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Athletes Confessions: The Sports Biography as an Interaction Ritual

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Abstract

Commercialisation of emotions is not a new phenomenon (Hochschild, 1983) but in Denmark there is a new general trend to tell and sell personal stories in the media. Personal deprivation and crises are also major topics in sports media. This paper focuses on sports biographies as a book genre that is reviving in popularity. The paper approaches the topic through the biographies of one Danish athlete: the former professional cyclist, Jesper Skibby, who writes about his doping disclosure and shares his personal dilemmas as a former elite sportsman. The thematic text analysis orientates around social interactions, emotions and personality constructions. Inspired by micro sociology with a Durkheimian flavor of Goffman (1967) and Hochschild (1983, 2003), themes including 'face work', 'interaction rituals' and 'emotions management' are discussed. The analysis claims that sharing personal information in the media is not only a means of confession and reclaiming status but is also business and management - on an intimate level. Telling the story of the corrosion of a sporting character has become a hot issue, entertainment and not least a commercial commitment.

KEY WORDS: Sport sociology; Emotions; Identity; Media; Doping.

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“The individual may desire, earn and deserve deference, but by large he is not allowed to give it to himself, being forced to seek it from others (Goffman, 1967, p. 58).

Introduction: Going public as a form of confession

Spilling emotions and sharing personal stories on TV has proven to be a sales success. Emotions have become a public matter rather than a private issue in unbiased TV reporting and in less serious broadcasts. The entertainment industry is no longer confined to living room etiquette on the front stage, but now draws in explicit news that shocks and embarrasses (Scheff, 1990) as part of the broader ceremonial profaning (Goffman, 1967) to create sensational and truth telling “authentic reporting”.

The impact of emotions is that they tend to touch people’s hearts, especially when messages are provocative and draw the viewer into the situation in an emotional sense and embodied way, as in the case of a couple who loses trust in each other during a TV broadcast. The latest sensation on Danish TV is *‘Confession – a Space for Soul Nurturing’*, a talk show in which a priest counsels crisis-stricken individuals facing, for example, divorce, illness or death.

The sports field is also involved in framing and faming the professional athletes. One of the newest programme called *‘Tina Lund – close up’* is an intimate story on TV with one of the most famous equestrian girls. The programme shows the athlete’s life in all its faces from front- to backstage, with detailed private aspects. On the backdrop of broadcasts like these, the issue of emotions (Hochschild, 1983, 2003) in professional sports will be analysed through current cases involving professional athletes.

Doping confessions in the sports world have been common place for years, yet it is novel for athlete confessions in the form of biographies to sell well in journalistic format. Sport biographies are not unique. In narrative format, however, they are facing a renaissance in the publishing world. In recent years, biographic accounts have been published on known politicians, authors and actors – where the tendency is to use a writing style that draws in news of a personal

and private nature. The writing style appears to present the material as ‘authentic accounts’ that get underneath already publicly known stories, presented from the main character’s perspective.

This article implicates the biography of a well-known Danish professional cyclist, Jesper Skibby, as an entry point and more specifically his doping years as a professional athlete. This biography is relevant because of the doping theme, but also because it highlights the general tendency of telling a personal story ‘up front’. Doping confessions may provide a restoration of the narrative of the self. In these days, a TV-programme is following up Skibby’s biography. Here, Skibby elaborates his doping abuse with the intention of getting other athletes to change their behaviour. More recent biographies take an emotional focus, which allows written reportings of career stories based on the athlete’s personal experiences¹. Several athlete biographies are now on the market. Like the case with Skibby, all of them use the elite athlete as the writer. The books are written in a first-person language, as a story about ‘me’, although told to a journalist. In our chosen case (the Skibby-biography), the role and influence of the journalist is not evident. The biography is merely ‘penned’ by the journalist. This way, the commercial aspect is downplayed for the benefit of a construction of the ‘real story’.

