Maintaining Interaction Within a Closed Awareness Context

The Case of Students and Exams

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Wherever rules exist – in examinations, in love relationships, or in games of chance – people will be tempted to cheat and invent ways to escape detection. The goal is to “pass” and be viewed as normal and respectable despite engaging in activities others consider discrediting. Success depends upon keeping the “discredible” (i.e., not known or immediately perceptible) in its “closed awareness context” so it does not result in the “discredited” (i.e., evident on the spot). Failure results in being assigned a stigmatized identity based on “blemishes of character” and being reduced in the minds of others from “whole and usual” to “tainted and discounted” (Goffman 1963:2-3). Cheaters, in this case, university students, depend in great measure on their ability to manage the “front stage” as the part of their performance that defines the situation for others. It includes control over (1) the setting – would be cheaters usually consider seats at the back of the room as the most appropriate locale for their activities and avoid sitting at the front if possible; (2) appearance – for example, wearing long sleeves to conceal “cheat notes” written on their arms; and (3) manner – for example, avoiding overly nervous gestures and mannerisms. Backstage is the place where “…the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman 1959:112). Would-be cheaters attempt to give an impression of being ideal, hard-working, and conforming test-takers but it is otherwise.

The focus of this work is on: (1) strategies employed by cheaters during exams to ensure that their activities remain undetected (i.e., within a closed awareness context) and (2) on routes of involvement to rule breaking behavior (i.e., instrumentalism, seekership, recruitment, and closure (Prus and Grills 2003). In this process we examine how cheaters engage in “fabrications” by intentionally managing their activities so that “authority figures” will be induced to have a false belief about what is going on (Goffman 1974). A key point about cheating is that it is an “exploitative fabrication”, that is engaged in for the benefit of the fabricator and
inimical to the interests of society at large. Overall, Brent and Atkinson (2011:641) argue that student cheaters decrease the “validity of assessments” diminish “equity in grading”, and erode “public confidence in universities”. Thus, cheating on university exams needs to be considered as a “public issue” rather than as simply an individual “private trouble” (Mills 1959).

Becker (1963) says that once we recognize a distinction between being labeled a deviant (i.e., acquiring a stigmatized identity) and what people actually do (i.e., break rules or uphold them) then four theoretical possibilities emerge: (1) an actor might break a rule and be labeled; (2) an actor might break a rule but escape detection and labeling; (3) an actor might break no rule but be wrongfully labeled; or (4) an actor might break no rule and not be labeled.

In an earlier work (Albas and Albas 1993) we focused on cell 3 – actors who broke no rules but might be wrongfully labeled. For example, students not cheating in an exam but aware of the painful results of being labeled, go to elaborate lengths to ensure that they are not suspected. For example, if they “drop a pencil or some other object and have to stoop to pick it up they keep their eyes on the proctor rather than on the object they are trying to pick up in much the same way as touch typists keep their eyes on the copy rather than on the keys” (Albas and Albas 1993:456) to avoid the possibility of being seen to be trying to catch a glimpse of something advantageous on another’s paper. In this “suspicion awareness context” (Glazer and Strauss 1981) students use impression management ploys we term “disclaimer mannerisms” (Albas and Albas 1993) to help guarantee that the awareness context between the power figure (i.e., proctor) and themselves is open and transparent. In Goffman’s (1974:141) words, “helping nature help itself”.

The focus of this paper is on cell 2 where students who do cheat employ whatever impression management techniques they can to hide that fact and so attempt to keep interaction within a “closed awareness context”.

Prus and Grills (2003) assert that there are four ways or routes to become involved in rule-breaking (i.e., cheating) activities: (1) instrumentalism – for students, cheating is viewed as a means to escape hours of tedious study and still maintain or enhance test scores; (ii) closure – cheating is viewed as a “quick fix” to cope with a pressing problem; (iii) seekership – cheating is viewed as a “thrill” that comes with courting danger; and (iv) recruitment – students encourage or are encouraged by others to cheat. For example, an instrumentally oriented student in a desperate state (i.e., closure) whispered to the person seated immediately ahead of him requesting help (i.e., recruitment) with a question. The target pretended not to hear. A second, louder request was responded to favorably by the student sitting on his immediate right (i.e., inadvertent recruitment). When asked why she responded, she answered “I love to help others, especially when they are in