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When False Representations Ring True (and When They Don't)

IN APRIL 2007, MARILEE JONES RESIGNED AS MIT'S DEAN OF ADMISSIONS after word reached the administration that she had fabricated part of her resume 28 years earlier (Lewin, 2007: A1). When she first applied for a job at MIT in 1979, Jones had claimed to have earned degrees from three colleges in upstate New York. Yet, there was no record of her having earned a degree from any of the institutions she named. The revelation came as a shock to the MIT community and to those who were familiar with her work as dean of admissions. During the 10 years since she had assumed the position, Jones had tried to discourage parents and students from embellishing their resumes in an effort to appear more attractive to colleges. In her 2006 book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*, Jones urges students to live with integrity and avoid the temptation to cheat. Her message resonated with parents, students, and college admissions administrators and contributed to her popularity in the MIT community.

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Jones's resignation coincided with a course that one of this article's authors cotaught in 2007 at a selective liberal arts college. The course, entitled "Meaningful Work in a Meaningful Life," encouraged students to reflect on their approach to work, including critical issues they will likely encounter and difficult decisions they might have to make. The course aimed to provide students with a "toolkit" of concepts that would be useful as they embarked on a life of meaningful work. At the time, we asked the students participating in this course what they thought of Jones's deception. Most of the students asserted that Jones's fabricated resume did not warrant her resignation. They reasoned that she had done exemplary work while serving as the dean of admissions, and she should not have been punished for an act that has become commonplace. When pressed to explain their perspective, our students argued that everyone misrepresents themselves to a certain extent on their resumes. We had not anticipated this response, and we were disturbed to hear the students' casual defense of Jones's actions. Their attitude did not reflect awareness or concern that the falsification of one's credentials is grounds for immediate dismissal at any place of employment, nor were they struck by Jones's clear, if poignant, hypocrisy.

The disjunction between our own interpretation of the Jones story and that of our students heightened our interest in young people's attitudes toward self-fabrication. We began by asking ourselves whether all self-fabrications are necessarily wrong. According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgic analysis of social life, self-fabrications are normative, not exceptional. We are all putting on a performance to some extent. However, Goffman distinguished between true and false performances, arguing that a true performance is one that is authorized whereas a false performance is not. Since the self is a "collaborative manufacture" between performer and audience, authorization must be a collective act. Individuals cannot be the sole arbiters of their self-performances. It becomes necessary, then, for interacting individuals to find consensus regarding the parameters of authorization. In this paper we seek to identify these parameters through an examination of the causes and consequences of young people's various self-fabrications. In so doing

we explore the individual and societal factors that both compel and sanction these fabrications. We argue that there are circumstances under which self-fabrications may have beneficial effects and are, thus, authorized representations of the self. In contrast, a false, or unauthorized self-representation is one that results in harm to the self, to others, and to society.

THE HUMAN NATURE OF SELF-FABRICATIONS

Goffman (1959) explained that in any given social situation we do not have access to all of the facts, in part because we cannot know another person's innermost thoughts and feelings. We must therefore rely on representations of reality rather than on the reality itself. As man-made substitutes of reality, representations are open to manipulation. Taking a dramaturgic perspective, Goffman argued that we stage our self-performances in order to manage the impressions that others form of us. He described the self as a product, not a cause, of the scene that a performer creates. The self is the character that the performer plays. It arises as the performance is recognized by the audience. Thus, the self does not exist within the individual. It is, rather, a "collaborative manufacture" between performer and audience. Goffman extended his theater metaphor further by distinguishing between the "front region" and the "back region" of a self-performance. The performance takes place in the front region and the audience interprets its meaning. The performer works in the back region to construct the scene, drawing on the tools at his or her disposal to produce the desired impression.

The dramatic aspect of one's self-presentation may be accentuated during adolescence. Erikson (1968) described this stage of the life cycle as a period of identity development. Individuals experience a psychological "crisis" as they begin to reexamine their childhood identifications and contemplate their role in the broader society. During this period, individuals develop the ability to think abstractly, a skill that enables them to entertain and hold onto multiple versions of themselves and to begin developing a self-theory. Harter (1999) notes that this cognitive capacity emerges at a time in individuals' lives

when they face an increasing number of potential roles as their social contexts multiply and expand. The transition from middle school to high school tends to bring with it greater autonomy from parents, the experience of multiple teachers and classmates throughout the day, and new and diverse extracurricular options. According to Harter, individuals assume different roles in different situations in order to adapt to the situation at hand.