This article centers on the athlete’s confession from the perspective of E. Goffman, and A. Hochschild while the microsociological frame provides insight into societal self-staging. The analysis will not contribute as such to an understanding of the personal character (the psychological content) as is the case with the narrative approach in sports psychology research tradition (Sparkes, 2002; Smith, 2007) or focus on autobiographical dimensions. These writings have given us a great amount of knowledge “from the inside of the sporting world”, often done with a creative form of new writing (Sparkes, 2009) – providing insight into the embodied, lived dimensions of pains, pleasures and commitments (Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Smith & Sparkes 2008). But the biography as a mediated text also calls for other forms of analyses (Denzin, 1989). To our knowledge, sociological analyses on sport biographies as text have hardly been conducted. In sport history research there has been written biographies on prominent sport personalities, as the biography on the Danish Niels Bukh (Bonde, 2001a 2001b) and the grounding father of the Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin (MacAloon, 1981). Further, the biography has been discussed as an empirical source for documentation of sport of the past (Bale et al, 2004; Næss, 1998; Sparkes, 1997; Ambjörnsson et al, 1997). Moreover, within the topic ‘sport and media’ there are analyses on media constructions of sport heroes (Giacobbi & DeSensi, 1999; Lines, 2001;

¹ Kenneth Carlsen *Alene på banen* [Alone on the Court] 2009; Bjarne Riis *RIIS* 2010; Erik Rasmussen *Tilgiv mig – historien om livet uden for linjerne* [Forgive Me – The story about life outside the football pitch] 2011.

Whannel, 2001). However, the topic of analysis in the current article is an original contribution as it aims to interpret the athlete's presentation of self as it is expressed in the format of a biography.

Following such lines, the article will analyze the confession as a current and new social phenomenon that is about status, recognition and justification on a societal level (Goffman, 1967). The confession has an impact beyond the micro level and will be explained below.

Theory: The Sports Biography as an Interaction Ritual

What is the purpose of confessional sports biographies? What makes world renowned professional athletes expose intimate details about their private lives, reporting on marital problems and difficult childhood experiences that make them appear fragile and vulnerable? What is the purpose of showing the corrosion of a sporting character on a global scene? This article analyses the use of the biography as a sacred significance in line with the thinking of sport as ritual (Birrell, 1981). Goffman defines a ritual as an activity that represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts. Goffman uses Durkheim's ideas about primitive religion and concepts of reverence and behavior in an attempt to illuminate aspects of secular life. He says that we have done away with many gods, but the individual becomes even stubbornly remains as deity of considerable importance (Goffman 2004). The sports Idol - as the 'divine identity', is very zealous in the worship he deserves. Doping confession stories can therefore be viewed as a 'rite of opposite sign' because the athlete on him/her own tries to explain his/her prohibited acts in the quest to acquire prestige and recognition.

When digging into the hidden layers of the daily act of 'the apology', Goffman (1971) uncovered unapparent social values of the offender's willingness to initiate and perform his own castigation. Apologies represent 'a splitting of the self into a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame given, and, by implication, is worthy of being brought back into the fold' (Goffman 1971, p. 113). Goffman also noted that the offender can 'overplay the case against himself', thereby giving to the others the task of cutting the self-deregoation short. Such a micro-sociological analysis of face-to-face apologies in daily life mirrors the structure and social functions of public confessions as a societal act. To apply Goffman's metaphor of social life as drama; 'a tacid agreement is maintained between performers and audience' (Goffman, 1959. p. 238). In the case of the apology, this 'agreement'; that is, the confirmation of a certain definition of the situation, is re-established through the interrelated acts of the offender's penance and the audience's forgiveness.

Goffman's analysis of the apogee illustrates at a deeper level his notion of the 'self' as a genuine social product. The self is considered a performed character rather than an organic thing that has a specific location. This staged character leads the audience to 'impute a self to the performed character', but this imputation – this self – 'is a *product* of the scene that comes off, not a *cause* of it' (Goffman, 1959, p. 253). Although Goffman recognises a human being behind the mask, he consistently downplays its significance (Lemert & Brannaman, 1997). He suggests that the sole importance of the self-as-performer is that it propels individuals to attend the social scenes at which they become social constructs. The self in this sense is thus not a property of the person to whom it is attributed but 'dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him' (Goffman, 1961, p. 168). In this way, each self occurs within the confines of an institutional arrangement; a social establishment or a complex of personal relationships, where the institutional arrangement 'does not so much support the self as constitute it' (ibid).

