Individual Integrity and Institutional Trust

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Cheating in high schools seems to be on the rise. A very large-scale recent survey carried out by the Josephson Institute of Ethics [1] in the United States indicates that the number of students admitting that they cheated on an exam at least once in the previous year was 74% in 2002. Ten years earlier it was 61%.

For over thirty years, the annual opinion study "Who's Who Among American High School Students" has focused its surveys on the very best students with college aspirations and top grades. It began to ask questions related to academic cheating in the early 1980's. By 2000 it reported a record number of 80% of these top students (with "A" averages) admitting to some form of academic dishonesty [2]. The great majority of these students indicated that they did not regard this as a problem ("we don't think it's a big deal"). Curiously enough, these same students had also "over the years become more responsible and more mature about taking charge of their lives: fewer teens drink, smoke or use marijuana, and more of the sexually active teens use contraceptives these days" [3]. According to David Callahan "a nearly exclusive focus on drugs, sex and crime has helped to change behavior among young people in these areas… Young people seem to be hearing *just say no* about some temptations, and *do whatever it takes* about others" [4].

A great deal of evidence suggests that this may be the result of increased competition for entering the top "Ivy League" colleges in the United States. And this, despite the fact that "the competition for admission to some pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and grammar schools can be… statistically more difficult (with lower admission rates) than for admission at Harvard" writes Dean William Fitzsimmons [5]. An army of consultants are now paid very large sums to coach and tutor increasing numbers of students at all academic levels to impress interviewers. Furthermore, "parents pull every conceivable string to get their child into the right school" [4]. While only 1% of college freshmen admitted to consulting an admissions counselor in 1990, by 2000 that number had increased ten-fold. I suspect that by 2010 more than half will have done so. These days a very large number of private college counselors are in fact writing and/or extensively editing the essays of many students as well as doing their homework for them. Teachers often feel frustrated that they cannot turn to the parents for help since they seem to be part of the problem. Many parents are firmly convinced that all kids get *aggressive private tutoring* and that "since everyone is doing it, their child would be at a terrible disadvantage if they didn't" [4].

Yet cheating by college or high school students is not a new phenomenon. A *New York Times* article in January 1931 reported Dean Clarence Mendell of Yale saying that the problem of cheating at the school was "so prevalent as to demand instant and sweeping measures of reform"[6]. Since then, a very large number of studies have tried to determine "why, when and how college students cheat on their academic work" [4]. Many of these

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students seem to justify cheating on the grounds that it gives them a chance to "keep up with those who cheat" [7].

One of the most thorough studies on academic cheating was published in 1964 by William Bowers [8]. Surveying thousands of students, Bowers concluded that three quarters had been involved in some kind of cheating. It turns out that the more competitive students cheat more, but that there seems to be no difference among students of different social backgrounds attending the same or similar schools. More recent surveys by Donald McCabe [9], one of the leading U.S. authorities on cheating among high school and college students, reveal overall levels of cheating similar to what Bowers had found several decades earlier (about 75% of students acknowledge some kind of cheating). Moreover, the numbers kept on rising during the 1990's. McCabe comments that "students who might otherwise complete their work honestly…convince themselves they cannot afford to be disadvantaged by students who cheat and go unreported or unpunished" [9].

While fewer studies have focused on the problem of cheating among graduate students, evidence has accumulated suggesting that cheating at the graduate level may be as serious a problem as is found in high schools and undergraduate programs [10].

What possible consequences this type of behavior might have on post-academic professional lives is discussed at length by David Callahan [4]. Findings reported at this conference focus on research careers.

Many of us have had to deal with difficult situations during our training years. I still remember how shocked I was when one of my teachers in high school, someone I respected greatly, accused me of passing the solution of a particularly difficult problem in algebra to some of my colleagues. I was so outraged that I told my father I would never go back to that class. It took several meetings with the headmaster and my teacher to resolve the problem and to discover that someone else was responsible for the occurrence. And yet, a few months later, during our final exam in descriptive geometry (one of my favorite subjects), I was able to complete my exam and then proceed to help a fellow student complete hers. Why was I so shocked in the first instance and so bold in the second? I have no idea. Maybe because I was only 16 at the time – not a good answer, but it's all I can come up with now.

