Cheating, Ethics, and Graduate Training in Professional Psychology:
Crime and Punishment or Misjudgment and Repair

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When graduate students in professional psychology violate an honor system and cheat on a
test, the faculty response must balance both ethical and humanitarian considerations. By
following an actual incident from detection to disposition, a number of dilemmas are con-
sidered. Relevant principles from the American Psychological Association’s ethical code for
psychologists, the student–professor interactions, and a short-term follow-up further elici-
tate the complexity of the factors involved. The author’s handling of the incidents stems
from (a) a model of training (Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1972) emphasizing the importance of
the supervisor–supervisee dyad for the learning of the student and (b) a model of interaction
emphasizing responsibility and repair in the conduct of human relationships.

Ethical Principles of Psychologists

Principle 1: Responsibility. In providing services, psychologists maintain the highest standards of their profession. They accept res-
ponsibility for the consequences of their acts and make every effort to ensure that their services are used appropriately. (American Psy-

Late in June, I received a call from my senior teaching assistant notifying me of a probable case of cheating by two graduate stu-
dents. I thanked him for the information and sent along the anonymous materials to the second teaching assistant for a verifying
opinion. She reached the identical conclusion — that the examina-
tions were so similar as to preclude their having been written independently. The facts pointed to a violation of an honor system
at the end of the year by two graduate students in professional psychology.
The situation was a difficult one. In this course on assessment,
ethical issues had been addressed in numerous contexts. Issues
involving privacy of the client, safeguarding of records, dilemmas
of agency versus client loyalty, and competence of the examiner
were discussed during the year. Moreover, all tests and quizzes in
the course had been conducted on the honor system; the instruc-
tor was pointedly absent although he was available for ques-
tions in an adjoining room. For the final examination, a take-
home format had been formally agreed upon, with the students
responsible for the independence of their work. The honor system
described here was discussed with the class and agreed to by the
students. However, two of the partners to this arrangement had
broken their agreement, and the question of how to proceed arose.

Principle 3: Moral and legal standards. Psychologists’ moral and
ethical standards of behavior are a personal matter to the same degree
as they are for any other citizen, except as these may compromise
the fulfillment of their professional responsibilities or reduce the pub-
lic trust in psychology and psychologists. (p. 634)

There is widespread agreement that cheating at the undergradu-
ate level is endemic with rates of 50%, 60%, and 75% reported
Analysis of the ways in which students cheat, their motives, and
the situational and personality factors that enter into the process
have been considered in the literature. Reports indicate that cheatin-
g is a multivariate phenomenon comprising varied determinants
including the following: importance of the text, pedagogical suc-
cess or failure, prevailing school and class attitudes, and so forth
(Hartshorne & May, 1928; Nevo, 1981). Although the honor sys-

tem is believed to reduce the incidence of cheating, the few pub-
lished reports on the method have not clarified the implications,
mechanisms, or impact of the honor system as applied to teaching
graduate students (Canning, 1956). There is a particular dearth
of information on the situational and personality factors operant when
cheating does occur under honor conditions. To complicate mat-
ters further, the total absence of data on the phenomenon during
graduate training limits the heuristic value of the published mate-
rial. My assumption, however, is that cheating in graduate school
is not normative, particularly when the classes are small, faculty
student contact is frequent, and the honor system is instituted by
the instructor as a significant parameter of the educational rela-
tionship. As a result, when cheating does occur, it is a matter of
particular concern.

At my university, students are required to abide by the bylaws
of the institution, which forbid both cheating and assisting others
in cheating (University of Haifa, 1984). The formal procedures
for handling violations may be invoked by the filing of a complaint
by a professor or other member of the university community. The
university procedures for disciplining students need not be mo-
bilized in every case of violation. Teachers may deal directly with
students and adjudicate matters on an informal basis (personal
communication, M. Kellner, Ethics Committee, September 12,
1984). After discussion with colleagues and the programs chair-
person, the decision was made to explore the direct adjudication
procedure.