So, what can the individual do to 'impact' this constitution of the self? It is here face work and impression management come into play. Through viable performances, including presenting a trustworthy front, dramatic realisation, idealisation, expressive control, etc. (Goffman, 1959), performers attempt to control the impression others receive in social situations. The same goes for public confessions. But the presentation of self is a risky business. It is the *success* of the performance – its credibility to oneself and to others – that leads the audience and the performer to impute a self to a performed character. Hence, much is at stake, also for Skibby, when doing his confessional biography, because a person's status or self or character cannot be distinguished from the performance.

Material: The Case of Jesper Skibby

The doping confession of this Danish professional cyclist, Jesper Skibby, was aired on Danish television during prime time in conjunction with a broadcast on his biography. We remember well the emotional drama of that show. The broadcast assumed the character of 'crime, confession and punishment' and played with media instrumentation. For many years, Jesper Skibby was known as an open and content professional cyclist who could be relied on to spurt out a funny statement, even after a tough race. The TV programme portrayed the professional athlete as being gloomy. His facial expressions were serious. He austerely confessed his drug abuse in front of the entire Danish viewing audience. Skibby claimed that through his biography, he wanted to tell the 'true

story' of his life. He would step out and explain how his cycling career had developed, and how doping became a part of his daily life. Unlike what the citations said about him, he would not lie any more. He claimed that he was stepping out of the mask. He made such an effort that his audience, the public, could see the 'real' Skibby for the first time. The biography takes a very personal approach and uses a writing style that protects the psychological profile. It makes a systematic attempt to identify Skibby's character and succeeds in doing this by documenting the career through text and photos.

The biography allowed Skibby to discard the 'mask'. He argued that he no longer could live with the facade that he had built; he was trying to justify his doings. He wanted to live 'properly' and 'honestly'. He was fed-up with always being 'the comedian', and he regretted lying to both the public and to his family about his drug problem. The TV broadcast portrayed Skibby's life as 'authentic'.

Skibby was born in 1964 in Silkeborg and became a professional cyclist in 1986 at 22 years of age. He won stages in the Giro d'Italia, Tour de France and Vuelta a España. Amongst other opportunities, Skibby worked for Roland (1986); TVM (1989) and Team Home Jack & Jones (1998), and became team mates with well-known Danish cyclists, including Bjarne Riis and Brian Holm.

The above-mentioned facts peaked our interest to read the biography as it could provide us with an insight into the doping culture in professional cycling.

Method

The biography, '*Understand Me Correctly*', about the 45 year old professional cyclist, Jesper Skibby, is analyzed through Goffman's dramaturgy, an approach that assumes an interaction between the text and an imagined reader (the public). Text analysis raises the overall investigation (above the micro level) by drawing in aspects of power and status (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004). Athlete confessions are seen as modern interactive rituals which aim to maintain and reinstate social order and which are achieved by balancing moral obligation and team spirit (Collins, 1994). We primarily use three of Goffman's texts in this article, namely: 'Interaction Ritual: Essay on Face-to-Face Behavior'; 'The Nature of Deference and Demeanor'; and 'The Interaction Order'.

The analysis is done in a hermeneutical way, where the interpretation of the text proceeds through the hermeneutic circle – created as a dialogical communication between the text and the researchers. Hermeneutics is to uncover the meanings of the act in question and also to interpret that

meaning related to theory (here, micro-sociology). The final goal of the hermeneutic procedure is to understand the 'author' better than he understands himself (Denzin, 1984). This kind of knowledge contributes to our ability to better understand meanings in interaction.

The interpretation of the text is done at two levels. *The first part* has a descriptive form. Rather than being a pure reproduction of the content, this presentation is reconstructed by the researchers based on recurring themes in Skibby's story. This 'descriptive reconstruction' is organised in line with six themes: (1) Personality; (2) Cycling as a sport (team involvement); (3) Daily life; (4) Childhood (relationship with the father); (5) Marriage (ex- and present wife); (6) Switching tracks. The themes have been developed through a hermeneutic circular motion between the book as a whole and the elements of the story (Gulddal & Møller, 1999), as understanding the meaning of the whole of a text and understanding its parts are interdependent activities. This first part of the analysis includes and builds on descriptions and quotations extracted from the biography. *The second part* is a more overall discussion aimed at gaining sociological insights in the course of life presented in the biography. Here, the theoretical framework presented previously has been applied in a dialog with the presentations and interpretations done in the first part of the analysis.

