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The Unofficial Acceptance of Cheating

Stephen Glass fabricated 36 of his 41 stories published in *The New Republic*. Frank Abagnale Jr. accumulated a total of \$2.5 million dollars from fraudulent cashed checks. Jordan Belfort swindled over \$1 billion from stock buyers. Just last month, 34 U.S. Air Force missile launch officers were released for cheating on monthly missile tests. Deception has become a common practice in today's world. From personal relationships to education to business to government operations, it has permeated essentially all levels of life. This is because our new, fast-paced world is success-driven, and regardless of harm to any general group or single individual, con men and the like have only one goal: reward. Materialism and the desire for self-satisfaction have created a flawed American dream and re-written the story of rags to riches using deception as the vehicle for prosperity. For a variety of reasons, dishonest conduct has become quietly ingrained in society. Today consequences are worth the risk because our society has made it so that cheating and conning, successfully executed or not, is a quick sure way to reap benefits, and this behavior is not only condoned, but celebrated.

In understanding the basis of fraudulent or dishonest intent, psychological gratification emerges as a prominent motivator. Behavioral psychology tells us that society is exceedingly disapproving of those who cheat on established rules and laws for his or her own personal advantage. Research done in over 120 countries has shown that this is due to an innate disposition in human beings to not intend harm on others (Hutton). However, due to a variety of

societal and cultural shifts, there has been a disintegration of community and a more self-promotional culture has taken over. Based on the belief that we are programmed to co-operate, psychology studies have concluded that unethical behavioral decisions are primarily cognitive and calculated and should therefore elicit feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety; however, this does not explain the pervasiveness of immoral conduct. In an article published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* titled “The Cheater’s High: The Unexpected Affective Benefits of Unethical Behavior,” scholars challenge the assumed negative affect associated with dishonesty and demonstrate across six studies that acting unethically more often than not elicits self-satisfying feelings. The study explains that more recent analysis in moral psychology has disproved the previously held belief instead showing that, due to the societal shift, ethical decisions are self-relevant and informed by emotions (Ruedy, Moore, Gino and Schweitzer, 533). In the experiments, individuals experienced more positive affect after cheating even though they predicted that they would experience increased levels of guilt and negative affect. According to the study, this inconsistency between people’s predictions and actions is due to a difference between an individual’s psychological “want” and “should” selves. A person’s “should” self guides predictions; people know what they “should” feel according to societal moral expectations and that defines long term goals and self-expectations. A person’s “want” self guides actions; people in this state are more tempted to engage in behavior that will result in an immediate reward, even if those short term benefits do not reflect a person’s long term goals. Because a person’s “should” self is the psychological self that informs predictions, people overestimate their future ethicality. People continue to lie and cheat because those immediate rewards are more compelling than the potential costs he or she might incur later (Ruedy, Moore, Gino and Schweitzer, 534).

For example, Stephen Glass, a once rising reporter for *The New Republic*, wrote dozens of fabricated articles knowing full well how wrong his actions were. After his lies were discovered, In an article for *60 Minutes* Glass explained that “[he] loved the electricity of people liking [his] stories. [He] loved going to story conference meetings and telling people what [his] story was going to be, and seeing the room excited. [He] wanted every story to be a home run...and [he] said to himself every time these stories ran, ‘You must stop. You must stop.’ But [he] didn’t” (Leung). Glass clearly felt a strong pull to engage in behavior that conferred an immediate reward, despite his behavior not being consistent with his ideals and long-term goals as a journalist. His stories were always accompanied by extensive fake evidence to support his lies and deceive his editors because he wanted the perfect story and the praise that followed. Those prompt benefits blinded him to the future hatred and disapproval he would come to face. His focus was only on those short-term benefits and the positive events, along with the success of convincing everyone of his lies, all of which triggered a positive effect, allowing him to draw psychological benefits from his continuing unethical behavior. His actions clearly demonstrate an individual's psychological craving for self reward and how positive affect can be a sole trigger in the perpetuation of con.

Much of an individual's social esteem today is based on recognition. The discovery of Glass's lies earned him a place in the popular lexicon, a six figure advance on a novel he wrote based on his experiences, and a well-received feature film. Whether successful or not, intricate crimes or clever trickery often receive excessive media attention which also encourages cheating and conning as a societally accepted and even glorified profession. In that vein, “‘infamy’ as well as ‘fame’, and ‘vice’ as well as ‘virtue’, can and do function as the basis upon which mediated claims to social recognition are articulated. In this dynamic, dramatic deviation from

agreed social norms (including the breach of those prohibitions set down in law) serve as the basis of claims for esteem and recognition” (Yar 251). This phenomenon is what is called “celebrated criminality,” or the exploitation of criminality by mass media to sell to a “fascinated public the spectacle of transgression,” of which there is no shortage (251).

