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
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.
Network of Complicity  
Network of Complacency  
Whisper Network  
Transactional Network  
Transformational Network

Enablers of Unethical Behavior  
Disrupters 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
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
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
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
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.
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Network of Complacency</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership:</strong> none</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> Minimizing involvement, time, risk, and effort</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Membership:</strong> bystanders who passively enable the perpetrator</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Information Control:</strong> low, biased to rationalize inaction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ties:</strong> weak</td>
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<td><strong>Density:</strong> low, many structural holes</td>
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<td><strong>Power:</strong> low</td>
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References


If you want to share your experiences with us, please contact us:

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