Analysis

I let my grief and frustrations eat me alive. During the first year in Belgium I started to build a facade that I'm able to pull down only now. On the outside, I functioned like a normal person while on the inside I was crumbling, and that resulted in my seeing my self finally as an empty shell. I can't count the number of times when I sat in my room at the Hotel Industrie and cried. Everything became completely unmanageable. There was only one place I found restitution: On my bicycle (Skibby, 2006, p. 65).

Personality: Weak, Restless & Wild

The account is very precise regarding the athlete's psychological make-up. Skibby is continuously described with emotional labelling as having a *weak* character. There is, for instance, a lot of 'crying stories' in the book. After reading the book, one is left with the impression that he is a puny, spineless man with a restless nature. According to the text, while other cyclists remained calm and relaxed after training, Skibby is presented as being unbelievably restless. He sought out social contact and ways of establishing a social life during periods when he was expected to rest and improves his performance during training sessions and competitions.

Skibby further reports on low self-esteem and feelings of failure to live up to the demands of high level sports, and this became more pronounced, as his career developed. He had difficulties with delivering the 'goods' that were fundamental to achieving good results and victories in competitions. Skibby is described as being reckless, unable to keep order in thing and leaving the team to set the agenda. He is portrayed as a loner but also as a teaser and a clown, but never as a serious cyclist obsessed with a sports career:

I wasn't happy though. Many years passed before I understood what happiness was and with that knowledge I can look back today and see what an unhappy life it had been. I was good at appearing happy, and when anyone asked me if I was I would lie to their faces and to myself. When it got difficult to maintain the mask, if I was unable to cover up the truth with lies, I could always go out and buy a beautiful new car or a watch. See what a great life, Jesper Skibby has! (Skibby, 2006, p. 91).

His need for luxury and fast cars is described as superficial and a joy which only provided a short-lived feeling of happiness but which was a meaningful game nonetheless in his life.

Professional cycling: Competitive, Boring & Repetitive

The backstage aspect of this professional sport is also presented in the biography, supported by emotional reports. This provides an insight into the boring and extremely hard daily life of the professional sport, which for the cyclist plays out as lonely, long and numerous rides on country roads. This lonely life is described as the character's wear and tear:

Friendship in professional cycling is a strange phenomenon. You can proclaim anyone to be a friend but in the long term most friendships turn out to be superficial acquaintanceships. That's the way it was for me. Even those whom I highly esteemed were just superficial friends. And today, apart from Brian Holm, I don't have contact with any of the many cyclists with whom I shared so many years (Skibby, 2006, p. 170).

Career promotion is described as increasing isolation. The closer Skibby approached idol status, the more isolated and lonely he became. The more demands which were made, the more stimuli he needed for motivation and to allow relaxation.

The biography does not provide any indepth knowledge of the cycling culture. There is almost no information about specific demands for the cyclists. The text takes a psychological perspective that tones down the relationel layer of the accounts, e.g. other cyclists' knowledge of doping and their shared experiences about cycling and drug abuse. The reader does not gain any knowledge about 'the system' behind doping and the community's cohesion of cultural ties:

Was there an alternative? Could I have just stopped? Couldn't I have just left the circus and returned to Denmark to work as a salesman? No. That was exactly what I feared the most. It was out of the question for me to give up the life I had and there was no alternative. I followed a one way street with no turn-offs (Skibby 2006, p. 121).

The pressure came from within. True enough that those around me pushed me all the time to achieve more, but noone expected or suggested that I stepped into the doping world. It was fully my decision (Skibby, 2006, p. 121).

The secret culture of the sport is kept intact and is not violated or debated in the text. The athlete's biography does not provide any insight into the professional cycling culture. Drug abuse is described and explained at the individual level as being a personal free choice. He does not expose any cultural pressure, and through this approach professional cycling can remain innocent, and the cyclist himself takes on all the blame. It is the athlete's worm-like character that is highlighted as the cause for the drug abuse.