An informal survey of faculty reactions to violations of an honor
system yielded considerable variation. Several colleagues felt that
irrespective of the motivating source of the violation, students
should be summarily failed or dismissed from the program for the
breach. In a field where temptation and potential for abuse of the
psychologist mantle are all too apparent, these faculty members
stressed the need for taking firm action to protect ethical standards.
Recent publicity given to ethical violations by psychologists underscore the range of problems besetting the field. From the manufacturing of research data to sexual liaisons with clients, the data suggest that both the academic and the clinical domain exert formidable pressures upon members of the profession (Davidson, 1977; Fisher, 1982; Hall & Haro-Mustin, 1983; Holroyd & Brodsky, 1977; Pope, Schouer, & Levenson, 1980). Other faculty members argued that every reasonable effort should be made to assist students who err and transgress an honor code. Concerned with the student as a humanistically perceived colleague, consumer, and client, these faculty members assert that one does not punish a student for errors in judgment. Instead, supportive contacts, opportunities to amend the failure, and a general nonjudgmental stance are advocated by this group.

Although these positions are set forth at their extremes, the implications following the adoption of either approach for a graduate training program are formidable. The ethical standards adopted within a training program serve teaching and modeling functions.

**Principle 1.** As teachers, psychologists recognize their primary obligation to help others acquire knowledge and skill. (p. 633)

**Principle 2.** As practitioners, psychologists know that they bear a heavy social responsibility because their recommendations and professional actions may alter the lives of others. (p. 633)

For the case under discussion, a course of action that would neglect neither the students as individuals nor the needs of society was called for. The responsibility of the teacher to serve the students, the university community, and the general public was present. Before a specific response could be formulated, more information, which only the students could provide, was called for. Before attempting to chart a course balancing humanistic and professionally responsible aspects, it was necessary to explore to what degree personal difficulties, rebellion, a deficient code of conduct, or psychopathy were involved.

**Principle 7g.** When psychologists know of an ethical violation by another psychologist, and it seems appropriate, they informally attempt to resolve the issue by bringing the behavior to the attention of the psychologist. If the misconduct is of a minor nature and/or appears to be due to lack of sensitivity, knowledge, or experience, such an informal solution is usually appropriate. Such informal corrective efforts are made with sensitivity to any rights to confidentiality involved. If the violation does not seem amenable to an informal solution, or if of a more serious nature, psychologists bring it to the attention of the appropriate local, state, and/or national committee on professional ethics and conduct. (p. 637)

Were the students individuals whom faculty could, in good conscience, support? If so, informal procedures designed to repair the honor violation could be constructed. If not, more severe measures deserved consideration. These measures included failing the student in the course, suspension, or expulsion from the program. Such measures would require a decision by the program faculty in consultation with the university ethics committee.

The Case

I requested individual meetings with the students, and Debby and Liz (fictional names) were each to meet with me two times. Debby, the first to arrive at a meeting, arrived determined to shoulder full responsibility for what had happened. She informed me that she had undergone a difficult semester and had been on the verge of "drastic action." It was only help from Liz that had enabled her to manage the strain of functioning and meeting academic requirements. Her suicidal concerns had been mitigated by much support from and dependence on Liz. The help she felt she needed so desperately had extended to the final examination, and so she had copied Liz's work. It seemed self-explanatory to Debby that she had become emotionally dependent on Liz, and she did not question the course of her actions. In previous discussions with her faculty counselor, a recommendation for psychotherapy had been made. Debby, however, was undecided whether to return to the university to complete the graduate program. She wished to ponder this before considering treatment. As Debby spoke, the lack of emotional depth, depression, or guilt was noticeable. She communicated rationalization, emotional distance, and general indecision.

Debby's response was a paradoxical one. On the one hand, the absence of remorse, responsibility, or appreciation of the honor violation were disappointing negative signs. Yet, on the other hand, she had presented a powerful explanation for her actions — one so powerful as to account even for her lack of responsiveness in the meeting. Given her current impasse, I did not seek to reach immediate resolution with her. I told Debby that the question of what to do with the course requirement — as well as the ethical breach — needed to wait until she was feeling better and had come to a decision about staying in the program. Debby departed with matters unresolved and with the entailing tension of that irresolution. The next step was up to her.

Liz arrived for her meeting in a very different state. She burst forth in a torrent of "explanation." She, too, described the difficulty that Debby had experienced and her own gradual evolution from friend to confident—supporter—therapist. The confusion and responsibility she had assumed had led her to seek out therapy for herself. With eyes downcast, she asked my pardon for violating...
"my" honor system and for letting Debby copy her independent work, which she had permitted Debby to do because she had felt responsible for her friend.

