

Sociological Perspective of Examination Malpractices in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: Examination malpractice is any act carried out by anybody that defies the rules that guides a student whose knowledge or ability is being tested in a particular knowledge or skill with the aim of distorting the student's true knowledge or ability. This article employs three classical major sociological perspectives in analyzing examination malpractice in Nigerian Universities. The structural-functional theory points out the contribution of examination malpractice in maintaining a stable social system and its negative consequences for the social system. Conflict theory reveals how examination malpractice generates various types of conflict in the social system and its role in perpetuating inequality. While the theory of symbolic-interactionism points out how examination malpractice takes place through interaction. This article explored various forms of examination malpractice including coming into the examination hall with extraneous materials, the use of mobile phones with internet connectivity, as well as plagiarism. Recommendations were suggested as it affects the role of stakeholders – students, lecturers, parents, the press, the government – in tackling/curbing examination malpractice in Nigerian Universities.

Keywords: Epidemic, examination, malpractices, sociological theories, Universities.

Introduction

Examination malpractice in Nigerian universities is rising in endemic and epidemic proportions. This perverse phenomenon has become the rule rather than the exception, and has consequently perverted the University system in Nigeria. This terrible phenomenon and its wholesale perpetration have not gone unnoticed by the international community. No wonder the Director General, National Orientation Agency (NOA) Mr. Mike Omeri said that Nigeria has been ranked number one in the world's examination malpractice index. He pointed out that the situation has led to the production of half-baked graduates and collapse of the education sector (Usman, 2012). Examination malpractice has been defined as "any irregular behavior exhibited by candidates or anybody charged with the responsibility of conducting examinations in or outside the examination hall, before, during or after such examination" (West African Examination Council, 2003). It has also been defined as "an illegal or unethical behavior by somebody in the process of testing an examinee's ability or knowledge by means of questions" (Ikupa, 1997). While, according to Eghafona (2011), "Examination malpractice involves a deliberate act of wrongdoing contrary to official examination rules."

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2006), to examine means "to give somebody a test to see how much they know about a subject or what they can do". The above definition directs our attention to the fact that examination is not restricted to writing tests especially in a class but also involves carrying out and writing projects, engaging in field work and writing its reports and working on oral and/or written assignments personally or as a group. Thus, we will define examination malpractice as any act carried out by anybody that defies the rules guiding a student whose knowledge or ability is being tested in a particular subject or skill with the aim of distorting the student's true knowledge or ability. Before peering into and revealing the many forms through which examination malpractice is perpetrated in Nigerian Universities, let us conduct a theoretical investigation in profusion into examination malpractice.

Theoretical Framework

The paper employed the three major (classical) sociological perspectives in analyzing examination malpractice in Nigerian Universities namely: the structural-functional and conflict and symbolic interaction theories.

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Structural – Functionalism

The functional explanation accounts for the existence of a phenomenon or the carrying out of an action in terms of its consequences – its contribution to maintaining a stable social system (Scott and Marshall, 2005:232). Examination malpractice could be contributing the following ‘positive functions’ to the social system:

- Examination malpractice (though a crime) can help to control the rate of more serious crimes in the society, in the sense that those who engaged in it can still get employed to carry out simple tasks after graduation instead of resorting to more serious forms of crime (e.g. kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, prostitution, drug pushing etc.) to sustain their lives.
- Financial and sexual gratification received by lecturers under the auspices of examination malpractice can serve as an actuating force for them to remain in the lecturing profession. This is because Lecturers’ salaries and allowances are still considered unattractive (even though it is subjected to occasional upward reviews by the government). It thus makes it possible for us to have persons who are ready to teach, because without them, the academic institution will be grossly understaffed and the society at large will be adversely affected.
- A form of examination malpractice is impersonation. It can be said that poor students normally take their academics more seriously than wealthy students with a view to improving their financial situation, and wealthy students normally pay poor students to impersonate them. When money leaves the rich and goes to the poor, it creates some stability in the economy of the society.

