



Secrets Behind the Gowns: Causes and Outcomes of Persistent Unethical Behavior in Universities

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Research Questions

Why does unethical behavior *persist* over prolonged periods of time—often as an open secret—in many workplaces?

How is such behavior stopped, disrupted or countered?

Method and Data

Field-based, grounded research

- 70 in-depth interviews
 - 29 in universities
 - 43 women and 27 men in various organizational roles
 - Multiple types of organizations (universities, business, health and wellness, journalism, nonprofit)

Secondary data

Methods and Data

Many types of persistent unethical behavior

- Microaggressions
 - Incivility
 - Mockery
 - Disrespect
- Bullying
- Plagiarism
- Fraud
- Theft
- Discrimination and inequality
- Sexual harassment and rape
- Wrongful dismissal

Current Focus: Universities

Many Parties Involved

- Faculty to students
- Administrators to faculty or staff
- Faculty to faculty
- Faculty to staff
- Staff to staff

- Student to student
- Student to faculty

Findings

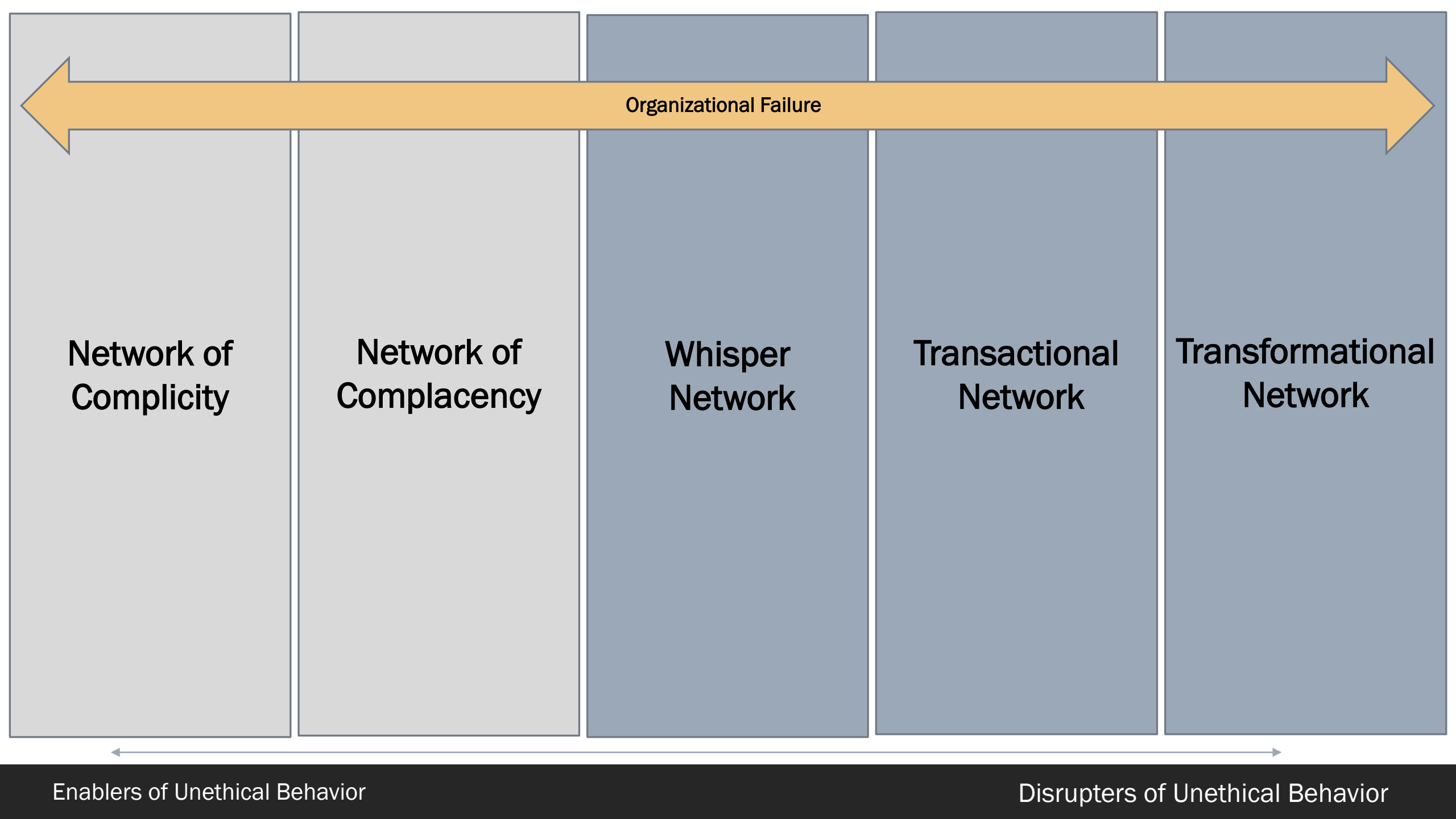
Two Lenses

- **Social Network Theory**

explained “*the what*”—what enabled unethical behavior to persist over time

- **Behavioral Ethics Research**

explained “*the why*” –why people behaved in ways that enabled unethical behavior to persist



Organizational Failure

- Weak or unenforced organizational policies
- Leaders default on their responsibilities or join network of complicity
- HR as a distrusted permanent bystander or even complicit
- Problematic internal investigations (often conflicts of interest)
- Suppressing and silencing complaints
 - Guarding reputation

Networks of Complicity and Social Network Theory

The What . . .