Acknowledging the pressures that Liz had been under, I empathized with what a confusing period that must have been for her. As the situation was becoming clear, I suggested we meet again to finalize the completion of the course. Liz's eyes opened wide as she gasped, "But I didn't copy, she did!" Her confessional tone changed to one of choking rage as she coldly informed the instructor that the prerogatives were all his. "Why did I tell you all this anyway? You are going to do whatever you wish." Agreeing to meet a second time, Liz left without saying goodbye.

Several weeks went by, and Liz had not yet returned. I initiated a second meeting and began by describing my reactions to the honor code violation. I related my shock and concern, and I was still undecided about whether to assist the still anonymous violators by giving them the opportunity to complete the course. Only by listening to Debby and Liz had I learned enough to determine that I was interested in working with them to complete the course. Liz listened carefully to this and replied that she had attempted to control her anger toward me but had been unable to do so. "I had been expecting understanding — forgiveness — from a clinical psychologist. Yet I guess there is less bullshit in your way of dealing with it. What do you have in mind for the course make-up?" Although I had accepted her contention that she had done her own work on the final and saw no reason for her to repeat the examination, I viewed her sharing of her work as a serious breach that needed repairation. As such, I offered a suggestion. Would writing a paper on professional ethics, on a topic of her own choosing, be an appropriate manner of easing the breach? If she agreed, her original grade on the final would stand when the paper was completed.

Liz acknowledged that the suggestion made intuitive sense to her. She then related a story from her own work as a counselor prior to graduate school. "I don't know how this is related!" she began, and described a counseling relationship with a student whom she has trusted and liked. Having caught him in a lie to her had broken their working alliance. No longer able to work with him, she had severed all therapeutic contact and put the case out of her mind. "The difference between how you and I responded was that I didn't leave him a way to either understand or work things out. You continued to work with me." In a manner similar to a therapeutic intervention that elicits confirming material from a client (Arlow, 1963), Liz's story suggested she had made a learning connection. She had described a parallel incident to our own that had ended negatively and contrasted it with the current interaction. On the basis of her spontaneous material, one could infer that more was involved here than mere compliance with the instructor's demands. Some weeks later, Liz handed in a paper entitled "Professional ethics: Sexual contact between patient and therapist — A critical discussion." The product of both library work and serious thought, it set a tone that praised psychology for its willingness to address such problems while acknowledging the seriousness of the violation itself. Liz added that confronting ethical issues had been valuable for her and that the manner in which she had done so had been a learning experience for her.

Several additional weeks passed before Debby made her decision to continue in the program, not to enter therapy, and to complete the course. She returned for a meeting with me aware of what had transpired between Liz and myself. Although it was clear to both of us that she needed to retake a final examination, the ethical violation needed to be addressed as well. In this meeting, Debby was more responsible, but she still did not critically evaluate her behaviors. I ventured the opinion that for Debby to submit a theoretical paper on ethics might miss the point. Fundamentally, she had not yet explored her own experience and role in the cheating episode. Therefore, I suggested she consider writing a combined case study and theoretical paper evaluating the dilemmas in limt setting.

Principle 6a. Psychologists are continually cognizant of their own needs and of their potentially influential position vis-à-vis persons such as clients, students, and subordinates. They avoid exploiting the trust and dependency of such persons. Psychologists make every effort to avoid dual relationships that could impair their professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation. Examples of such dual relationships include, but are not limited to, research with and treatment of employees, students, supervisees, close friends, or relatives. (p. 636)

Considering under what circumstances standing firm can be beneficial and therapeutic and when the occasion to bend rules to accommodate a person in need was called for was the heart of the dilemma I suggested Debby address. To make her paper particularly meaningful, she would be wise to use herself as the example. To respect her privacy, and to reestablish the honor system with her, I emphasized that the paper would neither be graded nor read by me. It would be sufficient for her to complete it and hand in the reference page alone. When completed, we would select a date for the second final. As Debby left, she turned and said "I think this paper is a substitute for a dialogue that I have not had with myself yet and that I have not had in here, in part because you think I need to take this stuff into therapy." Two weeks later I found the references in my mailbox. Some time later she completed the take-home final and received her course grade.

