



Rethinking Anti-Doping Research: Methodological Choices, Racism, and the Importance of Context

Geoffrey Miller*

Research & Expertise in AntiDoping Sciences, Institute of Sport Sciences, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This commentary responds to critiques of the authors' earlier work on raising awareness of epistemic racism in anti-doping research. The response is organized into three reflective sections addressing method, racism, and context. The first section outlines the deliberative process behind the original commentary and details the authors' lived experiences, addressing critiques of method. The second section reflects on racism: epistemic racism is not a novel concept but one acknowledged across disciplines, making it relevant to anti-doping scholarship; the authors challenge its dismissal as irrelevant and note that systemic racial biases in knowledge production have long shaped science and policy, supporting the recommendation that scholars be racially aware and that claims of tokenism regarding editorial board representation be reconsidered. The third section addresses context — a term the authors argue is heavily relied upon but inconsistently and questionably used by their critics. The commentary notes how an original framing of athletes from developing countries as lacking choice, values, and morality was obscured by a reframing presented as positive and critiques the concept of self-selection bias as a form of blame-shifting that ignores the historical context and consequences of colonialism. Through this structure, the authors aim not only to respond to their critics but also to encourage a more inclusive and equitable approach to anti-doping research.

KEYWORDS: Colonial Legacies; Decolonizing Methodologies; Athlete Representation; Implicit Bias; Cultural Contextualization; Qualitative Methods; Positionality

INTRODUCTION

"Silence is safer" — a phrase circulated on the authors' university campus — reflects the instinctive hesitation many feel about speaking openly on controversial topics. The authors nonetheless felt compelled to write their original Commentary (Ruwuya et al., 2024), a decision elaborated on below. Kayser (2024) anticipated that the original Commentary might create ripples, and he was right. Silence was, however, an option for their peers could have chosen, and the authors are grateful that many colleagues instead chose to engage in this important discussion, even where substantial disagreement remains.

The goal of the original Commentary was to raise awareness of epistemic racism and how it can influence research and knowledge production — potentially harming global anti-doping efforts, fostering division, and hindering effective policy creation and implementation. The authors aimed to encourage greater consciousness in research practice to address and rectify such biases and believe they were partially successful in that goal. Still, the Commentary drew

criticism on three fronts: (1) the "method" employed, (2) the concept of epistemic racism itself — its existence, usefulness, and application to the example used, and (3) the importance of, and a perceived lack of, contextualization.

This response is organized around reflections on the critiques of method, racism, and context. These reflections address misconceptions, clarify the authors' arguments, and advance the broader dialogue on epistemic racism in anti-doping research. While the authors aim to avoid rehashing their original arguments, some restatement is necessary where responses appear to misrepresent their position, rely on diversionary tactics, or contain inconsistencies. The response begins with a reflection on critiques of "method," followed by reflections on racism and on context.

Critics argued that the original "method" was flawed and lacked sufficient evidence (Dasgupta, 2024; Petróczi et al., 2024), with some dismissing epistemic racism as imagined altogether (Christiansen & Møller, 2024). The work was described as hurried and overly emotional (Dasgupta, 2024; Petróczi et al., 2024). Yet, as social scientists, the authors

emphasize awareness of the impact of their research; while the Commentary may read to some as an emotional response, it was intended as a thoughtful, reasoned perspective from scholars who are part of, and work closely with, the population depicted. Without extensive primary research, the assertion may appear bold — but publishing an original empirical study is not the only legitimate way to raise awareness. Drawing on lived experience and history as Indigenous people who were subject to colonial rule and continue to endure its effects — including distortion of culture and misrepresentation of identity — the authors challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives. Their critics, in advocating a purely objective approach to reality, fail to accept this history. The authors initiated a conversation using a case example, within the constraints of a Commentary paper, and here reflect on the method and approach taken to demonstrate that the work was not rushed or merely emotional [1].

In this account, “I” refers to the lead author (Woolf), while “we,” when referring to culture, country, or experience, reflects the voices and insights of collaborators Janarthanan, Juma, and Ruwuya, particularly those from Africa. On reading Veltmaat et al.’s (2023) article, Woolf was disturbed by its quotes about athletes from developing countries and expected them to be challenged or contextualized — they were not. Doctoral advisees Janarthanan, Juma, and Ruwuya were asked to read the article and record their reflections. Ruwuya’s and Juma’s responses were highly critical, finding the representation of athletes from developing countries, particularly Africa, offensive. Janarthanan initially found the manuscript uncomfortable without being able to articulate why, and at first defended it as possibly misunderstood; she later reflected that she had been largely unaware of racism until moving from India to Europe for her studies and had regarded it as irrelevant to her own experience until listening to Ruwuya and Juma helped her see why Veltmaat et al.’s (2023) framing was problematic [2].

