

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SANCTION REFORM

By Jonathan Haidt

One of the oldest principles of moral psychology is that habit builds character. If you can get people to do honorable things, they will become honorable people. Jefferson himself wrote that the moral sense “may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body.” So the community of trust that UVA students have created for themselves is a wise and wonderful thing. I have no doubt that UVA students leave Charlottesville as better, nobler people because of it.

But the honor system in its present form violates two other principles of moral psychology, thereby undermining its effectiveness. The first is that the certainty of punishment is a much more powerful deterrent than is the severity of punishment. At UVA, however, we get it backwards: cheating is almost always tolerated, and on rare occasions it is punished severely. Nobody knows exactly how much cheating there is, but I think it’s safe to assume that for every case that is discovered by a faculty member there must be many more known about by other students, and students almost never initiate cheating cases. They tolerate.

Faculty also rarely initiate cases, for two reasons. The first is that because of the single sanction the bar of proof is set extraordinarily high. Only indisputable documentary evidence will do; our own eyewitness testimony is not enough. So we are forced to tolerate most cases of cheating that we catch (although at least we can give an F on the assignment). The second reason is that even when we have absolute proof, the cheater is usually let off. According to statistics from the honor committee, there were 285 cases initiated in the 5 years from 1999-2003 (excluding Bloomfield cases). Because we faculty rarely initiate cases without excellent evidence, I think it’s likely that in nearly all of these cases the student was guilty. Yet only 24% of these cases ended with either a guilty verdict or an admission of guilt. The rest slipped out of the system at various steps, often by lying and using a variety of sleazy tactics, including slandering the professors and teaching assistants who, at great cost to themselves, tried to support the honor system.

The second basic principle of moral psychology is the principle of justice which says “treat like cases alike and different cases differently.” Concerns about fairness and justice are a deep part of human nature, and people get queasy when they see crime go unpunished, or when they see minor infractions punished severely. But the single sanction requires us all to violate the principle of justice. The single sanction is a deliberate policy of treating *all* cases alike, and most cases more harshly than we think is right. I believe this is a major reason why faculty as well as students are reluctant to turn in cheaters.

As a social psychologist it seems clear to me that the single sanction is an obstacle to honor at UVA. It contributes to widespread toleration of dishonor, and to dishonorable behavior at trial. Yet in my talks with those who defend the single sanction I have come also to see how much it inspires many students, both as a high ideal and as a cherished

tradition. So is there some way to keep the single sanction yet get it in harmony with basic principles of moral psychology?

Yes. Four years ago a Darden student named Lamont Soverall came to talk to me about his idea for adding a “forgiveness” clause to the single sanction. I thought this was brilliant - the perfect compromise. It retains the single sanction (because there is still just one sanction for dishonor), yet it humanizes the system, allowing expelled students to apply (once) for forgiveness and re-admission.

This single change would have a ripple effect throughout the system: more students would stand up after being caught and admit that they cheated, reducing the percentage of cases that go to trial, and reducing the desperate lies told at trial. More faculty would therefore be willing to initiate cases. The whole process would feel more humane and just, which would encourage more students and faculty to initiate cases rather than simply tolerate cheating. And best of all, forgiveness is an inspiring change, one that feels like moral progress rather than like an admission of failure. In fact, forgiveness satisfies the very logic that is already built into the honor system in the seriousness clause, which asks: if a behavior was to become widespread, would it undermine the community of trust? If so, then it is serious. Well, what about forgiveness? If forgiveness were to become widespread at UVA, would it undermine our community of trust? No. It would strengthen it. It would be exactly the sort of moral “exercise” that Jefferson wanted us to have.

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Psychological Principles Relevant to Strengthening the Honor System

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1) **The underappreciated power of the situation; the overestimated power of “character”**

–The Milgram Experiment

–Action causes attitudes, and character (“assume a virtue if you have it not....”)

--Implication: We must stop thinking about “weeding out the dishonorable students,” and think instead about reducing situations that cause dishonorable behavior.

Q: What is one of the main situational factors that causes cheating?

2) **The tipping point phenomenon**

–One of the most powerful fears: being a sucker. Cheating causes more cheating.

--Implication: we **MUST** keep cheating rates from rising above a few percent in any class.

Q: How? We already have the “death penalty” for cheating.

3) **The certainty of punishment is vastly more important than the severity.**

–people discount future costs steeply; go with a “likely/unlikely” appraisal of risk.

–Implication: We must let people see cheaters punished fairly often. But at present less than 1 in 10 cases are caught; of those only 1 in 10 lead to charges; of those, only 1 in 10 lead to expulsion. So only one in one thousand cases of cheating are punished, with the death penalty. This is not a psychologically tenable deterrent to cheating.

Q: How can we raise the likelihood of faculty initiating honor cases?

4) **Disgust leads to rejection and disengagement.**

–The faculty feels moral disgust towards the honor court system, wants nothing to do with it.

–We only file in most extreme cases; a priori guilt rate is probably over 95%. Conviction rate is below 20%.

–Implication: We will not end faculty disgust until conviction rates rise to over 50%.

Q: How can we get student juries to convict?

5) **The principle of justice: “Treat like cases alike, and different cases differently.”**

–The present honor system treats unlike cases alike (working together on a lab, and buying a paper on the web both yield same penalty), and it treats like cases differently (most students who plagiarize are acquitted; only a few are expelled).

–Juries refuse to administer penalties they see as unfair.

–Implication: **WE MUST CHANGE THE SINGLE SANCTION**, allowing alternate penalties (e.g. suspension, or readmission). Such a move would: increase faculty and student willingness to prosecute; increase honorable behavior after being caught; increase likelihood of conviction; decrease motivation to hire lawyers; reduce “disgust” with the honor system. All of these effects would greatly strengthen the honor system and the community of trust at UVA.