To resolve the adolescent identity crisis, Erikson (1968) argued that many individuals require a psychosocial moratorium, or a “time out,” during which they are free to explore alternate roles and values and evaluate how other people receive them. In this space, consequences may be suspended as adolescents rework and integrate their childhood identifications into an identity that is situated in and recognized by the broader society. Identity experimentation is not simply an expected attribute of the adolescent period; it is a necessary and healthy part of individuals’ psychosocial development. Building on Erikson’s work, Marcia (1988) elaborated on the centrality of exploration in the identity formation process. He warns that without such exploration, adolescents may experience one of two forms of identity confusion. Either they commit to a rigid and narrowly defined identity without exploring other options; or, they refrain from exploration and commitment altogether and maintain a diffuse identity that may be crippling.

In the contemporary United States, it may well have become more difficult for middle-class adolescents to carry out identity exploration (Turkle, 1999). Their lives are overly scheduled with the academic work and extracurricular activities they need to gain acceptance to college. They are strictly monitored by the adults in their lives, who fear for their safety in this age of “stranger danger” (boyd, 2007). Even if they do manage to escape adult supervision, boyd notes that young people are often regarded as menaces and banned from many public spaces such as shopping malls. Moreover, their recreational activities can have weighty consequences such as the danger of contracting a sexually transmitted disease through unprotected sex or getting into accidents through reckless driving (Turkle, 1999). In this atmosphere,

it is perhaps unsurprising that young people tend not to spend time exploring their identities. Indeed, Arnett (2004) goes so far as to argue that the identity exploration phase may have shifted to emerging adulthood (that is, the college years).

THE BENEFITS OF SELF-FABRICATIONS

One space in the twenty-first century United States does seem to provide opportunities to adolescents for identity exploration: online activity. As Turkle (1999) notes, the affordances of digital technology make it easy and appealing to engage in identity experimentation. Unlike offline spaces, where one is constrained by physical characteristics such as age, height, race, and sex, online spaces give individuals virtually complete control over their self-presentation. Thus, the way in which adolescents engage in online identity experimentation is limited only by their software program and technological skill. With online virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, and *City of Heroes*, players create avatars, graphical representations of their online persona, that might (and quite often) bear little resemblance to their offline appearance. A 16-year-old girl can become an ancient wizard with God-like powers; a boy with cerebral palsy can become a superhero capable of flight. Avatars are used in other online spaces as well, such as social network sites, online chat forums, blogs, and instant messaging. People go to sites like Meez and WeeWorld to create their avatars and attach them to different online environments. Some people attach a single avatar to multiple online spaces, whereas others choose to create different avatars for different spaces.

There are many ways to engage in identity experimentation online besides the construction of an avatar. One study looked at how Dutch youth ages 9 to 18 portrayed themselves when using text-based instant messaging to chat with others online (Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter, 2005). Of the 600 respondents, 50 percent said they experimented with their identity at least sometimes while online. The most common forms of identity experimentation included pretending to be an older person, an offline acquaintance, a more flirtatious person, or an

elaborated fantasy person. Stern's interviews (2007) with young authors of personal websites and blogs revealed the deliberateness with which these young content creators chose to present themselves online. One girl who wanted to project a counterculture, antiestablishment image on her personal website made careful decisions about what music to list on her site. She said that she omitted songs and groups that she enjoyed but did not fit the image of herself she was trying to convey to her online audience. Similarly, a blogger said that he showed only the "deep" parts of his personality on his blog because he wanted to come across as serious and introspective.

Once created, an online self-representation is easy to revise, update, or delete. Adolescents can therefore change the look and content of their blog, website, or social network profiles as frequently as they wish. They might upload new photos of themselves; reprogram the layout of their page with new colors and designs; or update their lists of favorite music, books, and television shows. Notably, the nature of the new digital media allows adolescents to undertake these multiple forms of identity experimentation simultaneously (Turkle, 1999).