At that stage no decision to write a response had been made. Woolf sought external opinions from a sport psychologist, a philosopher, and a sociologist to check the interpretation and sensitivity of the concern and concluded that these issues had not previously been identified or raised. A month later, after time to reflect, the students’ views had not softened but strengthened. Before committing to writing a Commentary, the group tested its interpretation against an outside check: the article was shared with colleagues to guard against operating within an echo chamber. Five responses (four Kenyan, one African American scholar) concurred that the article was derogatory toward athletes from developing countries [3].

Considerable attention was paid to tone and framing while writing. One example was extended debate over whether to

include the word “anger”; Janarthanan was hesitant until re-reading Veltmaat et al.’s article while mentally substituting India for Africa, an exercise that helped her understand her peers’ visceral reactions. The group ultimately settled on the phrase “and even anger” as a modifier intended to soften tone while still capturing emotional impact — an example of the deliberation Kayser (2024) recognized. The authors also discussed likely reactions in advance, correctly anticipating much of the general criticism received; their greatest fear was not criticism but silence, which would have signaled apathy toward the argument. Feedback on the final draft was sought from several colleagues, including two researchers specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion, with explicit instruction that the manuscript should “shine a light on the issue but not blind people with the glare [4].”

This detailed, if abridged, account is offered to address concerns about “method.” The original article was a Commentary, not an empirical study requiring extensive data to establish “absolute proof” of epistemic racism in anti-doping research; even framed as empirical, it would qualify as a single-embedded case study (Yin, 2018). Veltmaat et al.’s (2023) publication provided a relevant illustrative example. While some may view this as insufficient evidence, the authors’ concerns are grounded in extensive experience conducting research in and on developing countries; further examples of microaggressions were deliberately omitted to avoid appearing petty. It is worth noting that this series of Commentaries appears in *Performance Enhancement and Health*, reflecting the journal’s willingness to host this debate on epistemic racism in anti-doping research.

REFLECTIONS ON RACISM

Christiansen and Møller’s (2024) central criticism frame the original Commentary as representative of a troubling trend toward censorship in academia, targeting the term “epistemic racism,” its lack of an explicit definition and evidence, and comparing the work to a hoax publication. This analysis is considered flawed: the concept is not new and has been applied in public health (Hardeman & Karbeah, 2020), higher education (López & Parker, 2003; Ramadan, 2024), medicine (Hoberman, 2012), and sport management (Singer, 2005; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2020). While no formal definition was originally provided, epistemic racism is here defined as the way racial biases influence the production and dissemination of knowledge, often privileging some racial groups (namely White) while marginalizing others. For roughly fifty years, psychological research has largely ignored race, with most publications authored and edited by White researchers (Roberts et al., 2020); this prompted the American Psychological Association’s 2023 guidelines urging scholars to consider the racial and cultural histories of study populations (Ledford, 2023), following the APA’s 2021 formal apology for its historical role in perpetuating

racism (American Psychological Association, 2021) — developments underscoring the timeliness of the original Commentary [5].

Christiansen and Møller (2024) also questioned the authors' sincerity in avoiding the label "racist," characterizing this as reducing racism to a binary and, in their words, "unhelpful." The authors did not avoid this language to inoculate themselves from criticism; rather, Blum (2002) cautions against such language except in the most severe cases, McNamee (2008) calls for intentionality and ignorance to be weighed, and Scheurich and Young (1997) argue that racist intent is not a prerequisite for marginalized groups to experience unfair harm. By focusing on whether individuals hold racist beliefs, critics overlook the systemic nature of epistemic racism (Starke & Mastracci, 2023). The authors maintain that neither those involved in producing Veltmaat et al. (2023) nor their critics are, or should be considered, racist; this considered approach, as Kayser (2024) acknowledged, is a strength rather than a weakness of the argument [6].

The defensive stances of Petróczi et al. (2024) and Christiansen and Møller (2024) are argued to exemplify epistemic racism and Eurocentric bias in anti-doping research. As Smith (2023) argues, epistemic racism thrives under the assumption that research is objective and neutral — a hallmark of positivist and post-positivist paradigms that has long been critiqued for inadequacy in addressing human subjectivity, culture, and historical context (Cohen et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and challenged by interpretivism, critical theory, and postmodernism (Schwandt, 2000; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Derrida, 1976). Ignoring cultural and historical context is emblematic of "epistemologies of ignorance" (Mills, 1997), which allow dominant groups to remain unaware of the systemic nature of racial bias. Decolonizing research methodologies, as advocated by Smith (2023), stress the importance of researchers' mental frames and positionality — social and cultural background, power dynamics, and relationship to the study population — since outsider researchers often lack the nuanced understanding needed to avoid misinterpretation. Smith (2023) further critiques approach that prioritizes researchers' narratives over participants', reproducing colonial power dynamics [7].