Daily life: Empty, Contentless & Repetitive

From an emotional perspective, the reader is presented with a sad, worn existence and a boring daily routine. The daily routine is described as emotionally draining. Skibby's life is portrayed as empty and contentless, and there is a constant need to focus his energy and resources on racing, training and resting:

Boredom is the most prominent feature of a cyclist's daily routine. For the most part one lives a conforming and unglamorous life. In a month, you cycle thousands of kilometers on roads you already rode on thousands of times, in all kinds of weather, every day, year round. You're just supposed to not think about it (Skibby, 2006, p.65).

If life can be seen as bright or dark, then professional cycling is emotionally horizonless and dark. We are not presented with happiness, vitality and creativity. The story is presented as if all sports professionals are cultural dopes.

Childhood accounts: Hard, Wearing & Conflictful

The biography contains childhood stories that primarily focus on Skibby's relationship with his father and how Skibby characterised himself as a loner:

I had a hard time with my father. I always admired and looked up to him. I always wanted to be like him. Even after I became an adult his recognition was most important to me. And that was the one that was the most difficult to get (Skibby, 2006, p. 22).

The father is portrayed as being tough and seriously involved with cycle racing – a stereotypical masculine identity is framed. Skibby's self account contrasts that of his father's anticipation of him. Seen from his own perspective, he did not live up to his father's expectations of him becoming a good cyclist. Several times in his life, he acted contrary to his father's will and advice. His father did not take him seriously. He felt he was labelled as pathetic in his father's eyes. The father is portrayed as a very structured and competent person with a commitment that his son could not live up to. The mother and sister are barely described despite the fact that the sister is a well known cyclist in Denmark.

Marriage: Former & Present

The marriage with the former wife is also presented as a reason for the drug abuse. Skibby's first marriage is described and concretised as a traditionally constituted arrangement. He presents marriage in his biography as *gender division of labor* in which he was the breadwinner with the high salary and the former wife serviced him and his existence:

I lived in a loveless marriage which from the beginning was based on a tax technique in my favor. Of course there were fun events that brought us together. And there was the practical convenience that I made a hell of a lot of money and we had only the sweet life, but she looked after the house and entertained me once in a while when I was home (Skibby, 2006, p. 228).

The relationship with his first wife is described as being decisively loveless. Later in the book, when Skibby describes his new life and ‘true self’, the story of a new love is reported. The book constructs a picture of an athlete’s life where the script has a ‘before’ and ‘after’ image. The current image, where Skibby has come out of his drug misuse, is portrayed as happy and unproblematic and dominated by positive emotions. The current image tends not to contain lies or things from the past.

Switching tracks: From the false to the true self

The truth generally constricted my world while lies would hide my secrets and would continue to grow bigger. As early as at the start of the 1993 season, I was pretty much into it and that secret was the hardest of them all to keep. I shielded myself from the world by hiding behind a mask that no-one could see through. Honesty and sincerity were terms that I rarely used, and somewhere along the line it all began to hurt (Skibby, 2006, p. 141).

The biography portrays two versions of Skibby, and the doping confession is presented as a transformation of self:

Things have happened in my life that should have made me feel like a bitter, revengeful man today, but they are feelings that I try to push away. I believe that I got through it well enough and know that by telling my story truthfully and the way it should be told, I’ll be able to leave all of the bad things behind me. I don’t need to preoccupy my mind with formulating lies, cover ups and deviations from the truth as there are no more secrets now, and I can use my energy to simply breathe and take in all kinds of good feelings (Skibby, 2006, p. 241).

The old ‘fake’ self image is placed next to the new ‘true’ self image and as such it portrays the shift between the two life phases. The earlier self was constructed and concerned with the whimsical and the new self represents the reborn and real Skibby that tells true stories. The doping confession can be viewed as a penance and a normalising story that attempts to absolve the abuser, Skibby, and his past. The confession creates a distance for him from past sins:

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Actually, there were often no feelings left in me during those years because the medicine, anxiety and expectations filled everything. I just walked around feeling sad even though I was a success and won some cycle races and was the big well-known cyclist. I was a zombie. The sedatives took away my ability to feel, think and act for myself but the peace and security they gave me on the other hand, was what I needed more. The only thing I focused on was cycling. I had tunnel vision and focused my attention in the direction that meant the most to me, cycling (Skibby, 2006, p. 152).