Besides the ease with which individuals can manipulate their identities online, digital spaces boast several additional characteristics that make identity experimentation appealing and rewarding. First, the stakes are often perceived to be lower online than offline (Turkle, 1999). Due to the distance from one's audience and the absence of certain visual and auditory cues, it often feels safer to try out different versions of oneself and evaluate their reception by others (Valkenburg et al., 2005). Thus, an individual may feel more comfortable taking certain risks as a Night Elf in *World of Warcraft* than as a tenth-grade student in high school. Indeed, several of the young people that Stern (2007) interviewed said they found it easier in online spaces to confront aspects of their experiences that they had kept hidden offline, such as depression and sexual orientation. They explained that they were unsure how their family and friends would react. It felt safer to tell an unseen audience and gauge their response before attempting to speak face-to-face with their loved ones.

Additional benefits of identity play are illuminated by the example of Heather Lawver and her fictitious school newspaper, *The Daily Prophet* (Jenkins, 2006). At the age of 13, Heather started an online newspaper for the imaginary Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Writers for the newspaper assumed fictitious personas relating to the *Harry Potter* world. Typically, children created identities that combined elements of their offline selves with aspects of the *Harry Potter* characters. Often, these online personas revealed glimpses of the children's offline difficulties, such as illness or family conflict. Heather's staff of writers eventually grew into the hundreds. The stories they wrote were fanciful and covered the imagined goings on of the fictitious students at Hogwarts.

Heather encouraged her staff of writers to leave the trappings of offline life and enter deliberately into the imaginary world of *Harry Potter*. Jenkins (2006) argues that children and adolescents' participation in this world gave them the opportunity to express their creativity and grow as writers and individuals. Heather assumed a mentoring role and edited every piece herself. In this way, she helped the budding writers to develop their writing skills and discover their authorial voices. Many adults have expressed concern that young people are copying the work of others when they engage in fan fiction writing. Jenkins suggests instead that fan fiction can be viewed as a type of apprenticeship that frees individuals to practice an array of literary skills.

The children who participated in *The Daily Prophet* grew as individuals as well as writers. By writing each other into their fantasies, they experienced personal connections and validation that may have been lacking in their offline lives (Jenkins, 2006). The connections they forged with the *Harry Potter* characters also proved significant. For instance, many of the girls claimed an affiliation to the only central female character of the series, Hermione. Through this affiliation, Jenkins argues, they were able to play out their own "empowerment fantasies." Notably, virtually all of the characters created by the children possessed a special gift or talent. In this way, the writers for *The Daily Prophet* were able to explore their ideal, or "possible," selves (Markus

and Nurius, 1986). In short, role-playing provided these children with a means for understanding themselves in a deeper way.

Eventually, individuals must be able to connect their online and offline identities. Self-transformation through identity experimentation occurs when the various elements with which one is experimenting are integrated (Turkle, 1999). In late adolescence, individuals develop the cognitive ability to coordinate abstract representations, including representations of the self. This cognitive skill makes it possible for them to begin the process of integrating their multiple identities. Internet-based activities such as online journaling provide a space for adolescents to do this work. The young people that Stern (2007) interviewed described how they used their online journals to engage in self-reflection and receive feedback from their virtual audience. These adolescents observed how their audience responded to their identity experiments; made adjustments based on perceived discrepancies between their self-perception and others' perceptions of them; and tested out alternate versions of themselves for further feedback. With any luck, through this cycle of experimentation, feedback, and self-reflection, they were able to bring the multiple versions of themselves into alignment and form a coherent identity.

DANGERS TO THE SELF

While identity experimentation can promote healthy development, there are many instances when self-fabrications can prove harmful to the identity formation process. Widespread immersion in the Internet is a recent phenomenon, and it is not yet clear the extent to which online identity play helps or hinders the formation of a healthy sense of self (Buckingham, 2007). Turkle (1995) identifies at least two ways in which computer-mediated identity play can do harm to the self. Fragmentation arises when the different identities that one tries on remain uncoordinated. Turkle observes that "multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate" (1995: 258). Fragmentation is problematic because it prevents the formation of a coherent sense of self, the defining characteristic of a healthy identity (Erikson, 1968).