Petróczi et al. (2024), operating from a psychological, post-positivist perspective, argue it is not their responsibility to challenge or contextualize athletes' statements, assuming they can remain detached from their findings. Complete detachment is considered inherently flawed, since researchers inevitably interpret findings through cognitive lenses shaped by personal experience, cultural values, and disciplinary paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Notably, Christiansen and Møller (2024) acknowledge that athletes may have held biased views that could have been exposed and discussed — precisely the authors' original point.

Choosing which themes and quotes to foreground is itself a choice, and the choices made are argued to have perpetuated a negative perception of African athletes behind a façade of objectivity.

RISKY RECOMMENDATIONS

Christiansen and Møller (2024) express alarm at recommendations that scholars be educated on the potential for racial bias to influence research, and that editorial board representation be increased, equating "education" with censorship and arguing — somewhat circularly — that well-educated researchers would already be familiar with such biases. This dismissal is argued to ignore the historical entanglement of science and racism, including Samuel George Morton's cranial studies (Fabian, 2010), the Tuskegee syphilis experiments (Reverby, 2009), and contemporary medical racism (Hoberman, 2012); knowledge production is never generated from a position of neutrality (Starke & Mastracci, 2023). Ensuring researchers are racially aware is argued to be less likely to undermine research than allowing them to remain racially unaware. Concerns that increased representation would favor place of origin over qualification are explicitly rejected as not the authors' stance; the assumption that scholars from developing nations would be token, unqualified appointees is itself read as evidence of the subconscious biases under discussion. Africa has numerous accredited higher-education institutions producing capable scholars, some — including the authors — educated at internationally respected American and European institutions, rendering these concerns unwarranted [8].

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEXT

Petróczi et al. (2024) argue that the authors mischaracterized their study, framing evidence as "introduced" rather than "found," and offer an analogy suggesting the same study could as easily be read as ageist, sexist, or ableist: nearly a third of the sample was over 30 (one approaching 50, with 20% retired from sport), nearly 40% was female, and the sample included para-athletes. The authors respond that older, female, and para-athletes are equally entitled to comment on their own vulnerabilities to doping — the issue is not commentary by members of a group on their own group, but that European athletes commented on Africans, with that commentary then used to inform anti-doping recommendations.

Regarding why Kenya specifically was raised, Petróczi et al. (2024) suggest that three international distance runners, one trained in Kenya, may have offered informed insight. A careful reading, however, shows that only one athlete quoted was international (59), only two were distance runners (#8 and #59), and four athletes were quoted in total (#4, 8, 11, and 59), not three. Christiansen and Møller (2024) similarly suggest athletes may have commented on known doping patterns in Kenya, but other countries with high doping

incidence, prominently covered in media and represented among study participants, were not subject to comparable claims about choice, values, or morality — only athletes from developing countries, notably Kenya, were. The more plausible explanation offered is that those involved missed the racial undertone in the article not through deliberate racism, but because subconscious bias obscured the harm being perpetuated [9].

Despite Petróczi et al.'s (2024, p. 2) claim to have “cautioned readers against generalizing,” Veltmaat et al. (2023, p. 18) themselves describe their diverse sample as “enhanc[ing] the generalizability and richness of the findings.” The stated limitation — that participants were from developed nations, with more research recommended in “less privileged regions to fully understand the values and circumstances influencing athletes in these regions” (p. 18) — is not read as a note of caution, since arguing for a fuller understanding implies one has already, if only marginally, been obtained.

THE CONTEXT OF FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Petróczi et al. (2024) argue that economic pressure makes Kenyan athletes vulnerable to doping, citing Ogama and Sakwa (2019), a study of athletes' opinions on economic factors rather than actual doping behavior. The authors acknowledge that financial gain incentivizes doping broadly, not only among Kenyan athletes — modeling studies link prize money to doping prevalence (Westmattmann et al., 2020), and athletes' hypothetical-scenario discussions support financial motivations for doping more generally (Whitaker et al., 2017). Christiansen and Møller's (2024) comparison to an elite cyclist who admitted doping for financial gain is considered flawed, since the cyclist spoke to personal experience without purporting to represent others, unlike the framing in Veltmaat et al. (2023). Both sets of critics are argued to overlook the racially stereotyped language used by athletes in that study; ignoring this context, the authors argue, whitewashes the problematic framing identified in the original Commentary. The assumption that African/Kenyan athletes must dope to escape poverty, with sport as their sole vehicle for social mobility, is characterized as reductive, ignoring options such as stable employment in law enforcement or the military that allow full-time training alongside a secondary career path.