The question of blame is placed on the personality structure and is accompanied by a call for public understanding and justification, as revealed by the title of the biography, ‘*Understand Me Correctly*’:

Everyone needs recognition. Once in a while, we all need to get a pat on the shoulder. I needed more than that. That was my driving force and at the same time my ‘Achilles heel’. I get upset quickly if I don’t get recognition, so I have been focused on that my whole life. If I didn’t get it, I would fight even harder and would do all that it took to earn it. Everything (Skibby, 2006, p. 53).

The false self was involved with drug abuse and was influenced by childhood and the difficult conditions he grew up under (father), the loveless marriage (ex-wife) and the boring, achievement craving reality of professional cycling. The future and ‘true self’ seeks credibility and recognition, amongst other things, by showing honesty, emotions and by confessing.

Discussion

The confessional biography as an interaction ritual

The aim of the biography is to reinstate moral order. The doped athlete stepped outside of the sport’s boundaries and unwritten laws. For the athlete not to lose his national idol status (which he maintained earlier) and reputation and to save face, it is necessary for him to assume a new role to reinstate trust and sincerity. The athlete was an idol in Denmark but lost his status because of a doping accusation. By constructing personal confessions with a ‘character of truth’ and by documenting them both verbally and in written form, it may be possible to re-enstate trust and honesty between the cast-out and the public.

In a Goffmanian terminology the doped athlete can be seen as stepping out of the bounds of moral conduct due to his use of performance-enhancing drugs. The athlete participated in ceremonial profanity. Birrell (1981) writes that the sporting incidents, which are singled out and applauded by the media as examples of heroic action are used to support the idea that athletes are significant social figures because they are capable of representing important societal values. The ritual of sports is founded on competing under equal conditions. Communicating respect for the self, through rituals of demeanor and deference, includes such practices as showing self-respect and demonstrating skills of impression management or facework. The rules of equality in sports (Guttman, 1978) are 'sacred' (Birrell, 1981) in defining the purpose of competitive sports. However, the fascination with sports is the 'fight for the match' and that is what creates the distinction (difference and inequality). Stepping out of bounds of a set of sports rules is seen as a crack in the interaction ritual; it is condemned by the community; and it can be characterised as a behavioral form that is unacceptable and perhaps even violates the sports ritual. The use of doping is cheating and creates fundamental doubts about the athlete's abilities. The abuse is a sign of weakness that signals lack of discipline and can be seen as an expression of immoral behavior. Is it the drugs that have created the sport results or is it the hard training and the competent body?

Destroying the sport ritual is not sympathetic – and can even be seen as an event of not accepting the role of the audience. Biographical confessions are not only a way for confessors to allow the public to get a glimpse of personal issues and perpetrator acts but, to a large extent, they show how a doping violation can be painful, embarrassing and humiliating to the public (Goffman, 2004). Describing a sports career as detailed daily problems and exposing the athlete as being weak can appear to be as superficial as *losing face*, when actually it may be a more serious obligation to show reverence that is vital for the athlete not to lose his social standing and worth. Interaction rituals establish and restore credibility. In late modern and commercial realities *facework* is manifested in a strategically staged manner, which is furthermore commercially and economically viable for the confessor. The term 'face' should not be understood literally in this context but is rather defined as a positive social and symbolic worth that a person attaches to himself and that others attach to him (Goffman, 2004).

This analysis was achieved through accounts of how Skibby felt that he was not understood by his father and by exposing his so-called bad marriage to the public. Intimate and very personal details are exposed to the point, where the reader is given enough background to understand the difficult life of sports and the decisions made over time. On the one hand, the past

personality is presented as being fake and unbearable, and on the other hand, it is presented as a necessity for the disciplined athlete's character. In this paradoxical presentation, the past personality is established as weak, attacked and unauthentic. The idol is humanised and reconstructed as a vulnerable and incomplete person trying to do his best within the frames of strong expectations from the professional world. The story portrays a messy life world, which is easy for 'ordinary people' (readers) to recognise. Skibby's apparently glamorous life is stripped and brought closer to our own experiences of personal incompleteness and failures under the pressure of the social structure. Hence, the distance between the performer (Skibby) and the audience is reduced, making identification, and thereby forgiveness, possible. He is a celebrity, but a *human* celebrity.

