

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISHONESTY AND INTEGRITY IN TANZANIA: A Reflective Piece from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Preamble

No potential employer is looking forward to hiring dishonest staff. All learning institutions have tight admission and evaluation criteria to guard against risk of academic dishonesty in students, and any wise individual will not take a dishonest person for a life partner. Yet, dishonesty is a much more complex phenomenon than it seems. Always, there are some acts of dishonesty that are considered “normal” or “legitimate” or even highly praised in some avenues, including buying an examination for a child, or leaking a test paper to a student for a pay, or concealing an important truth for some gains, or cheating on a number of hours worked as well as deceitfully bargaining to get more money. There are even common phrases in our daily idioms like “*riziki kitako*” (daily bread is found from where one is seated), “*cha kuokota si cha kuiba*” (monopolizing ‘lost and found’ does not amount to theft), or “*mtembea bure si mkaa bure*” (walking around one has greater chance of finding something valuable), to rationalize dubious gains on public resources or “lost and found” items.

Dishonesty seems something others do—“criminals”, “evil ones”, “politically motivated and selfish people”, or “inadequately trained staff”. Such acts when done by “good people” are not branded dishonesty. They are brushed aside as oversights since good people do not engage in dishonest behaviours. If they unfairly bargain, it is justifiable as they act for a noble cause of meeting their rightful demands in this unfair world or overwhelming working conditions. This paper seeks to shed some light on these views and tries to dismiss some myths.

Today more than ever before, it is critical to have a clear understanding of dishonesty. Trying to understand dishonesty is not encouraging or condoning it. It is seeking to grasp the sources of our own dishonesty and condemn them. In fact, one can only denounce dishonesty when one comprehends it clearly; and two points need to be established if one has to understand dishonesty: First, honesty and integrity as human values and behaviours are culturally relative; and secondly, one cannot explain dishonesty unless he/she can contrast it with honesty. For these reasons, the paper attempts to answer two questions: Is dishonesty a problem today than ever before? Is it really a problem in universities in Tanzania?

Keywords: Dishonesty, academic integrity, social construction of honesty.

Defining Dishonesty

Dishonesty is a deceitful behaviour related to taking unfair advantage of people or situations. It is the opposite of honesty, sincerity and truthfulness. Honesty refers to a propensity to keep explicit or implicit commitments, and if necessary to forego opportunities to profit at one’s expense (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Isolated incidents suggest that university staff and students like many Tanzanians engage in behaviours that considerably fall within the realm of dishonesty. Such examples include but are not limited to:

- Staff stand-off teaching in the week in which large class student tests are scheduled so that its impact may be felt.
- Staffs conceal names of others with whom they shared work, for example marking, so as to claim extra workload payment.
- Academic staff sees no problem in lifting examination or test questions from the Internet; or finds no conflict of interest when they coerce students into buying materials they put together even if for good intentions.
- Responsible staff cares less that their test was in students’ possession before it was administered and students feel no qualms studying a leaked test or examination paper.
- An investigative team does not come up with a credible report or much worse manipulates the “evidence” to impress the appointing authority.
- A group of students boycott classes and beat up everybody that goes against their wish.
- A student leader diverts students’ union funds into his personal bank account.
- A group of students smoke *marijuana* in broad daylight and admits to have been doing it often, yet win the case in court for “lack of evidence linking them to the crime”.
- Roommate cover up their friend’s habits of violating accommodation contract and student by-laws.
- A student finds it okay to pay an instructor so that the latter changes marks on an otherwise failed

examination, etc.

These anecdotal examples and many others suggest that dishonesty is a problem at the universities in Tanzania.

Analysing Dishonesty

A critical review of literature suggests that the level of trust that correlates with honesty varies across societies and is related to a number of important economic, political, and social variables, including the level of per capita income (La Porta et al., 1997; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Fisman & Khanna, 1999). The literature also shows that variations in honest behaviour across societies are consistent with the idea that individuals are self-centred wealth-maximisers who respond only to incentives (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Moreover, the proportion of (selflessly) honest persons in a society changes slowly in response to the payoff differential between honest and dishonest types and reaches equilibrium level when payoffs are equal (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). From the psychological perspective however, people's decision to be honest or not is partly internally motivated due to internalization of norms and values of the society, as people typically value honesty and have strong belief in their morality and would like to maintain this aspect of their self-concept (Mazar et al., n.d.). The assumptions underlying the theory of variability in honesty within societies are that people may be socialised to be honest, largely in childhood, and that the extent of this socialisation responds to the return on honesty compared to dishonesty (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004; Mazar and Ariely, 2006). The implication is that human beings consist of a mix of honest and dishonest people (Frank, 1988 in Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). They may pretend to be honest while they are not. Nevertheless, there is evidence that others can detect true honesty through interactions (Frank et al, 1993 in Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Brosig's (2002) experiments showed that subjects were able to detect honesty even in brief face-to-face interactions with strangers.

Honest behaviour or its opposite can be inculcated by parents in their children (Kagan & Lamb, 1984; Cole, 1997). While behaviour patterns learned in childhood are often long-lasting, they are not always unchanging, and honesty is no exception. Honest parents may learn that dishonesty pays and change their behaviour (Grossman & Kim, 2000). As such, honesty may last only over an economically significant time, such as the expected length of an employment contract (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). While biological evolution may have endowed humans with the capacity to form emotional loyalties and feel guilty when they break them, individuals need to know about the circumstances in which these feelings might be triggered (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Thus, the extent of honesty in a society can respond to incentives over the long run, which means that the extent of honesty in society can change over time, growing when the payoffs to honesty exceed those to dishonesty, and shrinking when the reverse is true (Grossman & Kim, 2000). The acts at the universities highlighted above such as staff stand-off during week of large-class midterm tests, concealment of names for monetary gains, buying examination and test leakage, to mention only a few, may be understood in the context of growing payoffs to dishonesty. Also, some broader social factors including a weak and corrupt social fabric may have triggered such feelings favouring dishonesty (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Further research to explore the relationship between levels of honesty and contractual arrangements at the universities is necessary since the nature of contract that any given institute offers affects the growth of honesty in its entire system (Somanathan & Rubin, 2004). Other issues of interest include staff socialisation process and how the universities orient employees to their organisation-specific concepts of virtue rather than decision making based on economic advantages (LeVine et al. 2008).

