

A Perception of Robert King Merton's Theory of "Gap between Goals Approved and Means Limited" in the Explanation of Examination Malpractices in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical orientations of Robert King Merton in fundamentally giving explanation to the re-occurring incidents of examination malpractices in the Nigerian educational system. It presents the major characteristics of the theory and explanations are advanced as to what extent this theory gives meaning to the phenomenon. The weaknesses of the theory are stated while areas of its strengths are alluded to. Suggestions based on the strengths of the theory are made to stem the tide of the occurrences of examination malpractice in the Nigerian educational system. The suggestions are based on the idea that specific methods of achieving successes in society should be accorded to all members regardless of their social positions. Specifically, the Nigerian school system should articulate the position for a differing school curriculum structure to provide success opportunities for all individuals in school.

Introduction

In whatever ways that examination malpractice is perpetrated, the individual who engages in it ends up acquiring less of the expected content of what he/she is examined. Thus, the value of the certificates being awarded to successful candidates becomes worthless while the idea of producing knowledgeable men and women of appropriate characters is elusive. The menace of examination malpractice according to Jacob and Lar (2001) makes nonsense of the quality expectation of the educational system. It negates and impinges against the country's scientific and technological advancement efforts. Jacob and Lar (2001) agree that if the menace progresses, most claims to expert technical knowledge may be no more than fake.

The situation of examination malpractice makes nonsense of educational qualifications and discredit selection processes of certificated candidates for appointments into positions of responsibilities for the development of society. With the complexity and sophistication by which students engage in examination malpractice, the end result is that the entire nation may suffer where its destiny is placed in the hands of "half-baked" individuals with low

mental abilities and of no conscience. Anaba (2001) says that a system of fraud characterized with examination malpractice can only produce corrupt and fraudulent leaders and citizens who do very little to achieve progress in any social system. They slow down progress and the development process of the nation and the protagonists contribute to the malaise in the country, which include the cankerworm of indiscipline.

Based on these, societies have formulated policies and mapped out strategies to remedy the rise in the incidents of examination malpractice in the school system. This work thus, is an attempt to add to the pool of ideas for the remediation of the problem.

Major Features of Robert King Merton's Theory of "Gap Between Goals Approved and Means Limited"

Robert King Merton, a distinguished American sociologist maintained that in all illustrations, too much emphasis is placed on goals and not enough on achieving them legitimately. That one of society's main functions is to provide a basis for normal behaviour and when it fails to do so "cultural chaos or anomie" ensues. This thinking led Merton to take Emile Durkheim's classic concept of anomie and adopted it to the explanation of deviance. His starting point was the insight which recognized that, if a set of socially approved goals were to be effectively upheld by members of society, then those members ought to have available to them effective socially approved means of attaining those goals (Pfohel, 1994).

Success in school means the acquisition of basic societal skills, competence and knowledge by the learner where behavioural change is experienced. These successes are supposedly gained by hardwork which connote educational achievements. Yet, for one thing, some individual members of society or groups despite hard work will be held back by social, economic and status deprivations. Howard (1973), in effect stated that, there is unequal opportunity for educational and occupational achievements for members of society. Thus, in the gap between goals approved for all and means limited to some lies a source of deviant behaviour (Perdue 1986). Merton made the point that, deviant behaviour will occur on a large scale when a society holds out, above everything else, certain common success goals for the population at large, while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved means of reaching those goals for a considerable part of the population.

The thrust of this theory lies in how the members of society adapt to this discrepancy between goals and means. According to Mckee (1981), Merton said, members of society adapt to this discrepancy in any of the four listed forms:

- i. Ritualism: a situation of giving up on the goals while still going through the means. The individual still conforms to the

- prescribed patterns of behaviour even though no longer expecting to be successful.
- ii. Innovation: this is the opposite of ritualism where the individual strongly adheres to the goals of personal success while new illegitimate means of success are employed. This situation generates a wide range of illegal activities by which people seek success and recognition. The individuals are conformists in terms of the major value of success but are deviants only in the manner of attaining success.
 - iii. Retreatism: this produces the "true aliens", who give up on both goals and means. They are in society but not of it. These are the individuals who had first strongly used the means effectively to achieve the goals. This may be for lack of opportunity due to some deprivations or intense personal competition with others.
 - iv. Rebellion: this takes the form of renouncing the established goals and the social structure that supports it and seeking instead to create a social structure in which new goals and means are possible. This is some what revolutionary in philosophy.