On the other hand, early functionalism has been criticized for ignoring the important note that one social fact can have negative consequences for another social fact. This serious omission was rectified by Merton, an author in structural functionalism who developed the idea of a dysfunction, that just as structures or institutions could contribute to the maintenance of other parts of the social system, they also could have negative consequences for them (Ritzer, 2012:253). We can point out the following if we apply Merton’s postulate of a dysfunction to the phenomenon of examination malpractice:

- Examination malpractice discourages and de-motivates students from studying hard as it becomes obvious to them that they can pass their examinations (which many have made their chief objective) without working hard. When students had not studied hard during their university days, it can eventually facilitate the enthronement of a mediocre, half-baked, incompetent and corrupt work-force ranging from quack doctors to pharmacists and can lead to massive fraud in banks, the collapse of buildings, the miscarriage of justice, etc. (Ugwu, 2008). Also, “people who cut corners early in life - such as cheating a lot in school – may bring that habit to the work place”, says David Callahan, author of *The Cheating Culture* (quoted in *Awake!* August 2012). This can in the long run cause a financial crisis in the economic institution of the society.
- Examination malpractice can cause the perpetration of other deviant acts like prostitution, stealing, armed robbery, etc. Which some students resort to in order to have money to malpractice.
- When a lecturer is found guilty of an act of examination malpractice, he can be kissed-off. This would automatically lead to unemployment for the lecturer. In addition, it can result to a loss of manpower for the department involved especially if the lecturer is an intellectual king-pin.

Conflict

Conflict theorists as pointed out by Scott and Marshall (2005:104) “emphasized the importance of interests over norms and values, and the ways in which the pursuit of interests generated various types of conflicts as normal aspects of social life, rather than abnormal or dysfunctional occurrences.” Conflict theorists also “see dissension and conflict at every point in the social system” (Ritzer, 2012:66). Below are some conflicts that are generated as a result of the perpetration of examination malpractice:

- Conflict between the lecturers who engage in it and those who do not. This usually results in a lack of cooperation among them and in some cases ‘witch-hunting’.
- Conflict between the lecturers who engage in it and the university administrators who are ‘normally expected’ to fight against it.
- Conflict between morally upright cum hardworking students who detest it and those students who depend on it.
- Conflict between students who refuse to engage in it and lecturers who engage in and/or demand that students engage in it in order for them to benefit. For example, the National Association of Nigerian

Students (NANS) has informed the ICPC (Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission) boss of the association's decision to have a unit of ICPC on each campus. The reason for this is that if a lecturer decides to fail 80% of his students, in the hope that this will intimidate them to succumb to his demands, such a case can be tackled quickly by the ICPC unit of the institution (Retrieved from www.zimbio.com on July 13, 2012).

- Conflict between students who cannot do without it and Lecturers who scrupulously avoid it.

In his conflict theory of stratification, Collins (quoted in Ritzer, 2012:273) "urged us to think of people as animals whose actions, motivated by self-interest, can be seen as maneuvers to obtain various advantages so that they can achieve satisfaction and avoid dissatisfaction." He further argued "that in a situation of inequality, those groups that control resources are likely to try to exploit those that lack resources. He was careful to point out that *such exploitation need not involve conscious calculation on the part of those who gain from the situation*; rather, the exploiters are merely pursuing what they perceive to be their best interests. In the process they may be taking advantage of those who lack resources" (Italics added). Let's now give consideration to the application of Collin's theory to examination malpractice:

Nigerian Universities are made up of both rich and poor students. While the poor struggle tenaciously to get out of their situation of deprivation, the rich consciously and in intransigence resist any attempt to give away their wealth. Examination malpractice has a role to play in aiding and abetting the rich in perpetuating their status. As earlier observed, many children of the rich put in puny efforts into their academics because they live comfortable lives, but the reverse is the case for the poor, since they recognize the fact that a good education can improve both their material and social wellbeing/welfare in the society. However, the seemingly unserious rich students and their parents are also aware of the need to be well educated. Unfortunately though, their myopic idea of a good education is not 'good knowledge' but 'good grades', consequently, such parents equip their children financially for the purpose of malpractice. Other very influential parents assist their children by merely calling these lecturers to assist their children. For example, Igbinovia (2003) notes that "rich pupils entice their teachers with promises of compensation and ... teachers award high grades in return". Besides, because of the growing importance of being connected to the influential in the contemporary Nigerian society, these lecturers pander to the whim of the rich and influential. Since as many a lecturer will say that "all grades must be represented" and the rich have been awarded the high grades, the lower grades are thus made to be represented by the poor students. At the end of their programs, the names of many influential students are boldly written in the best grading categories (especially Second Class Upper Division for first degree students), while the poor but hardworking students cry their eyes out for such injustices and are painfully reminded of the low status they occupy in the society.