Discussion

When students violate an honor system, it is a breach of trust vis-à-vis the instructor, the university, and their colleagues. A type of almost victimless cheating (standing in marked contrast to falsification of research or clinical data, which threatens the scientific enterprise [Fisher, 1982]), the broad implications of the faculty to the ethical violation should not be dismissed lightly. Significantly, in the otherwise extensive ethical code of the APA, the response to cheating and other preprofessional ethical violations is not raised. In the absence of definitive guidelines, an approach that attempts to balance concern for the maintenance of ethical standards in psychology with the interpersonal caring characteristic of the helping professions was adopted.

One of the leading models in the realm of psychotherapy training, the parallel process paradigm, is relevant to the analysis here. In discussing the process of psychotherapy supervision, Ekelin and Wallerstein (1972) set forth the parallel process model. They emphasized that the processes at work between supervisor and therapist greatly influence the work of the therapist and patient. That much of the emotional climate of one relationship is paralleled within the other and interventions within one relationship have implications for the other has been demonstrated empirically
(Doehman, 1976). To those who acknowledge that the faculty-student relationship is a potent model for the student in the role of therapist, the concept of parallel process can be useful. Here too the extent to which both ethical professional standards and interpersonal concerns are operant between faculty and student has implications for how the student will function in the role of professional (Tymchuk et al., 1979).

The violation required a response. Although much was a matter of nuance, exploration, and personal judgment, the process set forth strongly resembles the adjudication of ethical violations by the APA (Hall & Hare-Mustin, 1983). Both stress the educative function of the response to ethical issues. At the university level, attempting to adjudicate the matter informally necessitated an assessment phase in which the background to the honor system violations was obtained. The honor violation was addressed at its most immediate level as the breach of a personal contract with the instructor. Were the students individuals with whom I was willing to continue in a relationship involving trust? Examining the students' ability to assume responsibility for their actions was important. The features of the case that suggested weakened responsibility were cause for concern. What had been at the forefront of the acceptance of all students — that they not be harmful, that they be capable of shouldering the responsibility of the tasks ahead, and that they have the capacity for meaningful human relationships — returned again for fresh consideration (Grayson, 1982).

The ethical breach warranted repair in its own right, and the ethics assignments were designed to be this repair. By instituting a requirement addressing the cheating, a situation where something corrective could be done to close and work through the breach was created. The opportunity to learn from the experience in an experiential–didactic way changed the context of the events as well. In grappling and responding to the events, the participants had addressed together an area where ethics, interpersonal relationships, and training meet.

The process described above is not advocated as a blanket procedure for all violations during graduate school training in professional psychology. It is self-evident that of those students who face periods of increased stress during their graduate school years, most do not resort to technical solutions in violation of academic and ethical standards. Yet the question remains of how to proceed when violations occur. The risks of even appearing to tolerate unethical behavior, and of committing oneself to a standard with ambiguous limits, need to be balanced against the opportunity to effect reparation. In situations in which the responsibility for the handling of the violation rests with the instructor acting within institutional rules, the possibilities for response — and of error — increase. The risk of error needs to be weighed against the constructive opportunity for personal and educational response.

In seeking to allow repair of the ethical and interpersonal breach, I communicated my faith in the ability of a bipersonal framework to tolerate shock and continue to function (Mueller & Kell, 1972). That this was at least partly communicated is illustrated by Liz's spontaneous sharing of her own parallel experience: She contrasted her own response to how she had been treated in the current episode with the earlier experience when she had been unable to continue in a helping relationship with one of her counselors following a breach of trust. The connections she made suggested that learning had occurred. The value of the approach adopted with Debby was less clear. Whether she had learned enough to behave differently could not be ascertained. In the absence of an unequivocal demonstration that true learning had occurred and that the instructor's interventions were meaningful, my advocacy of the approach described ultimately derives from a philosophy of training and modeling consistent with my work as a clinical–academic psychologist.

Epilogue

I followed both students in a second year therapy course and was able to assess the impact of this ethical–personal experience on our relationship and on the students' work. The experience proved beneficial to their understanding of what I emphasize in therapy: mutual responsibility, an ability to tolerate strong emotion in the interaction, and a viewpoint that allows for addressing and working on difficulties in the bipersonal relationship. Debby and Liz have also been able to use something of their own experience to understand what the psychotherapeutic process is about. For all three of us, the distinction between the academic and clinical worlds is less sharp that it once was.

References


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