Robert King Merton's (1969) Typology modes of Individual Adaptation

Mode	Institutionalized means (Hard work)	Societal goal (Achievement of success)
Conformity	+	+
Ritualism	+	-
Innovation	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	+	+
	-	-

Key:-
+ (plus) symbol indicates acceptance of either means or goal or both by the individual or members of society.
- (minus) symbol indicates rejection of either means or goal or both by the individual or members of society.
± (plus and minus) symbols indicate replacement with new goals and means by the individual or members of society.

Examination Malpractice as a Social Dysfunction

Some examinations are designed to aid in the selection of candidates for admission into some programmes of further studies, including promotion to a new class, or appointment into a job. This was the purpose of the earliest recorded instances of examination, and has not changed significantly (Zheng, 1990). Ojerinde (2001) says that the rationale behind such use of examination is that it is objective and unbiased in determining who qualifies and who does not. It presupposes that performance in such an examination is expected to be

a reliable and valid predictor of performance in the higher-level programme or job.

Examinations, especially public ones, are used for certification of candidates. It is often a declaration that such candidates have attained certain levels of competence. Such declarations help prospective employers to decide whether an applicant has attained a level of knowledge or skills necessary to perform effectively in their establishments. This is obviously necessary for institutional as well as overall societal development as skills and knowledge acquisition are impetus for human advancement. Performances in examinations are important in determining the relevant category of employees to be considered in societal establishments. This is particularly so, where the examination is competence-based with its application within the context of vocational and professional training. Carew and Tukur (2001) see competence – based examinations as relevant for our teachers, medical doctors, engineers, accountants and other professionals. The veracity of the use of examination in determining the personalities with relevant skills and knowledge to recruit for activities of societal development cannot be overemphasized.

The only worry is that the phenomenon of examination malpractice gives undue advantage to certain personalities who do not have the relevant skills and knowledge to perform certain developmental tasks. In the circumstance where such deception is manifested on a significant level, the expected societal development may be hampered. Very little progress can be achieved by personalities without appropriate skills and knowledge who find themselves in positions of responsibilities ought to be occupied by others. The major concern of this paper therefore is to demonstrate how the theory of “gap between goals approved and means limited” explains why some students cheat in examinations and how this can be remedied.

Ritualism and Examination Malpractice

Some individuals abandon the goal they once believed to be within their reach and no longer expect to be successful but still conform to the prescribed behaviour of being in school. They play by the rules of the school and have a daily safe routine. These individuals do not aspire for high success and are contented with their little success and limited mobility. They hardly indulge in examination malpractices.

However, they accept the lifestyle of hard work and yet not committed to the goal for high success. They do not have the disposition/drive to engage in examination malpractices since they have low aspirations but may remain in school. Their major feature is that of obtaining low grades until they are withdrawn for poor performances. Individuals in this category are the major source of

college drop-out. Though, they may not indulge in examination malpractice which is our major concern in this write-up, the likelihood to be lured into other forms of criminal activities remains high. Thus, they should be motivated to appreciate the societal values which the school teaches.

Innovation and Examination Malpractice

The innovators according to Merton are individuals who strongly adhere to the source of personal success. The individuals adopt new illegitimate means of achieving these success. They are conformists in terms of the major value of success but are deviants in how they get about obtaining success.

The innovators have high tendency to engage in examination malpractice since they believe in the goals prescribed by society. They resort to illegitimate means of obtaining success since the legitimate means are not available to them to achieve the much cherished societal goals. Nweze (1998) reported poor state of physical facilities particularly in government-owned schools. These schools according to him are usually highly populated especially those located in urban centres resulting in overstretched facilities.

The students are exposed to harsh conditions of learning while basic teaching and learning equipment are lacking. This position was buttressed by Nwamaradi (1999) who stated that examination malpractice is a function of ineffective teaching and learning, resulting largely from lack of teaching facilities, adequate classrooms and laboratories. These present a scenario which merton in Stark (1987) described as a social structure luring individuals to engage in examination malpractice since they were not exposed to adequate knowledge to enable them achieve a personal success. Examination malpractice which is a deviant behaviour is thus rooted in the social structure of society and not in the attribute of persons who engage in it.

Nweze (1998) stated that most teachers are poorly remunerated and identified with severe poverty and want due to limited wages and poor incentives. He reiterated that, they usually abandon their teaching responsibilities in pursuit of more economic return activities outside the school. Attendance to class is irregular and rarely do they cover the syllabus before examinations.