Understanding Academic Integrity and Dishonesty

The notion of academic integrity refers to "adherence to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility" (Centre for Academic Integrity, 2005). Academic dishonesty is defined as insincere behaviour related to academic achievement including cheating, plagiarism, lying, deception and any other form of advantage unfairly obtained by one student over others (Hendershot et al., 2000). It is more than just a student's problem (Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003) as we live in a culture that both condemns and condones some forms of cheating (Callahan, 2004) as exemplified by behaviour hinted above like staff finding it okay to lift test questions from the Internet, students paying for a failed grade change or leaked test paper, or a parent purchasing an examination for a child.

Academic misconduct transcends the classroom boundaries to include forging university documents, writing a paper for a student, and damaging or hiding library resources (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006). There are many scary examples of students cheating in primary and secondary leaving examinations at increasing rates in Tanzania, which is indicative that there are cultural influences enabling these behaviours (Wideman, 2008). Enormous literature exists on academic dishonesty among students even though the provided data have not curbed the problem of dishonesty; and more worrying is the high likelihood that cheating in school is indicative

of cheating in other settings (Wideman, 2008). The isolated incidents shown above are extremely troubling given the possibility that academic integrity and qualities are compromised. Chilling are rumours that some instructors are lifting test questions elsewhere or altering grades for payment in cash or kind while knowing that cheating calls into question the quality of the university's academic programmes, the value of its degree and the capability of its graduates (Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003).

Although research pertaining to academic dishonesty is extensive, it is often contradictory mainly due to quantitative methods by which these data were collected (Wideman, 2008). Such studies seem to assume that the definition of cheating is universal and that students and staff have the same understanding (Wideman, 2008). Qualitative study on the other hand, have found that students often have not understood cheating and plagiarism due to differing cultural expectations around academic writing and a lack in language skills (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). Integrity being what one believes is the best course of action in helping out a needy person; it is possible that helping an academically weak person is not considered cheating but an altruistic behaviour for individuals raised in simple and kin-oriented cultures (Whiting, & Whiting, 2008). The same may be true for staff's understanding of the notion of academic integrity or dishonesty hinted in above examples.

McCabe et al. (2001) showed that one of the reasons students cheat is the need to succeed in education in order to get a good job. It is becoming harder for universities to model standards of integrity when students perceive their own teachers as acting dishonestly within a society that ignores many aspects of cheating (Wideman, 2008). Studies show that often teachers know of cases of cheating, yet choose to ignore them claiming that they are overworked or confronting a student can be time-consuming (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Hendershott & Cross, 2000). Some feel that the university does not provide adequate support or training to properly handle such cases (Leask, 2006). Others sympathise with students, believing that students are cheating in response to a subjective or unfair system (Wideman, 2008). Thus the above cited anecdotal examples may be understandable if seen along these scenarios. The cultural complexity surrounding academic dishonesty increases the confusion for students and academics (Leask, 2006). This is a particularly difficult concept for students in more communal cultures where academic dishonesty is defined differently or for those with limited English language (Wideman, 2008). It could also be possible that universities may be encouraging cheating by honouring the level of achievement over the steps taken to achieve the marks (Anderman, 2007).

Internet and technology (ICT) have brought the diverse world closer and compounded the confusion. Recent literature suggests that the ICT plays a key role in the increased number of students cheating (Centre for Academic Integrity, 2005). Harper (2006) found a positive correlation between academic dishonesty and the increased use of technology in education. Computers and other high tech gadgets have changed the way people communicate, work and study, not to mention that the prevalence of digital resources fosters academic dishonesty such as easy cut and paste (Centre for Academic Integrity, 2005), particularly among individuals with different understanding of what constitutes academic dishonesty.

Taking from constructivist theory that reality is constructed, it is important to examine the impact of beliefs of teachers, students and of the larger school system on what are appropriate beliefs and behaviours towards learning (Wideman, 2008). Students' understanding of success and non-success are psychological constructs, so educators must do more than police for misconduct; but must uphold and support integrity (Fassett, 2001). Examples of staff stand-off, concealment of names and "I couldn't care less" attitudes toward assessment tools (tests and examinations) portray lack of seriousness and questionable integrity among the staff. In a society with opportunistic people, the benefits of integrity cannot be over emphasised. The motto should be to build a culture of integrity in universities, which cannot be about policing students, but creating a university wide environment that demonstrates integrity at all levels (Wideman, 2008) including recruitment process, staff development programmes, consistency and transparency in staff support services, to mention only a few examples.

Conclusion

Unarguably, dishonesty is prevalent in our daily lives in Tanzania and is an extremely complicated issue such that there is no easy answer. It cannot be explained by individual dispositions but the social-cultural contexts in which individuals operate. To gain the complete understanding of all facets of dishonesty while emphasizing integrity may be the first step in dealing with the escalating problem of dishonesty in general and opportunism in particular. Apparently, university staff and students are prone to opportunism upon which dishonesty thrives. This situation needs to be addressed urgently. Hopefully, building a culture of honesty and integrity will have positive effects on the quality of university programmes, the competence of the trained graduates; and thus will provide a solution to a seemingly rampant opportunism in Tanzania.

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