THE CONTEXT OF RECRUITMENT

Recruiting athletes is acknowledged as a general challenge for researchers (Harris & Trussell, 2024), particularly in doping research (Engelberg et al., 2015; Kirby et al., 2011). In addressing the reluctance of African athletes to participate, Petróczi et al. (2024) are argued to overlook the historical context of colonialism and resulting distrust of European and Western research initiatives (Smith, 2023), and the inherent disadvantages outsider researchers face in communities with long histories of marginalization and exploitation (Berger,

2015). Rather than confront this, Petróczi et al. (2024) are characterized as invoking self-selection bias to explain recruitment difficulty — a form of blame-shifting. The authors emphasize that research participation is a privilege, not a right, and that what recruitment challenges call for is active collaboration with scholars from the relevant regions, as previously highlighted (Ruwuya et al., 2024); the authors note that Petróczi and colleagues have previously sought, and received, their assistance with recruitment. Successful cross-cultural recruitment by outsiders is possible, as Sikes (2023) demonstrates, given sufficient time, effort, and commitment to understanding the cultural and historical context of the communities studied [10].

THE CONTEXT OF VALUES

Petróczi et al. (2024) are argued to engage in a diversionary tactic regarding value priorities. Veltmaat et al. (2023, p. 8) state that “values might vary between countries, with distinct notions of fairness and correctness across different regions, particularly between Western nations and less developed regions like Africa,” and that athletes from less-developed countries “may not place as much emphasis on fairness and rule adherence and, hence, might not perceive doping as a value conflict” (p. 15). These statements — that doping is normal for Africans, not perceived as wrong, and not in conflict with their values — are read as failing to cast Africans in a positive light.

Petróczi et al. (2024) subsequently invoke African moral philosophies — presented as three distinct traditions, Ubuntu, Hunthu, and Umunthu — to reframe the argument positively. The authors note this is inaccurate: Ubuntu and Umunthu describe the same concept across different Bantu languages (Ubuntu from Zulu in South Africa, Umunthu from CiNyanja in Malawi), while “Hunthu” is not itself an African philosophy — the correct term is “Hunhu,” from Shona in Zimbabwe, expressing the same values as Ubuntu (Matinhira & Mbewe, 2023). Ubuntu emphasizes humanity's interconnectedness, prioritizing harmony, compassion, and community well-being, and would function as a protective factor against doping — a positive connotation of Africa that stands in contradiction to the athletes quoted, and conclusions drawn, in Veltmaat et al. (2023). Invoking African moral philosophy in this way is characterized as avoiding accountability for the original framing while exploiting African traditions to deflect criticism rather than engage with the substantive argument.

The authors argue this exemplifies the central problem with both critiques: despite repeated emphasis that “context matters” and “context is everything,” both sidestep the core critique that Africans were painted as poor, amoral, and without options beyond doping to improve their lives — accountability avoided by the claim that it is not researchers' responsibility to challenge, censor, or conceal participants'

views, even where those views were expressed by three or four athletes out of sixty. To illustrate the point by analogy, the authors offer a parallel scenario: had a comparable study reported a handful of male athletes claiming women are less physically capable, more “maternal,” and therefore less doping-prone due to differing value priorities — publishing this without challenge, under a claim of neutrality — the same standard of scrutiny that was withheld from Veltmaat et al. (2023) would likely not have been extended to such a paper either.

CONCLUSION

This commentary highlights the importance of looking beyond conventional ideas of methodological neutrality when examining racism and representation in anti-doping research. The discussion shows that research methods, interpretation, and reporting are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts, and these influences should not be overlooked.

The concerns raised about the representation of African athletes also demonstrate why researchers need to consider how particular statements are selected, presented, and interpreted. Treating such decisions as completely detached from context can unintentionally reinforce existing stereotypes. At the same time, acknowledging these concerns does not require labelling individual researchers as racist; rather, it calls for greater awareness of how structural and unconscious biases can enter knowledge production.

Future anti-doping research would benefit from stronger cross-cultural collaboration, greater attention to researcher positionality, and meaningful engagement with scholars and communities represented in the research. A more context-sensitive approach can improve the quality of evidence while supporting fairer and more responsible knowledge

production in international sport.

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Citation: Miller G “Rethinking Anti-Doping Research: Methodological Choices, Racism, and the Importance of Context”, American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol 11, no. 2, 2025, pp. 20-24.

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