A *Frontline* documentary that aired on PBS in 2008 featured Jessica Hunter, a self-described outcast who had no friends at her high school and endured constant teasing from her classmates. Jessica went online and created a personal website, where she became the Goth model and artist “Autumn Edows” and eventually developed a cult following. Jessica said she loved the positive attention she received online, which contrasted sharply with her offline experience. Since she did not like herself offline, she explained, she enjoyed the feeling of being someone else online. Jessica’s transformation from a shy, awkward, and friendless high school student into the popular Goth artist and model Autumn Edows could be considered one example of a fragmented self. Jessica kept her online and offline personas separate and distinct from one another. Unlike the young people interviewed by Stern (2007), she did not attempt to bring the two versions of herself into alignment. As long as the gulf between Jessica Hunter and Autumn Edows remains, her sense of self is likely to remain fragmented and, ultimately, unsatisfying.

Turkle (1995) also distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” in relation to identity play. Using online activities to recast and work through one’s offline challenges can lead to growth and insight. In contrast, acting out involves “fruitless repetition” of ongoing conflicts across settings. Individuals who act out fail to reflect on and learn from past mistakes and their conflicts remain unresolved. The *New Yorker* magazine profiled a young woman whose story of online identity play illustrates this concept well (McGrath, 2006). Offline, Stevie Ryan was a 22-year-old aspiring actress in Los Angeles dating the actor Drake Bell; on YouTube she became Cynthia, or Little Loca, an 18-year-old Latina from East L.A. with a boyfriend named Raul. Ryan’s transformation from Stevie to Little Loca took about 15 minutes and involved the application of a fake mole on her cheek, a change of clothes and makeup, and the donning of a more assertive and accented style of speech. Ryan used her Internet persona to act out when she and her real-life boyfriend, Bell, broke up, replaying the conflict online as a dispute between Little Loca and Raul. Little Loca used her YouTube platform to rant against Raul, blaming him for the recent vandalism of her

car and accusing him of drug use. While the production of these videos may have been a cathartic exercise for Ryan, they seem more like a repetition of than a resolution to her offline problems. It is unclear how Little Loca's tirades against Raul helped Ryan to gain insight into her failed relationship with Drake Bell.

In addition to fragmentation and acting out, the creation of multiple selves is problematic when the selves one creates are inauthentic. As children move into adolescence their social contexts expand and they must find ways to adapt to the different situations in which they find themselves. They may alter aspects of their self-presentation in order to move more easily across their changing contexts. These alterations can be healthy and adaptive, provided they are done in a spirit of authenticity. Harter (1999) explains that inauthentic selves arise when individuals hide their true thoughts and feelings in order to gain the approval of others. The suppression of authentic parts of oneself is associated with a variety of negative consequences, including feelings of low self-worth, depressed affect, and a weakening of one's close relationships (Gilligan, 1996). Adolescents often expend a tremendous amount of energy promoting themselves online (Stern, 2007). They design their social network profiles, blogs, and websites in a way that will capture and hold the attention of their audience. In the process, they may keep out thoughts and feelings that do not fit with the image they are trying to convey online. To the extent that self-promotion becomes the central focus of attention, the selves adolescents portray online are likely to be inauthentic fabrications. In contrast to the healthy act of using online spaces to explore previously unexamined facets of one's identity, the deliberate suppression of parts of oneself undermines the identity formation process by preventing the construction of an integrated, holistic sense of self.

HARM TO OTHERS

The consequences of self-fabrications cross over into the realm of morality when harm is done to other people. In some cases, the manipulation of one's identity engenders feelings of betrayal among those on the receiving end. When viewers started to notice that Little Loca's mole changed

position from one video to the next and that her boyfriend Raul bore a striking resemblance to the actor Drake Bell, Ryan eventually admitted that Little Loca was a fabrication (McGrath, 2006). While many viewers had long suspected the ruse and continued to watch nonetheless, it is likely that others believed Little Loca to be a real person until the moment Ryan confessed. They might have felt deceived when they watched Ryan explain that Little Loca was nothing more than a product of her imagination. It is important to realize that individuals come to online spaces with different expectations and goals (James et al., 2008). Some people approach their online activities in a playful spirit. These people are unlikely to be surprised or disturbed to learn that the people with whom they interact online do not exist in the same form offline. Others, however, enter into online interactions with earnestness and expect others to do the same. When they find out that other users do not hold the same motivations and goals, they may feel disappointed and deceived.