The students in this category who adhere to the social goals of society and have high aspirations for success but experience these circumstances may resort to illegitimate means of achieving these goals of passing examinations for which they were ill-prepared for. These students aspire to high social positions in society which school examinations are meant to help enhance. This explanation however excludes those students who are well-prepared by apparently well-motivated teachers and exposed to relatively well maintained school

social structure of the elitist type but engage in examination malpractice. These are isolated cases where students of well-managed private and elitist schools also indulge in examination malpractice. These cases are excluded from the applications given by this theory.

The Nigerian school system and its learning environment has come under severe pressure due to large school enrolments especially in urban centres. Funding has also been problematic such that supply of school equipment and infrastructure have been grossly affected. Nweze (1998) observed that the above mentioned have collectively rendered our schools porous and susceptible to all forms of examination malpractices and cheating. This adds credence to the argument of Merton (1968) that deviant behaviours such as examination malpractices are only rooted in social structure of society and not in the personality of persons who actually engage in it. Students therefore reject the correct examination procedures as socially legitimate means of success in schools or of social mobility and resort to the illegal means of malpractice and cheating since the society limits them from benefiting from the rich experiences of the school.

The poor value orientations of society have also been partly responsible for the persistence of examination malpractice in our schools. Most young individuals in schools have imbibed the wrong attributes of not relying on hard work, honesty and diligence in achieving success in life. They rely on "short cuts" and illegitimate means of achieving success. Unfortunately, the society does little to redress this situation and so many young individuals have advanced in sophistication in using illegal means to achieve success in life.

Retreatism and Examination Malpractice

Merton's (1968) typology on retreatism produces the "true aliens". The individuals in this group have initially strongly internalized the goals and means but became unable to use the means effectively to achieve the goals. These students were admitted in schools as they had perceived school to be of high value for social mobility but failed to adjust to the procedure of schooling to achieve success. They may have experienced some lack of opportunities because of certain deprivations of family background or of intense competitions with others. These individuals then retreat or give up on both the social goals and means. They are thus, unlikely to cheat or engage in examination malpractices and may drop-out of school and resort to other means of survival. Merton (1968) opined that they may resort to crime. Some of them may engage in campus cult activities and other forms of deviant behaviours to cover up for their inadequacies. Campus cult groups usually find it relatively easy to lure retreatists into their folds since they have given up on both social goals and means in order to realign with some ventures for the purpose of self-recognition.

Rebellion and Examination Malpractice

This explains the behaviour of individuals who may have been retreatists but now renounce or reject the established goals and even the social structure that prescribes and supports the goals. These are reformists who desire a new social structure that will bring new goals and new means of achieving them. They are over-burdened with the social structure where the means may have been inaccessible to them. Schooling as a means for social mobility is questioned. To these individuals, examination malpractice is not even the true remedy to their problem.

The goals of the school and procedures should be re-examined in order to accommodate the interest and abilities of all members of society. These can provide opportunities for all members of society who have different social characteristics.

Weaknesses of the Theory in the Explanation of Examination Malpractices

With the characteristics of the theory in giving explanations to the phenomenon of examination malpractice the following are perceived weaknesses:

1. This theory does not explain the many incidents of examination malpractice by individuals who experience relatively conducive environments for learning. The social structure does not significantly work against some individuals in private or elitist schools who also experience rich and adequate environments at home, yet indulge in examination malpractice
2. There are many individuals who experience extreme deprivations in the social structure. The social structure predisposes them to the tendencies to be deviants in school by indulging in examination malpractice or cheating. Instead they adhere to both social goals and means. They neither rebel nor retreat but work hard to achieve successes in school. This appears to explain the many situations of individuals who have defiled the harsh home and school environments to work hard and achieve success in schools.

Remedying Examination Malpractices using the ideas of Robert King Merton.

Based on the strengths of Robert King Merton's theory, the following suggestions are made to stem the tide of examination malpractices:

1. According to Merton (1969) the social system restricts some individual members from achieving the accepted goals of society. It shows that individuals in school have varying opportunities to learn and since equity cannot be afforded to all individuals in school to achieve success, it is suggested that, the

school curricular structure be differed in order to create liberalism for alternatives to the different individuals in school. The individuals can thus learn at their pace and ability. Different curricular structures will therefore be available and learners will adopt whichever that suits their social characteristics.

2. Since the theory perceives the society as closing access to the approved means of achieving goals for a considerable population of society, which creates condition for examination malpractice, government policies and statements on education should open up opportunities for all categories of learners in schools to excel. All decisions pertaining compulsory subjects, courses and core-courses, which restrict some individuals from excelling should be critically re-examined. What the individuals should learn must coincide with their interest, ability and competence. Where learners experience frustrations in learning, the tendency to resort to cheating becomes quite high.

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