



# **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

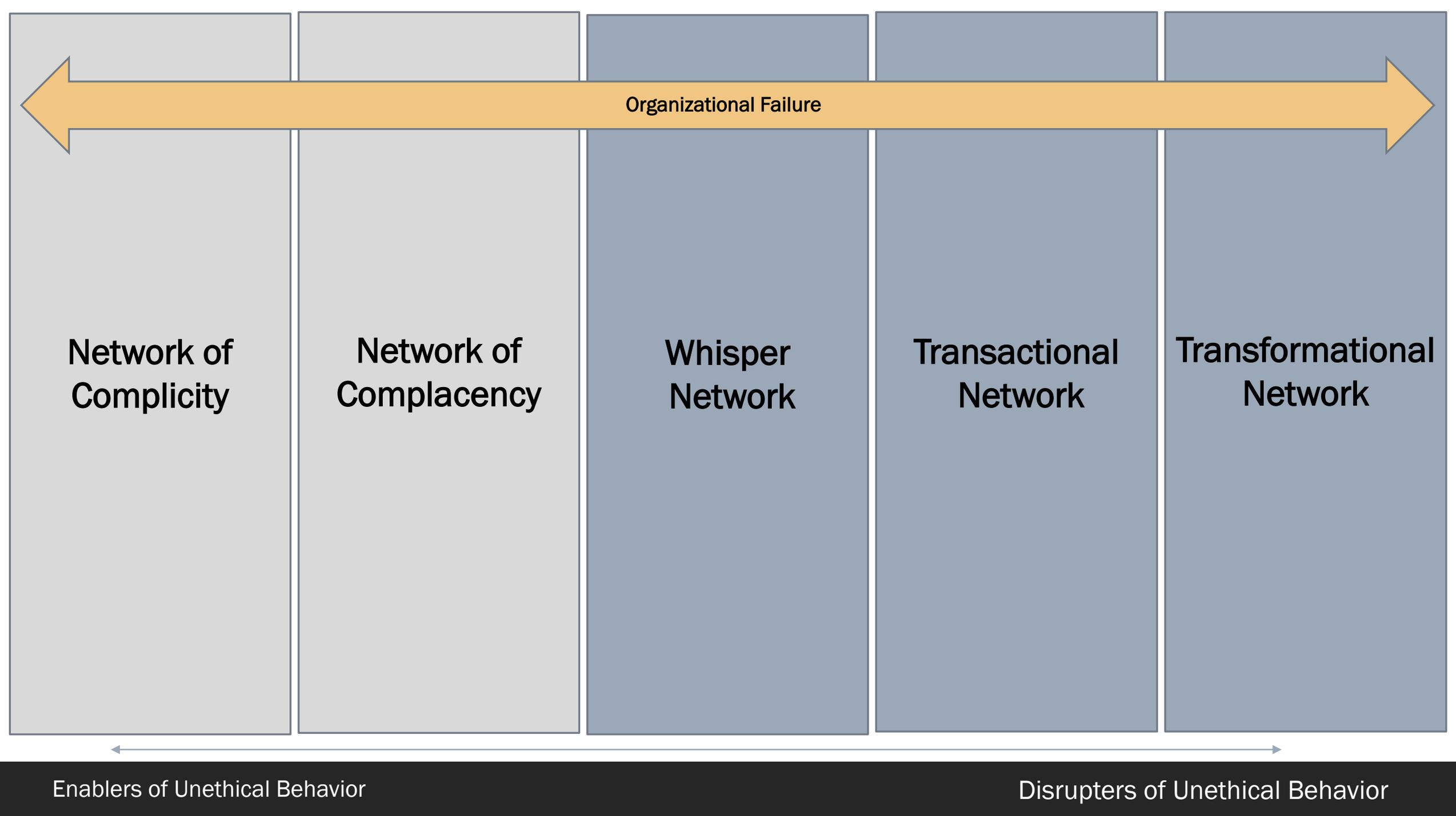
## Two Lenses

- **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

Network of  
Complicity

Network of  
Complacency

Whisper  
Network

Transactional  
Network

Transformational  
Network

Enablers of Unethical Behavior

Disruptors of Unethical Behavior

# 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

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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

Characteristics  
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# 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

Characteristics  
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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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