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### **Academic Dishonesty - Whose fault is it anyway? (0151)**

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Increasing debate surrounds academic dishonesty, in terms of increasing incidence and its impact on the integrity of higher education and the qualifications it confers. Despite this, theoretical understandings of academic dishonesty are lacking. Most studies construct it as the 'fault' of students, requiring more intense scrutiny, training or punishment. These approaches are largely silent about how university structures and practices impact on student behaviour, deploying student-centric framings of both the responsibility for and solution to, academic dishonesty. This study addresses this by seeking explanations of academic dishonesty using a theoretical basis drawn from Bourdieu.

Hence this paper's focus is not on addressing questions of 'why do students cheat' and 'how do universities better prevent/detect it' but addresses the question: How does the objective social structure of higher education influence students' subjective practices in relation to academic dishonesty? Put simply – do universities influence, collude with, encourage or facilitate students' cheating?

### **Academic Dishonesty – Whose fault is it anyway?**

#### **Background**

Increasing debate surrounds academic dishonesty, both in terms of its increasing incidence and its impact on the integrity of higher education (HE) and the qualifications it confers (Park 2003). Despite considerable analysis, theoretical understandings of academic dishonesty are lacking. Most studies in the area focus either on charting its incidence (Lin and Wen 2007); understanding its causes in terms of identifying particular student characteristics which predispose such behaviour (Bennett 2005; Culwin 2006); or on HE practice in terms of developing more robust prevention, detection or punishment strategies (Leathwood 2005).

Whilst these are helpful in understanding aspects and responses to academic dishonesty, they incline towards constructing it as the 'fault' of deficient students, requiring more intense scrutiny, training or punishment. These approaches are largely silent about how ingrained university structures and practices impact on student behaviour, deploying a student-centric framing of both the responsibility for, and the solution to, academic dishonesty (MacDonald and Carroll 2006). This treats students' academic dishonesty as occurring within an institutional vacuum, isolated from the influence of objective social HE structures on the subjective experiential practice of students. Obscuring the HE context from the discourse allows it to abdicate responsibility for academic dishonesty, creating partial understandings of it, exacerbated by most studies limiting considerations to plagiarism, further constraining understanding.

This study begins to address these deficits by seeking a socio-cultural explanation of academic dishonesty using a theoretical basis drawn from the literature of Bourdieu (1977). Specifically the relationship between the objective social environment of the HE field and the subjective practice of student academic dishonesty is explored. Hence this paper's focus is not on addressing the familiar questions of 'why do students cheat' and 'how do universities better prevent and detect it' which reinforce (within the dominant 'crime and punishment' conception) the notion that students alone are culpable for academic dishonesty. This paper instead addresses the question: How (if at all) does the objective social structure of higher education influence the subjective practice of students in relation to academic dishonesty? Or, put simply – do universities somehow influence, collude with, encourage or facilitate students' cheating?

### **Theoretical Approach**

Writers report an increasing relevance of the social theory of Bourdieu within the social sciences and humanities (Xu and Xu 2008; Shenkin and Coulson 2007). In this paper I use ideas drawn from Bourdieu's construction of the social world to theorise undergraduate student academic dishonesty.

Bourdieu's (1977) social theory characterises the relationship between subjects (e.g. students) and the social arenas or fields (e.g. universities) they occupy as a power struggle of constant positioning in order to acquire desirable and valuable cultural capital within that field (e.g. high grades or academic qualifications). Subjects respond to particular fields by adapting their way of being (habitus) in relation to their 'feel for the game'.

Through the notion of the habitus, social action (e.g. academic dishonesty) is understood as neither entirely determined nor entirely arbitrary. This allows the framing of students' academic practice – including acts of academic dishonesty - as the potential result of collisions between institutional structures and their subjective participants. These continuous collisions or interactions between students and institutions creates and moderates the social practice of study, influencing student habitus by producing enduring dispositions, abilities and orientations to particular actions (honest or otherwise) within the field. Such a Bourdieusian framing of academic dishonesty consequently places institutions, alongside their students, and more importantly, inside the circle of responsibility.

Furthermore, academics hold more power and status (symbolic capital) than students, enabling the latter's domination. Symbolic violence comprises the subtle and pervasive mechanisms through which domination takes place. Struggles for position, imbued with symbolic violence, create conflict and resistance (of a real or symbolic nature) for participants who seek to establish what comprises valuable and legitimate capital within the field. Out of this, academic dishonesty could be framed as one form of response or resistance to such struggles.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected from 687 first year undergraduate students via a questionnaire, developed in response to the initial findings of the literature review and an earlier preliminary study. This primarily collected data on students' attitudes and dispositions towards academic dishonesty from students enrolled within two UK higher education institutions.

The questionnaire is in two sections, the first providing students with a series of statements relating to institutional and individual attitudes towards academic dishonesty. Students' recorded their response or disposition towards each statement using a 5-point Likert scale. The second section presents a series of institutional characteristics, requiring students' to consider which (if any) influence their disposition towards academic dishonesty. There is provision at the end of the questionnaire for students to record additional comments. Results are explored in relation to the concept of 'habitus' providing a conceptual and empirical understanding of how particular university values and practices impact upon students' perceptions, disposition towards and practice of academic dishonesty.

### **Preliminary Results**

Key preliminary findings indicate the following aspects of institutional habitus may influence students' habitus in relation to academic dishonesty:

- Physical learning spaces especially overcrowding.
- Strong competitive focus encouraged amongst students.
- De-personalised learning environment.
- Lack of appropriate learning support.
- Differences between students and institutions in what constitute the 'appropriate' use of information – e.g. students are very familiar with the 'sampling' culture and may seek to 'use' the work of others in alternative ways.
- Increasing integration of e-learning resources and reliance on Internet resources.
- Over-assessment - students constantly graded. Assessment outcomes take priority over learning processes.
- Reliance on traditional, tutor-based grading and assessment – sparse use of peer or self-assessment.
- Inconsistencies within the university system itself - academics frequently distribute inappropriately cited and referenced materials.
- Possible differences between students and their institutions in terms of what constitutes 'legitimate knowledge'.
- Students largely excluded from policy development discussions concerning academic dishonesty.
- Lack of clarity provided by institutions in grey areas e.g. boundary of collaboration and collusion.

The paper subsequently reflects on these findings, sketching preliminary recommendations in relation to academic dishonesty.

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