Stevie Ryan had many models of staged performances to follow when she created the character of Little Loca. In the media, “reality” television shows employ diverse strategies to ensure that each episode includes sufficient drama, emotion, and suspense to attract viewers. For instance, the story editors of MTV’s *Laguna Beach*, a show aimed specifically at young people, used the popular technique of “Frankenbiting” to create a nonexistent love triangle among two girls and a boy (Poniewozik and McDowell, 2006). With Frankenbiting, story editors manufacture a particular relationship between two people by editing together footage taken in different contexts. Thus, a statement said about one person may be edited to make it seem as if it was said about another, thereby creating a relational dynamic that does not exist.

The public does not appear to be surprised by such tactics. In one survey, the majority of respondents said they expect reality shows to manipulate events in some way (Poniewozik and McDowell, 2006). Other surveys have shown that both adults and young people perceive mainstream news media to be biased (Kiesa et al., 2007; Turner, 2007). In particular, cable television networks such as CNN and Fox are thought to deliver the news with an ideological slant. One experiment showed

that viewers detected an ideological bias in television news stories that were assigned either a CNN or a Fox label, irrespective of the content of the story (Turner, 2007). These results were true whether the viewer was a self-described liberal, conservative, or moderate. Briefly stated, both the entertainment and news media provide powerful models of inventive representations of reality.

In addition to examples in the media, deception is also modeled closer to home by the adults in young people's everyday lives. The recent case of Megan Meier is an extreme example. At 13, Megan began a flirtation with a 16-year-old boy, Josh Evans, on the popular social network site MySpace (Maag, 2007). The flirtation continued for a month until Josh suddenly changed his attitude and started to tease and insult Megan. She committed suicide shortly after he wrote to her that the world would be better without her in it. Josh Evans turned out to be Lori Drew, a 47-year-old woman and mother of Megan's former friend. Drew created the persona of a 16-year-old boy to earn Megan's trust and find out what Megan thought about her daughter. While online deception rarely ends in death, Megan's story provides a potent example of the very real harm that self-fabrication can do to others.

Sometimes self-fabrications can harm other people by unfairly denying them certain opportunities. In the early part of this decade, our research team at the GoodWork Project (www.goodworkproject.org) interviewed several high school students who took part in the highly competitive Intel Science Talent Search. The interviews were part of a larger empirical investigation studying young people's approach to work. The rewards of the Intel competition are high and include money, status, social networks, and, in most cases, access to the nation's most prestigious universities. One of the young scientists we interviewed was Allison (a pseudonym), a high school senior who worked as a research apprentice in a university-based neurobiology lab. During her interview, Allison spoke strongly of the values that guided her scientific work. She believed that scientists should never fabricate their data or represent others' work as their own. Yet, when she sat down to write the report of her findings for the Intel judges, Allison

deliberately misrepresented the way in which she had conducted her experiment in order to win the judges' favor. She was named a semifinalist and won \$2,000 and a college scholarship. She was subsequently accepted at an Ivy League school, where she planned to pursue scientific research in molecular or cell biology. She hoped one day to teach at the graduate level. While Allison benefited personally from her decision to misrepresent the design of her experiment, her actions may have deprived another student from earning \$2,000 and a college scholarship. Also, if she continues to deceive in this fashion, she risks harming herself and others, while also undermining the calling of science. Here, again, a false representation "harmed" another individual.

Callahan describes similar examples in *The Cheating Culture* (2004), a book that explores the motivations behind Americans' growing comfort with cutting corners in order to get ahead. With respect to young people, Callahan relates the diverse ways that students at both public and private high schools misrepresent their work, including the use of the Internet to find and plagiarize term papers. Copy-paste functionality and the power of a Google search make it possible for students to "write" papers that lack any original sentences of their own. Callahan notes that parents are often complicit in students' fabrications. For instance, wealthy parents hire private college counselors to write (or at least heavily edit) their children's college essays; employ private tutors to do their children's homework; and ask psychiatrists to diagnose their children with a learning disability so they can take the SAT without time restrictions. Students who are given an academic boost by hired experts enjoy an unfair advantage over students who, through choice or necessity, do not receive such assistance. The help these students receive may secure them a place at a competitive college, but their success comes at the expense of other students.