The reader gets a feeling of drama manipulation. The sport, with its imposing competitive demands, is the co-creator of the pathetic character that can do nothing more than to fall into the doping trap. The accounts present the character as broken and a slave to the system, and presents people as weak individuals who, because of poor conditions while being raised and bad marriages, end up in drug abuse and dependency, without putting any blame for it on the sport. This way, an ambiguity is embedded in the text. By hinting to underlying causes emerging from the competitive system but still personalising the blame, the performer is, paradoxically, put in a favourable light in the eyes of the reader. The performer seems to overplay the case against himself (Goffman, 1971); it is entirely his fault, and he bears full responsibility. Consequently, the commercialised elite sport system, including the audience as is an integrated part of this, is exempted from liability. In other words, you – the audience and the public – are not dragged into this and can still have faith in the system and yourself. This reflects the structure of the confession genre as such: it directs the whole critique towards the confessing individual and is emptied for social criticism.

Public confession and a doping declaration mark a shift and form the bridge (Turner, 1969) from one life phase to another. The current personality is presented as the true one, i.e. the 'authentic Skibby': The one who repents in public. He apparently allows the old mask to fade away and puts on a new mask. The new face is open and receiving. It is prepared for new challenges. He now has a new life situation, a new occupation, a new wife, a new residence and new children. The slate is wiped clean. The masquerade establishes a trusting tie with the public: I am now one of you, and I am seeking your recognition for what I have done. I am re-instating our relationship and will base it on worthy values. Through my narratives and TV broadcasts of my most intimate personal

thoughts (taken from backstage) through time and what I have done wrong, I am showing you that I accept moral order. I am obliged to expose what drugs I took, and I will try to explain why it was necessary for me to take them. By verbalising guilt and shame (Scheff, 1990), he shows admittance and hope for acceptance. The collective accounts (Goffman, 2004) can be seen as a hard trial to re-establish status and the sports biography can be read as an interaction ritual that, with the help of personality selling, attempts to resurrect and *maintain* face – by giving it a new form.

In earlier times, it sufficed to make a private confession in the church setting, behind drawn curtains. Today's confessional is exposed both locally and globally. The punishment is not corporal but targets the psyche; this creates the silhouette of the 'new' person.

Why construct emotionally oriented and intimate confessions?

As far back as 1983, Hochschild wrote about commercialisation of emotions. From the setting of a flight attendant's occupational situation, Hochschild described the human cost that continuous emotional work can have on the personality's character, when the work place demands specific emotional tones and humor types. More recently, Hochschild (2003) reraised the theme by analysing care's commercial organisation in the global society. When an athlete chooses to sell his biographical account and document his private life, it is not only the story that is sold but the personality itself. Skibby is no longer just a professional athlete but also a personality that has given the public an insight into the breaking points of his private life as well as the options and dangers that followed. While we used to have images of cyclists' tired faces after hard races, we now instead see Jesper Skibby's unhappy marriage and childhood.

Role playing has consequences. Collins (2004) pointed out that interaction rituals build status and potential power relations. When successful, these rituals build group consensus and recognition but less successful ones drain emotional energy. Awareness of the potential 'pay off' of emotional accounts should not be underestimated. The commercial branch knows this potential and the effect of presenting 'authentic accounts' and knows which instruments will get the results onboard. There can be empowerment in constructing accounts, but there is also a risk of 'losing face' (Goffman 1967).

Confessional accounts are also about 'emotional management' and can have personal costs (Hochschild, 2003). If emotional biographies fail or do not work according to the plan the athlete will lose his popularity. Confessions aim to stimulate an understanding from the public. The narrator tries to regain recognition despite the fact that he disobeyed the rules of the sport. By

showing "face" and coming clean, the narrator attempts to create sympathy. There is reverence and respect for the public by repenting (Goffman, 1967). By coming into the spotlight and informing people about his reasons for doping, and by giving an insight into sport culture's enormous pressure to achieve, the athlete shows reverence to the public and the sport's ritual.