- Networks of complicity as enablers of persistent unethical behavior
- Perpetrators as network builders and power brokers
- Tightly connected network with strong ties, few structural holes, high trust
- Perpetrators as myth builders and information manipulators; network members as perpetuators
- Networks of complicity create and spread toxic organizational cultures and profoundly damage individuals and the organization.

Behavioral Ethics

The Why...

- Cognitive biases or rationalizations
- Social and organizational pressures
- Situational Factors

Networks of Complicity and Behavioral Ethics

The Why...

- Self-serving bias
 - Obedience to authority bias
 - In-group/out group bias
 - Conformity
 - Lack of transparency
- = Motivated Blindness

Networks of Complacency

The What . . .

- Bystanders who are unwilling to resist and passively enable unethical behavior
- Loosely connected network with weak ties, many structural holes, low trust, and restricted access to information
- Some benefit; others are threatened and intimidated by the perpetrator and the network of complicity
- No leaders emerge

Networks of Complacency and Behavioral Ethics

The Why.....

- Conformity bias
 - Framing bias
 - Appeals to higher loyalties
 - Self-serving bias
 - Time Pressure
- = Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, Moral Disengagement

Now drawing from our university data . . .

Characteristics
Making
Universities
Conducive to
Persistent
Unethical Behavior

Reputation and Resource Dependency

- Preeminence of research
 - Star system
- Supremacy of athletics
- Dominance of donors

Structure and Organization

- Hierarchies and high power differentials
- Siloed and autonomous units
 - Departments, schools, colleges
 - HR, Legal, Title IX, Ombudsman
- Formal barriers to taking action
 - Tenure
 - Unions
 - Complex processes
- Untraditional workplaces
- Leaders without leadership training
- Bicameral governance
 - Senate vs. Board

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Socialized Beliefs and Attitudes

- Philosophy of academic freedom
- Independent-contractor mentality
 - Rewards for individual accomplishment
 - Competition for recognition
 - Little appreciation for the “good of the whole” or shared values
- Pay-your-dues mentality
- Lack of appreciation/respect between faculty and administration

Implications for Leaders

Network Factors

- Proactively try to understand networks and the power they wield to control and shape information
- Removing perpetrators is not enough
 - Disenfranchise network of complicity
- Allocate compliance resources to those at highest risk of unethical behavior
- Actively support and give voice to networks of empowerment

Implications for Leaders

Organizational Change

- Simplify reporting process (one stop)
- Use external, independent investigators
- Beachhead strategy: take visible action
- Instill transparency
- Communicate continuously to reinforce ethical values
- Provide training (giving voice to values)
- Empower and transform the HR function from permanent bystander to proponent of ethical behavior

In Closing . . .

Paradoxes

- Focus on ethics with regard to research, but...ignores ethical transgressions in other aspects of work, leadership, and management
- Ethical motivations are integrated with unethical motivations
 - Mentor students / abuse students (erotic mentorship, bullying, theft)
- The longer the university prioritizes protecting reputation over ethical considerations, the more damage done.

Closing Question

**Are universities today
recognized as creators of
knowledge and drivers of
societal good**

or

**have they abdicated these
roles and become
harborers of persistent
unethical behavior?**

Summary and References

Network of Complicity

Leadership: perpetrator

Purpose: Protecting perpetrator and member interests, controlling and shaping information

Membership: active enablers of the perpetrator

Information Control: high

Ties: Strong

Density: high

Power: high

Trust: high within / low externally

Biases: motivated blindness, moral licensing, norms of reciprocity, self-serving bias, obedience to authority, in-group/out-group bias, conformity bias, framing bias

Situational Factors: lack of transparency, siloed units, hierarchical structure, authoritarian leadership

Network of Complacency

Leadership: none

Purpose: Minimizing involvement, time, risk, and effort

Membership: bystanders who passively enable the perpetrator

Information Control: low, biased to rationalize inaction

Ties: weak

Density: low, many structural holes

Power: low

Trust: low

Biases: moral myopia, moral muteness, moral disengagement, self serving, appeal to higher loyalties, conformity

Situational Factors: time pressure, siloed units, hierarchical structure, authoritarian leadership

References

- Cunningham, Peggy, Minette E. Drumwright, and Kenneth William Foster (2019), “Networks of Complicity: Social Networks and Sex Harassment” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EDI-04-2019-0117/full/html>
- Drumwright, Minette E. and Peggy Cunningham (2020), “Unethical Behavior in Newsrooms: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm,” *Journalism Practice*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1825114>.

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