THE ROLE OF MARKET FORCES IN PROMOTING SELF-FABRICATIONS

Callahan (2004) attributes students' willingness to cut corners in part to the intensely competitive atmosphere in which they are raised. Frank

and Cook (1995) were among the first to describe the “winner take all” society of the late twentieth century. It is a society distinguished historically by the extreme competition to succeed at all costs. The stakes are high because the difference between winning and losing is so large. Due to modern technology and market globalization, the best performers in any given field attract a wide audience. As a result, there is no audience for the competent, but slightly less-skilled, performers. Thus, winners are lavishly rewarded, losers receive little compensation, and a middle ground between these two extreme conditions has become rarer. Frank and Cook identified this disparity as the primary reason for the rising income gap, which has only grown in the twenty-first century.

In this competitive atmosphere, Brook argues that young professionals face the unfair choice of being “a sellout or a saint” (2007: 6). He notes that a generation ago the difference in salary between a lawyer and a teacher was not so great as to prevent the two professionals from owning homes and living in the same community. Today, corporate lawyers earn enough to buy large houses in gated communities, while a teacher’s salary makes it difficult to buy a house in many communities. Due to this state of affairs, young people who may have been attracted to teaching are looking instead to corporate America and vying for jobs as management consultants and investment bankers (Rimer, 2008). According to Brook, they are not necessarily aiming to strike it rich; rather, they are trying to avoid poverty.

The competition for a job in corporate America begins before college. Most of the leading management consultancy firms and investment banks hire exclusively from elite universities. Faced with unwieldy applicant pools, employers rely on heuristics such as the reputation of one’s school in order to reduce applicants to a manageable number. It thus becomes critical for young people to attend a top college if they hope to be considered for such a job when they graduate. And yet, with top colleges and universities in the United States accepting less than 10 to 20 percent of their applicants, it has never been more difficult to gain admittance to these institutions.

From CEO of a Fortune 500 company to high school junior sitting the SAT for the first time, everyone is feeling the pressure to succeed. Callahan notes that, “As the race for money and status has intensified, it has become more acceptable for individuals to act opportunistically and dishonestly to get ahead” (2004: 106). In other words, profitability, not morality, drives people’s decisions. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that so many students and their parents are willing to hire experts to write college essays and complete homework assignments if it means improving their chances of getting into a top college, with the dividends that accompany this status.

Surveys of college and high school students show that young people do, in fact, feel tremendous pressure to gain a competitive advantage over their peers. The college students surveyed across the United States by McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2001) said they often felt compelled to cheat in school because they are competing for a small number of desirable jobs. Since they see their peers around them cheating, they reason they must also cheat in order to remain competitive. The 2006 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth showed a similar trend among high school students. This national survey found that close to 60 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “In the real world, successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating.”

Young people’s focus on gaining a competitive advantage in the workplace is a relatively recent development. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s Survey of American Freshmen shows an illuminating shift in attitudes towards work and lifestyle (Pryor et al., 2007). This annual survey has tracked the attitudes, values, and goals of first-year college students across the United States since 1966. In 1966, 42.2 percent of the students surveyed said that “being very well off financially” is “very important” or “essential” to them. In 2006, this figure was 73.4 percent. In contrast, 85.8 percent of the students surveyed in 1967 said that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” is “very important” or “essential” to them, whereas only 46.3 percent of the students in 2006 said the same.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL ATTITUDES REGARDING MORALITY

Allison, the young high school scientist described earlier, not only felt immense pressure to misrepresent her experiment design in the Intel competition; she felt completely justified in doing so. Cultural attitudes regarding morality that are distinct to our time and society evidently contribute to young people's comfort with fabricated self-representations. In the United States today, a "culture of individualism" prevails in which the pursuit of the American Dream seems to be the mandate of every citizen (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1996; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). This cultural discourse attributes successes and failures to individual effort alone. The rich are rewarded for being more talented, harder working, and experienced than the poor. In our focus on the individual, we often fail to consider the economic and political forces that have contributed to disparities in wealth and well-being in the United States. Instead, we blame the poor for their plight and congratulate the rich for their inherent superiority or their well-earned success.