Conclusion: Is the punishment rewarded with purification?

If a person wishes to sustain a particular image of himself and trust his feelings to it, he must work hard for the credits that will buy this self-enhancement for him; should he try to obtain ends by improper means, by creating or theft, he will be punished (Goffman, 1967, p. 42).

The Goffmanian micro-sociology is rooted in the Durkheim oriented sociology, which denotes dynamics of everyday life as a maintenance of social order (Collins, 1994). Impression management is about managing the impression we leave with others – in respect for fellow humans. We show civil courtesy and establish the social life as sacred. The sports biography analysis shows that the inclusion of the personal material gives life to the understanding of the Athlete's professional sports career. Elite sport is no bed of roses; it is hard work, which drains the athlete and impoverishes his soul. The story is not solely about the humanising of an idol: The god-like worship that falls to the famous athlete gets a touch of everyday life through the 'blubbery stories'. The hero comes down from his pedestal. The story requires courage. But it is not without personal costs, to reveal the cracks in the 'mask'. The new mask is not completed with the publication of the biography.

The confessional stories get a commercial glow - like 'reality shows' - when the doping confessions are written in an intimate way. Masks can be analysed as a justification ritual, where the audience is honoured, because the ritual is a search for forgiveness and recognition – justified by means of time typical pulp literature stories. The interaction ritual tries to restore the confidence in the elite sport by using sad stories about the hard life on the road. The consequence of the story is that the audience can continue its celebration and appreciation of cycling events such as Tour de France because the cause of dishonour is placed *within* the individual. It is the cyclist who committed an offence towards the rules, it is he who is the abuser, and it is he who does not have the life skills to master the competitive race. Doping is a matter of shame and humiliation, because he failed to train without the help of substances. The cyclist is described as a working ant, who has

worked hard at his boring job, trained in the sleet and rain, but with no guts to go all the way without medical help. The image of sport is maintained, but the athlete's god-like status is cracking. The abuse becomes understandable. The show can go on. Following the book, doping has to do with bad or weak personality traits – grounded in bad childhood experiences and an unhappy marriage. The dope does not have to do with a rotten or contaminated commercialised sport culture surrounding the scene.

Punishment in the modern western society has changed character. Punishment has moved away from physical violence, e.g. executions, where the public could actively participate in and satisfyingly enjoy a head being chopped off, or other violent assaults in the Middle Ages, to today's discipline within confined institutional walls hidden from the public. However, the empirical case, which attempts to create truth constructs from the world of sports, demonstrates that confession no longer only take place in the church, between a priest and the members of his congregation, but they also take place between citizens in the public arena of sports media. The media's commercial and public confession has become successful. Analysis of the interaction is exemplified in the article by means of an athlete's biographical confession, showing that interaction does have a Christian cultural inheritance. With a confession, the individual seeks out a hidden truth deep within himself. Truth reinforces. It is no longer corporal punishment but rather the soul (here the face), which is exposed as an entertainment commodity. Punishment takes the form of public self-examination, a self induced action that therapeutically seeks to create a new life and arrive at the truth from within. The confession uses a commercialised form with dramatic entertainment themes, including feelings of shame, sadness, aggression and love. The account mimics reality show dramaturgy and reveals only the person: Skibby. The telling and selling is business in which the personality is a commodity and the emotional ties are the packaging.

Perspectives

Doping declaration is not (only) a matter of health or sport medicine, but also concerns relations of justifications and social processes. The question of the sociological microanalysis is whether or not the scenario of sports media works. Is the (doped) idol status re-instated as the result of publicising intimate stories, or does the idol lose even more credibility? The self, as a performed character, is 'arising diffusely from a scene that is presented (...) and the crucial question is whether it will be credited or miscredited' (Goffman, 1959, p. 253). In defense of the publicly revealing personal

stories, journalists state that society needs to hold power holders accountable and controllable. The question remains whether biographies with an emotional focus are the way to do it.

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