For instance, Frank William Abagnale Jr. is one of the world’s most notorious forgers. At just 16 years old, Frank began his forgery by writing bad checks and overdrawing his account by thousands of dollars. Knowing that the police would eventually catch on, he made plans to move away and change his name. Soon, he came to the conclusion that if he assumed a more impressive personality bank tellers would be less suspicious of him. Using his experience watching his fathers white-collar business dealings, he was able to manipulate his way to obtain a Pan American Airlines pilot’s uniform, as well as forge a Pan Am ID card, and FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) license under the alias of Frank Williams. He went to multiple banks and opened accounts while wearing his pilot’s uniform and it wasn’t long until his preferred method of travel became deadheading--flying free of charge by impersonating an off-duty pilot. Frank toured around the world this way and opened accounts in every state and 26 countries accumulating a total of \$2.5 million dollars from fraudulent cashed checks throughout his lifetime. Eventually tiring of his pilot lifestyle, he continued his charades by posing as different professions, including a pediatric doctor, attorney, professor and Hollywood screenwriter (Abagnale and Redding). After his eventual capture, he was tortured in French and Swedish prisons before finally being returned to the U.S., where he served 5 years and was then released on probationary terms that required him to lecture the FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies on his methods. His life and criminal adventures have received much fame and glorification in the form of best-selling memoirs, highly-acclaimed movies and even a Tony

award-winning Broadway musical.

The attention and celebration of his criminal actions in media have created a new motivation for the public to accomplish similar offenses. In 2001, commercial banks' check fraud losses amounted to \$4.3 billion. By 2003, following the release of *Catch Me If You Can*, the movie chronicling Abagnale's various exploits, that number had increased by 28% and has been on the rise ever since (National White Collar Crime Center). In 2012, a 17-year-old Australian boy was caught impersonating doctors in local hospitals in the city of Adelaide (Pearlman). Last year, a 61-year-old French man was caught impersonating an Air France pilot in order to deadhead a US Airways flight from Philadelphia to Florida (FoxNews.com). According to the article "Crime, media and the will-to-representation: Reconsidering relationships in the new media age" by Majid Yar, media scholars have noted that the public tends to recognize only that criminality is celebrated, as with Frank Jr.'s story, not that his actions harmed many and put him in jail. In fact, his extravagant consequences awarded him even more attention because what the public does perceive is that in order to gain recognition in a way that the media will grant outrageous attention, one must stand out. Therefore people feel encouraged to boast about attempts to go against social norms in delinquent ways because those actions are less common.

Adding to the temptation to con, people commonly convince themselves that the most successful people must have cheated to gain their successes. Today, "what economists call a 'tournament market' exists: the first to make an extraordinary finding reaps a hugely disproportionate share of the fame and future grants" (Hanson). This "winner takes all" culture breeds cheating. Tempted by rewards, many will go to extremes to attain that "winner" status, and those that have already accomplished that will do whatever it takes to stay there. A recent

example of this is the Air Force Reserve Officer's Missile test cheating scandal. Just last month, it was discovered that many of the officers responsible for the nation's nuclear-tipped missiles consistently cheated on tri-monthly tests. The jobs of these men is essentially waiting for launch order from the president of the United States, and if it comes, launching the missiles in under a minute. Every part of the missileers jobs is done by an exact checklist that must be followed for everything -- each time a nuke is launched, a maintenance crew is is let into a missile silo, or even when they get a lunch break. These tests are to ensure that each officer knows everything on those checklists. In order to be in charge of the weapons, a missileer has to score higher than a 90 percent each time. However, what missileer officers quickly became aware of was that the scores of the tests were being used to determine promotions and leadership positions. A missileer officer in an article for NPR said that "it was pretty obvious that if you wanted to succeed, you wanted to move up, you had to meet that near perfection, you know — 100 percent average, as close as you possibly could to that, or you wouldn't get promoted" (Brumfiel). This constant demand for perfection among the officers fostered a culture of cheating. The cheating became a necessity with missileers insisting that they "did so to survive." These kinds of situations result in cheating from the most qualified. Every month, the missileer officers are also tested in simulations, making it impossible to cheat, and all still pass with high markings. This shows that they do know how to do their jobs well, and it really is the standard of perfection and the associated rewards driving them to continue their scams.

It is clear that we have become an ends over means society. The elevation of cheating to the status of high regard and success indicates a shift in the moral standards of our culture. Though the examples used are of high-profile cases, small scale fibbing happens by 98% of all people who believe that they are still complying with their long term morality goals if their

cheating does not blatantly cause harm to others (Ariely). However, the implications of these new standards are detrimental to our society. While cheating can bring about many rewards in multiple forms, the harm that follows far outstrips any apparent gains. Due to a self-centeredness, these harms fail to be so obvious. Stephen Glass harmed the millions of readers of his articles who took his words for truth and disgraced the names of his honest and unsuspecting colleagues. Frank Abagnale not only stole millions of dollars from our nation and other countries, but nearly crashed a plane while impersonating a pilot and almost killed a young boy while impersonating a doctor. Had the missile officers not actually known the procedures in their checklists and mis-fired a missile...the consequences hardly bear mention. The victims in these situations are overlooked by the perpetrators of these crimes in favor of the cheaters' immediate psychological benefits and further overshadowed by media attention given to the criminals. Essentially, the disregard for the damage wrought lends to an unofficial acceptance of cheating in today's culture.

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