Ah! An emotion-filled, hectic week for passionate cricket lovers like us. Since the telecast of the ball-tampering video during day 3 of the third test match between Australia and South Africa at Newlands, Cape Town, a lot has transpired — cheating, confession, punishment, and apology. These are not new to either sports or sports psychology. Gender deception, bribery, match and spot fixing, doping and, the latest hype, ball tampering are all well known.

Perhaps, tampering the cricket ball to extract enhanced reverse swing, although argued for being a relatively lower level offence, fits best into the definition of “cheating,” which is a “deceptive behavior intended to break the rules and make illegitimate gains.” Apart from match and spot fixing, where players are bribed mostly to underperform, resorting to illegitimate means or cheating is driven by an ultimate motive to win. The modern sport in general, not limited to any particular sport or team or individual, has been criticized for their “winning at all cost” attitude. Perhaps, this attitude has been termed as “popular mythology” that is ruining the modern sports. The Australian “win at all cost” attitude has been blamed, by the sports and telecast media, as being the primary motivation behind the index “sandpaper-gate” cheating saga. Indeed, “goal orientation” has been an important variable in sports psychology research that is studied as a predictor of cheating. Grossly, two types of goal orientations have been defined: (a) Task orientation, where the goal is mastering a skill or task and (b) Ego orientation, where the goal is to attain success by outperforming an opponent. This “motivation-cheating” relationship in sports was very recently examined by Ring and Kavussanu using an experimental design. They reported that athletes having higher ego orientation and lower task orientation use illegitimate means to win. Several previous studies have uniformly found a positive correlation between ego orientation and cheating among athletes, footballers, and tennis players. Social learning theories have aided the “motivation-cheating” relationship in sports psychology research. Gender deception, bribery, match and spot fixing, doping and, the latest hype, ball tampering are all well known.

Interestingly, studies have also hypothesized that moral-antisocial attitudes mediate the relationship between ego orientation and cheating. Recently, Kavussanu and Stanger reviewed the existing literature and endorsed this relationship. A couple of other findings from that review are particularly interesting in the current context. First, “anticipated guilt for acting antisocially inhibits antisocial behavior.” This realization, however, seems to have come a little late, when Steven Smith said “anytime you think about making a questionable decision, think about who you are reflecting, you are reflecting your parents. And to see the way my… old man is paining… and my mom… it hurts.” Second, “antisocial behavior brings anger in teammates.” The way past cricketers, mostly Australians, reacted on this issue reflects just this. By “antisocial behavior,” here, we precisely indicate the tampering incident and genuinely believe that it was just a “slip” in the moral behavior of those accused, and are not drawing any parallels onto the characteristics of antisocial personality or pathology. Neither are we questioning the personal motivations of players nor do we have any intention of demeaning the integrity of a team.

Now moving onto confession, punishment, and apology. All the three cricketers who were found guilty in the “Newlands saga” have publically confessed their mistake and sought apologies. “Apologies” have been put forth as to serve a role of “social lubrication.” It has also been observed that apologies can magically transform an act—from something offensive into something acceptable. Fascinatingly, psychological and neural bases of how apology emolliates reactive aggression and promotes forgiveness are also being experimentally studied. While guidance based on conflict resolution and related psychological aspects on “how” and “when” apologies should be given is available, we can never be certain whether or not these three cricketers took advice on giving apologies. Consider the confessions made by Steven Smith and Cameron Bancroft immediately after the incident (on the 9th day of the test match) and the ones that came about 5 days later. A distinction is very much evident, isn’t it? Social psychology literature (although not directly related to sports) suggests that improper timing of an apology, i.e., immediately after a transgression, invokes suspicion and raises questions about its sincerity. Results from...
experimental studies that used hypothetical situations have also shown that later apologies were more effective and that this was mediated by a feeling of being heard and being understood.[14] The later (emotion fueled) apologetic confessions that came after a strict ban being imposed on them seem to be an attempt to convert a relatively retributive punishment (where punishment is proportionate to crime) to a restorative one (where offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and to repair the harm they have done) [19] and a plead for forgiveness, not just from fans and fraternity, but also from authorities. Considering that the offence has been committed against “cricket” and not just the opponent team, arguably, a retributive punishment is a popular choice. However, should they agree to become the emissaries of something like the GUBOG approach in cricket, a restorative judgment may well be considered.

Significant emotional reactions were evident during these confessions, and it is important to discuss them as well from a psychological perspective. The emotion that was displayed portrays “repentance.” Perhaps, repentance and forgiveness are closely related.[20] Socio-psychological research has shown that repentance leads to increased perceptual validation, which is socially verifying that one is correct about one’s interpretation of an event and that such validation marks forgiveness.[21] Literature also suggests that forgiveness restores baseline-prosocial orientation.[22] With a conception that “sandpapergate” was just a slip in the morality of the sportspersons in question, forgiveness hence becomes much more pertinent. Santelli et al.[23] had shown that transgressor’s repentance mediates victims’ (in this case, cricket and sports’ fans and community) regulatory focus and their forgiveness of the transgressor.

On the other hand, with some sports journalists going on to even call the kind of emotions “Hansie tears,”[24] alternate and more cynical views shall also be reflected in this article. As we consider that antisocial affinities mediate cheating, such affinities have also been found as major risk factors for susceptibility to false confessions.[25] Although in a strict sense, they do not qualify for a “false confession,” incompleteness and minimization have been speculated in the stereotypic public statements made by the three cricketers. There are some descriptions in criminal psychology, where suspects have made false confessions and accepted prosecution, in order to evade stricter interrogations.[16] Intriguingly, experimental studies have shown that altruism toward fellow group members is at play in false confessions.[26] Only time will tell whether or not these confessions, perhaps not in a concrete sense, are closer to “altruistic false confessions” that were made in order to protect other team members (members of a larger “leadership” group), who might well be involved in the “plan,” from further interrogations and punishments.

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