Symbolic – Interactionism

The focus of interactionism highlights the social world as precisely that which is 'interactive'. From this point of view there is no such thing as a solitary individual, hence humans are always connected to others (Scott and Marshall, 2005:653). Symbolic interactionist see society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. This implies that the phenomenon of examination malpractice cannot exist without interaction which 'most often' occurs in the following ways:

- The student(s) approaches the lecturer and offers a benefit either in cash or kind to get a good grade. The lecturer rationalizes that the money could help pay a debt or solve a pressing need, or sees the benefit in kind as very alluring, he acquiesces to the demand and an act of examination malpractice occurs.
- The lecturer demands or threatens that the student(s) offer a benefit either in cash or kind or else face some consequences. The student(s) in realization of the seriousness and desperation of the lecturer yields to his demands, and both parties commit an act of examination malpractice.

Forms of Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice can manifest itself in various ways. For example, Obaro (2011) enumerated the following as forms of examination malpractice:

- Leakage – proven cases of fore-knowledge of examination questions.
- Coming into the examination hall with extraneous materials.
- Impersonation at examination.
- Failure of subject teacher or course lecturer to submit marked answer scripts within the stipulated period.
- Receiving financial gratification with intent to assist candidates.

- Sexual harassment or gratification with intent to alter candidate's results.
- Mishandling of examination materials.
- Disclosing questions to students or to any other unauthorized person.
- Illegal alteration of student's/candidate's scores.

However, let us expound on some of the above forms and point out some more recent and innovative manifestations of examination malpractice in Nigerian Universities. This will bring to light a fact that youths put a lot of effort and ingenuity into cheating which they would be better off channeling into obtaining an honest education (Awake! January 22, 2003).

- With regards to coming into the examination hall with extraneous materials, a lecturer in a federal University once discovered a student who donned a suit into the examination hall on a cold day with many a piece of paper that he inserted in the numerous pockets of his suit.
- To buttress the fact that lecturers and others receive financial and sexual gratification with intent to assist candidates, Igbinovia (2003) noted that "students shower lecturers and others within the system with designer shirts, clothes, wristwatches, ties and shoes and lecturers also demand sex from students in exchange for grades". It should also be noted that some female students brazenly offer themselves to male lecturers in exchange for assistance. They do this more often by dressing seductively in order to be sexually attractive to male lecturers and propel them to request for sexual gratification. When they eventually succeed in scratching the backs of the lecturers, as it were, the lecturers are forced to scratch their backs in return by assisting them.
- The use of mobile phones with internet connectivity is a recent manifestation of examination malpractice. In connection with this trend, Awake! (August, 2012) notes that "often, only a small percentage gets caught, and this emboldens others". For example, a senior lecturer in a federal University once seized a blackberry phone from a candidate who typed 'Sigmund Freud' into a search engine during a psychology test.
- Dr. Eddy Erhagbe (who spoke in a workshop of examination ethics, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, 2011) pointed out to the amazement of his listeners that some students now put on well starched white brocades to the examination hall because they can write possible answers to examination questions on the inconspicuous areas of the brocade trousers.
- Reproduction of another candidate's work with or without permission (Ugwu, 2008), otherwise called 'plagiarism' is another form of examination malpractice that is rising tall. Such a reproduction can take the forms of copying or dubbing a fellow candidate's answers in a test hall, copying written assignments of fellow candidates and dubbing original essays (or projects) already carried out. Plagiarism is most often an act committed by University lecturers who as researchers publish research based works that are 'examined' and used as a basis for their academic promotion. This, according to Osaze (2011) "occurs when a researcher consciously or unconsciously 'steals' and uses the ideas, work and writing of other authors and researchers giving the impression that those ideas are his own original work."
- "Colluding with a member of staff or any other person in order to submit a newly prepared answer script as a substitute for the original script after an examination" (The Faculty of Education, University of Port-Harcourt).
- "Writing of projects, laboratory and/or field reports on behalf of a student by a member of staff" (The Faculty of Education, University of Port-Harcourt).
- Another pucky manifestation of examination malpractice has to do with the venal motive why some students vie to become class representatives. They simply capitalize on the orthodox and unorthodox relationship they develop with lecturers. Class representatives normally mediate between lecturers and students to ensure adequate flow of information between the two parties. Abnormally however, class representatives in Nigerian Universities now possess the Mephistophelian reputation of not just collecting bribes from students on behalf of lecturers but even determining how much they deem will be gratifying enough financially. When they do their job well, they expect to be rewarded. And since lecturers have been given *carte blanche* to score students, they artlessly give them excellent and very good grades to the utmost dismay of many classmates.

Tackling Examination Malpractice in Nigerian Universities – Recommendations

- Cases of examination malpractice should be reported to the relevant authorities/agencies so that its perpetrators can be appropriately punished to ensure both specific and general deterrence from the act.

