions, the results indicated an improvement of their beliefs about whistleblowing (Figure 4). The lowest pre- and post-event values were recorded for the Worthwhile item. It seems that although sports people are aware of the value of this behaviour, they do not see it as being able to make significant changes in the sport world. The results of the ANOVA, revealed significant difference only at the Meaningful item (Table 1).

Figure 4. Sports People's Beliefs on Sport Whistleblowing

Table 1. Results of the ANOVA on trainees attitudes

Educational material characteristics	Initial evaluation	Final evaluation	F value	F critical
Meaningful	6.42	6.68	2.07*	1.34
Smart	6.34	6.66	0.40	0.74
Helpful	6.33	6.65	0.45	0.74
Reasonable	6.32	6.69	0.30	0.74
Valuable	6.28	6.67	0.30	0.74
Useful	6.31	6.66	0.40	0.74
Worthwhile	6.16	6.56	0.38	0.74

Note: * $p < .05$

The results confirmed that the participants understood better what whistleblowing means, but after a 3-hour training session they did not assimilate the necessary procedural knowledge regarding whistleblowing. Furthermore, that the results showed that after following the modules chosen by the trainers there is an optimization of the level of awareness regarding the sport whistleblowing issue, an increase in the level of potential engagement in whistleblowing actions, and the social accountability on the reporting of the irregularities in the sport (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Level of self-efficiency

With respect to the institution where sports people, if they would opt for a whistleblower behaviour, are most likely to address, the results

showed that most of the trainees would address to international bodies, and national and sports federations. To a lesser extent, sports people are inclined to appeal to other athletes, coaches or club directors (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Level of sports people's trust

As far as the quality of the educational material is concerned, the results showed that the trainees agree and strongly agree on all its features: usefulness, relevance, novelty, interesting, and attractive (Figure 7). At the same time, the trainees reported that the material has the ability to motivate and encourage sports people to have an active attitude towards sport whistleblowing. Furthermore, the trainees appreciated that the educational material was useful and interesting and has increased especially their level of declarative knowledge. Lastly, the trainees reported that sport whistleblowing is worth promoting and could bring an important contribution to sport education.

Figure 7. Opinion of trainees on educational material

The analyses of the data obtained from the qualitative and quantitative analysis showed an association between multipliers' options to approach the educational material and the trainees' beliefs. All agreed that the material should be taught by trained persons in the spirit of clean sports and can be effective only if it is assumed / promoted by sports organizations (local and national).

5. Limitation of the study

Our study has some limitations in terms of the sample size (i.e., six multipliers) and the geographical coverage of the trainees (i.e. trainees from only a few cities across Romania). Therefore, the results cannot be generalized for the whole country. Also, the conditions for organizing the local training sessions did not allow the selection of a stratified sample-group, representing equally professionals from different sports areas. Therefore, future studies on this topic should take into account the above-mentioned limits.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The Sport WHISTLE educational material addresses for the first time a sensitive issue for the sports such as whistleblowing. The aim of the educational material is to provide training sessions that will encourage people to make informed decisions and will engage into whistleblowing. As previous evidence from relevant sport organizations (e.g., SportAccord, WADA) has shown, the impact of educational measures on whistleblowing

behaviour will be shown on the long-term, and needs to be supported by more resilient mechanisms and procedures.

The educational material had a positive effect at trainees' awareness about whistleblowing. However, this effect could be retained or increased only with the help of relevant sports organizations. Unlike other studies (Erickson et al., 2017), the present study showed that in Romania, sports people prefer to approach the international organizations in the field, having less confidence that whistleblowing systems can be implemented at a local level.

7. Future directions

The present study provides information showing that the content of the Sport WHISTLE educational material should be included in the compulsory curriculum for coaches continuing education and could bring an important contribution to the consolidation of a clean sport culture. In addition, the training activities must be accompanied by an important component of personal development; so the participants can feel adequate and improved in the aftermath of the training session. The educational material is freely available for stakeholders to use, however, we believe it needs to be adapted each time to the trainees, and transmitted by qualified professionals in the field of ethics and integrity in sport. At the same time, it is important to develop sport policy recommendations to guide further education and training of public sport servants, and sport stakeholders about the establishment of sport whistleblowing and sport compliance systems and practices, for the prevention of abuse, violence, bullying, harassment, doping, match - fixing and corruption in sports, and to inform sports people about the existing and ongoing EU level policy initiatives.

Acknowledgement

The paper was written as part of the project *Sport Whistleblowing of Harmful Irregularities in Sport through Learning and Education project* (Erasmus Plus Sport, 2017- 2018), coordinated by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), and having as one of the partners the National University of Physical Education and Sports Bucharest. All the authors had an equal contribution to the research design and implementation.

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