During my post-doc at Berkeley I realized that one of my major papers in a relatively prestigious journal had been published in an issue that included a "letter to the editor" by a very prestigious competitor of ours on the exact same subject. He had visited our laboratory half a year earlier and had shown a great deal of interest in my data. I was lucky because we published the full paper and his "letter" confirmed our results using a different technique, but I never doubted that the delay in our publication was meant to allow both publications to appear in the same issue. I have heard appalling stories of scientists who happen to be on "study sections" of various funding agencies and who ask their own graduate students to perform the experiments that have been described in research proposals that they happen to have had the privilege of reviewing and

evaluating. I am sure we all have many stories to tell, in addition to the high-profile scandals that have hit the media in the last couple of years.

And still, research continues to attract some of the brightest and most accomplished of today's young people. Why? Perhaps because they continue to believe that fraud in research is the exception rather than the rule. But how can that be, given the evidence on the behavior of students provided above? Do most of them they suddenly stop cheating once they become independent researchers?! Or is most of the cheating not of a "very serious" nature?

The recent high visibility cases have affected the reputation of several prestigious institutions, universities as well as journals (not to speak of financial institutions, political parties and majors news agencies). Suddenly the issue of fraud makes headlines and most credible institutions are busy – very busy – trying to "deal with the problem".

But are we really facing a "crisis of public trust" in institutions? Onara O'Neill believes that it might rather be "first and foremost a culture of suspicion" [11]. She is also convinced that two proposed consensus mechanisms aimed at controlling this problem, namely greater *accountability* and more *transparency* may not necessarily do so.

In the last two decades our lives have been greatly modified by the quest for greater *accountability*. But for most of us in the public sector, this new accountability seems to be no more than increased control of details; "an unending stream of new legislation and regulation, memoranda and instructions, guidance and advice floods into public sector institutions" [11]. Do we have any indication that these instruments are actually working? On the contrary; many professionals feel very strongly that the relentless demand to record and report, as well as the increased frequency of ranking and restructuring, damage their *real work*. "If the new methods and requirements supported and didn't obstruct the real purposes of …these professions and institutions, the accountability revolution might achieve its aims. Unfortunately I think it often obstructs the proper aim of professional practice" [11].

Curiously enough, judging by a simple "performance indicator", namely whether or not public trust is reviving, the clear answer seems to be that it is not. As O'Neill [11] points out: "In theory the new culture of accountability and audit makes professionals and institutions more accountable to the public…yet the real requirements are for accountability to regulators, to departments of governments, to funders, to legal standards. The new forms of accountability impose forms of central control". And she continues: "The real focus seems to be on performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure quality of performance accurately". She adds, "In the end, the new culture of accountability provides incentives for arbitrary and unprofessional choices". Some researchers may rush to publish data that would require more careful analysis simply because their department's research rating and funding needs may pressure them to do so. Schools may promote certain classes (and their teachers) in which it is easier to obtain higher grades. Hospitals may reward departments that demonstrate a higher throughput in patients, etc.

But is there such a thing as *intelligent accountability*? I believe there is. It requires that we move away from exhaustive micro-management and toward *good governance*. We should provide greater autonomy to institutions, allowing them the freedom to experiment with a variety of different strategies. I have no doubt that this would result in a large number of success stories that we could learn from.

The issue of *transparency* is directly related to the levels of information available. But when dealing with institutions O'Neill warns us: "Reasonably placed trust requires not only information about the institutions, their proposals and undertakings but information about those who put them forward" [11]. And she continues: "Openness and transparency are now possible on a scale of which past ages, could barely dream. We are flooded with information about government departments and policies, about public opinion and debate, about school and university league tables. So if making *more* information about *more* public policies, institutions and professionals *more* widely and freely available is the key to building trust…"[11] we should be well ahead. Are we? I suspect that many societies have become less rather than more trusting. Or, more accurately, I believe we have become more suspicious.

Another problem is related to the fact that we all know that while transparency may certainly destroy secrecy it has very little effect on deception and deliberate misinformation. "We place and refuse trust not because we have torrents of information but because we can trace specific bits of information and specific undertakings to particular sources on whose veracity and reliability we can run some checks" [11].

Trust can only grow if active inquiry is encouraged. Unfortunately, in a world flooded with information *and* misinformation, this becomes an increasingly difficult task to perform successfully. "It is very easy to imagine that in a world in which information travels like quicksilver, trust can do the same. It cannot. Placing trust is…as demanding today as it was in (Socrates') Athens" [11]. Remember that Socrates always preferred dialogue to written essays, because he believed in the strength of personal interaction.

How then do we build trust in institutions? We need time and autonomy associated with responsibility. Learn as much as possible from "good practices" and make such policies as widely known as possible. Allow institutions the freedom to explore different forms of governance. And make sure that the young (including young researchers) come into close contact with good role models as early as possible. Respect and admiration are much better teachers than fear and dread.

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