In buttressing the need for deterrence, Professor Ademolekun stated that “unpunished corruption deepens corruption. When people are made to pay for their offenses, it drastically reduces corruption.” Practically, the University administration should put measures in place to protect students from harassment when they report cases of examination malpractice. This can motivate many honest students to be intrepid in reporting cases of malpractice. It has also been observed quite unfortunately that some lecturers sympathetically hold back from punishing students who breach examination rules. Such leniency no matter how well-meaning is an aberration and must discontinue if we are determined to tackle this execrable phenomenon.

- The press should put measures in place to regularly and profusely point out the negative consequences of examination malpractice. This could appeal to the consciences of some to desist from the act.
- Parents should assist their children to be hard-working and counsel them on the need to be scrupulous. They should stop aiding and abetting them in any way to malpractice. The reason for this as noted by Polly Young-Eisendrath in her book *The Self-Esteem Trap* (quoted in *Awake!* October, 2012) is that “if parents run too much interference in problem solving for their children while the children sit back and do nothing, . . . the children get weaker and fall over when they try to run on their own.” To help their children succeed academically, ‘parents should teach their children how to fish instead of fishing for them’ by giving them practical and normative assistance.
- Lecturers have a significant role to play in curbing examination malpractice. They should learn to be content with what they have, look beyond what they benefit (especially monetarily) from examination malpractice and focus on helping the students to become ‘full-baked graduates’ as it were. Lecturers should remember that as teachers, they occupy a position of public trust, are expected to adhere to a reasonable pattern of behaviour accepted by the society and help to improve education in the community (Monye-Emina, 2011). It is worthy to note that some lecturers are doing well in this regard. For example, a Professor in a federal University once refused an offer of a hundred thousand naira deceptively presented as a gift. He refused because he realized that the student (who offered the money) had a carry-over in a course he taught. He then pointed out pungently that he would not accept any gift from the student until her graduation, and that was after the student also presented an offer of a vacation overseas for a period of time. If you were in his shoes, what would you have done?

The Holy Bible in Ecclesiastes 5:10 says: “A mere lover of silver will not be satisfied with silver, neither any lover of wealth with income. This too is vanity.” With regards to lecturers who take delight in sexual gratification from students, Dr Victor Cline, a specialist in treating sex addiction likens sex addiction to cancer. He states: “Like a cancer, it keeps growing and spreading. It rarely ever reverses itself, and it is also very difficult to treat and heal” (quoted in *Awake!* July 22, 2003). It is dehumanizing and disgraceful for a lecturer to be addicted/enslaved to material and sexual gratification! Such a one does not deserve to occupy the position of a lecturer, and must be transformed in order to find joy in this noble profession and contribute positively to societal development.

- Students should please work hard and be aware of the negative consequences of examination malpractice. As a Director of campus judicial programs explains: “Any student committing an act of academic dishonesty will run a serious risk of harming future educational and employment opportunities” (*Awake!* June 8, 1986). They should boldly report cases of examination malpractice to the relevant authorities instead of allowing themselves to be insured by this bad act. Students who think that they can get away with examination malpractice in the interim should ponder over this fact: ‘Examination malpractice can initially seem to be the shortest-cut, *but it eventually turns out to be the longest.*
- Examinations (especially when it involves writing and is conducted in a hall) should be well supervised in a manner that will make it almost practically impossible for students to malpractice. For example, Sulaimon (2010) recommends that “secret cameras should always be planted in examination halls to monitor examinees”. This is an imperative because one reason for exam malpractice according to Eghafona (2011) is “poor conditions under which examinations are conducted”. We also recommend that any staff suspected to be unscrupulous be restrained from supervising examinees. In addition, there should be enough *eagle-eyed supervisors* in an examination hall to monitor examinees.
- Lecturers in another vein should avoid giving areas of concentration with specificity. This is hinged on the observation that many students spend time impressing the information from those areas with ink on small pieces of papers that they hide all over their bodies for use in exams instead of spending time impressing the information on their minds.

Conclusion

Though examination malpractice cannot be totally stopped, it can be curbed if stakeholders do not apply the above recommendations passively. As Durkheim (quoted in Ritzer, 2012:104) wisely said, “Ideals cannot be legislated into existence; they must be understood, loved and striven for by the body whose duty it is to realize them.” All stakeholders should know that if this negative, putrid and ugly trend is allowed to persist, it will turn out to be an injury to all. A stitch in time saves nine; it is time we saved higher education in Nigeria from a colossal and abysmal fall.

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