In its celebration of the individual, our culture is distinct from many others. Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997) describe the moral discourse of the United States as an "ethics of autonomy" that overshadows two alternative moral discourses: the "ethics of community" and the "ethics of divinity." The authors explain that an "ethics of autonomy" is commonly found in individualistic societies such as the United States. This moral discourse places value on individuals' free will to choose and be guided by their personal interests and preferences without interference from other individuals or institutions. Concepts such as individual harm, rights, and justice are central to this discourse.

According to Shweder et al. (1997), different cultures emphasize different moral discourses such that the ratio of the three moral goods varies across cultural traditions. An ethics of autonomy is present in rural India, but it is less salient than the ethics of community and divinity. For that society, the interests of the individual are typically

overshadowed by the interests of the community and the sacred order. In contrast, secular societies such as the United States possess a much different ratio of moral goods. Our free market society foregrounds the claims of the individual as it diminishes the authority of community and divinity.

The dominion of the individual has never been as far-reaching in American society as it is in the twenty-first century. Wolfe (2001) claims that we have been accumulating individual freedoms throughout the history of the United States—most recently our moral freedom. Wolfe notes that the right to own property and make and sell goods secured our economic liberty in the nineteenth century. Our political freedom was achieved in the twentieth century upon individuals' acquisition of the right to vote and run for office. According to Wolfe, cultural and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s ushered in the final freedom, the freedom to define for oneself the meaning of a virtuous life.

Wolfe's research team asked Americans what it means to lead a good and virtuous life, and probed as well the role that virtues such as honesty, loyalty, forgiveness, and self-discipline play in their daily actions and decisions (Wolfe, 2001). Respondents said they were guided primarily by subjective feelings regarding their own best interest and their desire to avoid harming others. They did not believe they needed to sacrifice their personal needs and desires in order to lead a virtuous life. Nor did they feel that others had any right to pass judgment on their morality or other prevailing community norms. Wolfe's subjects felt beholden to themselves rather than to the authority of tradition. Wolfe observes: "Americans approach the virtues gingerly. They recognize their importance, but since they are wary of treating moral principles as absolutes, they reinvent their meaning to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves" (2001: 223). Free to own property, buy and sell goods, vote, and hold office, Americans also feel free now to define for themselves what it means to be good and virtuous.

The manifestations of moral freedom in American society are numerous. Wolfe (2001) argues that moral freedom stretches the concept of individualism to such a degree that individuals focus almost

exclusively on their rights while overlooking their responsibilities. As people assume control over every aspect of their lives, they detach themselves from family, faith, and tradition. Thus, the ambition and competition that characterizes the way so many people approach their work and everyday lives. In this “culture of narcissism,” it may seem quite justifiable to present oneself in whatever manner will serve one’s best interests.

It appears that today’s young people have embraced the concept of moral freedom to a greater extent than any previous generation. Twenge (2006) labels the group of young people born after 1970 “Generation Me” and claims they are more self-centered than young people of earlier generations. Today’s youth are less likely to attend church, more likely to value self-love above love for others, and are highly focused on their appearance. Twenge attributes the self-focus of the “GenMe” group to the “self-esteem curriculum” that gained popularity in the 1970s. During this period, parents, teachers, and the broader society began to instill in children the belief that they are unique, special, and worthy individuals. This idea—that people are worthy for who they are rather than what they do and how they do it—has only gained in popularity since the 1970s. As a result, Twenge argues, young people today believe that they can be whatever they want to be and do whatever they want to do. In pursuing their goals, they are answerable first and foremost to themselves.

THE SOCIETAL EFFECTS OF SELF-FABRICATIONS

Ultimately, the prioritizing of self above all else is untenable in any society. As social beings, we are of necessity interconnected and dependent on each other for our well-being (Bellah et al., 1996). Indeed, economists and political scientists argue that a healthy economy and functioning democracy require the cooperation of individual citizens (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1995). Cooperation occurs when people trust each other to be open, honest, and true to their word. If individuals portray themselves in an inaccurate or misleading light, either to remain competitive in a market-driven society or because they feel

entitled to devise their own rules of morality, social trust will diminish over time. Without trust, people become cut off from one another and cooperation ceases, with negative consequences for social life and economic well-being. Putnam (1995) observes that cooperation among Americans has diminished in recent decades due to the fact that we are “bowling alone” rather than participating in bowling leagues and other voluntary associations of the sort French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville celebrated during his visit to America almost 200 years ago. Putnam attributes the parallel decline in democratic participation to this diminishment of civic life.

Jenkins (2006) suggests that online engagement has the potential to enhance democratic participation by encouraging cooperation among a wide variety of individuals. The young reporters for *The Daily Prophet* would not have found each other or created the community they did without the ability to transcend geographic constraints through the Internet. In a similar way, Stevie Ryan reached thousands of geographically dispersed viewers through her Little Loca videos on YouTube. Jenkins suggests that engagement in such “participatory cultures” serves as a starting point for engagement in participatory democracy more broadly. Online activities hold the potential, then, to revive the voluntary association model that de Tocqueville first described in the nineteenth century (Gardner, 2007b). And yet this potential is just that, a potential; it is by no means guaranteed. In fact, it may be particularly difficult to establish a cohesive, enduring “participatory culture” when anonymity, fluctuations in group membership, and unclear roles, responsibilities, and norms conspire to reduce feelings of connectedness and accountability among participants of an online community (James et al., 2008). Moreover, the focus on self-presentation, promotion, and validation that seems characteristic of many online activities may overshadow the participatory aspect of “participatory culture” and undermine the integrity of the community.

When individuals put themselves before others and represent themselves in a misleading way, they risk damaging the cohesion and smooth functioning of society by decreasing trust among its citizens.

In addition, there is a more abstract way in which self-fabrications can threaten a society. In any given society, people assume various roles, most notably the role of professional worker and citizen (Gardner, 2007a). The adoption of a particular role brings with it certain obligations and responsibilities. In the role of doctor, a person must strive to avoid harming any patient. In the role of journalist, a person must attempt to report the facts of an event in an unbiased and thorough manner. In the role of citizen, a person is expected to vote, pay taxes, and participate knowledgeably in civil society. If individuals place self-interest above the obligations of the roles they assume, they undermine the integrity of society. When an aspiring scientist like Allison misrepresented her experiment design in the Intel competition, she failed to uphold the core values embodied in the role of scientist. Perhaps she succumbed to the pressure of competition, and perhaps she felt justified to do so because the idea of moral freedom pervades today's society. Nevertheless, her behavior was unethical because she pursued her self-interest while undermining her responsibilities as a young scientist.

CONCLUSION

According to Wolfe (2001), the idea of moral freedom is here to stay. It is not a simple matter to repeal a freedom once it has been embraced by the majority of society. The challenge, Wolfe argues, is to strike a balance between the authority of tradition and the authority of the individual. As our discussion of young people's self-fabrications suggests, finding such balance entails considering the consequences of one's actions as they relate to the well-being of the self, others, and society. We—parents, educators, the media, and community leaders—face the task of promoting young people's awareness of the people and institutions that can be affected by their actions. Of course, this effort begins with our own actions. We must model responsible self-representations if we expect young people to exercise responsibility themselves.

Active intervention may well be warranted (Rimer, 2008). With our colleagues on the GoodWork Project, we have devised an educational curriculum that encourages young people to reflect on their

roles and responsibilities as they make decisions about the way to conduct their lives in various contexts, including school and work. The GoodWork toolkit comprises several ethical dilemmas that emerged during out interviews with aspiring and young professionals. Allison's story is included as an example of one aspiring professional's decision to postpone ethical considerations until she had "made it" in today's competitive, market-driven environment (Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan, and Gardner, 2004). The toolkit also includes a variety of activities and discussion prompts that educators can use to encourage their students to think critically about the dilemmas and make connections to their personal goals and values.

The toolkit is currently being piloted in a number of high schools and universities in the United States. We are also participating in several college courses, such as the one described at the beginning of this paper, on pursuing meaningful work, meaningful citizenship, and a meaningful life. Through these endeavors, we hope to refine an educational curriculum that encourages tomorrow's citizens and workers to pursue their goals in a way that not only benefits them personally, but also serves the interests of the broader society. An important part of our work involves developing in our students an appreciation for the difference between a self-fabrication that rings true and one that is, quite simply, false.

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