

Confessions and Reputations

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This thought piece brings together fragments of philosophy of science, moral philosophy/ethics, and critical theory in an attempt to elucidate the fundamental work that researchers, interested in the reputational integrity of co-operative/mutuals, ought to do.

The First Step, is Admitting It ...

The most troubling thing I have seen of late is rather usefully explained with reference to (and adaptation of) the thought experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat.¹ The analogy, involves:

- A cat (read: mutual society); which is trapped in
- A steel box (read: business model); with
- A potentially degradable radioactive substance (read: the landscape of trust law, contract law, law of tort);
- A Geiger counter (read: auditor/accountancy firm or lay auditor);
- A mechanism connecting the Geiger counter and a hammer, below (read: accountants/ auditors report);
- A hammer (read: public awareness);
- A vial of hydrocyanic acid (read: public opinion); and
- A scientist, located outside of the box (read: those with an interest in the co-operative movement/mutual societies).

If the radioactive substance degrades, even by a single atom, the Geiger counter detects that fact, a relay mechanism trips the hammer which breaks the vial of acid, that poisons the cat. Alternatively, the scientist can open the box (which trips the acid instead of the Geiger counter). But before any of this happens, if the Copenhagen Interpretation is to be believed, the cat is considered to be both alive and dead (known as a 'Superposition').

In the original story, the cat cannot directly interfere, with items in the box. However, in my example, let's say it can, or rather, the *society* can (carelessly trigger the wrath of public opinion, that is), by failing to maintain proper books and records, not paying attention to the detail of grant agreements and not complying with their accountant's requests for information.

The situation we, students of mutual societies, are in, is of that of the scientist: we don't want to open the box, but we are naturally curious about what is going on in there! If that cat had already tripped the vial, and we opened the box, our conscience would be clear, but if we prematurely opened the box, we would be responsible for the destruction of the cat's life. Nevertheless, there is something very (intellectually) unsatisfactory about the cat's sustained 'superposition', by which I really mean, I would rather have certainty about the financial/legal status of a given society.

This thought takes me neatly from quantum physics to moral philosophy and ethics, because precisely what I have come across is the phenomenon of cats (and indeed scientists) wishing to *maintain* the 'integrity of the superposition' ("Don't look in the box! Please don't!") even after indications that the vial probably cracked long ago.

Moral Mazes or Just ... Hazes?

Consider what happens when the sharp (financial) practices of a company are exposed. Some will leap to the business's defence ("There is a fiduciary duty to uphold shareholder value."); a few will look to academic discourse² to explain how behaviour might have evolved ("pressure, opportunity rationalisation"); but some will have none of it, preferring to define the knowing activities of that business as an example of "wilful blindness".

When it comes to a society, on the other hand, who say, is in receipt of grant funding, but who dips into 'restricted' reserves when they should not, how many co-operators comfortably leap to its defence or try to explain away its unacceptability?

Answer: more than I would like.

Consider a second (apparently true)³ scenario: a couple is confronted about their nursery-aged child's lack of urinary continence in the classroom. "We are oxford classicists ..." they declare, as if the duty to prepare their child wasn't part of their remit. Potty training may well not be on the Greats syllabus, but that isn't to say — particularly when one becomes a parent — that the two are forever to be considered mutually exclusive!

And so it goes, I would argue, that in cases of a suspected breach of trust, societies should not be able to get away with, "We are only volunteers ...". But how many co-operators challenge that excuse?

Answer: less than I would like.

Finding the Words ...

If people are allowed to continue to believe that, since they are running social businesses (saving planets, caring for vulnerable people, housing people, financing the unbanked ...), the rules that apply to arch-capitalists, need not apply to them, that is no different from saying "I'll both have my cake and eat it, thanks". That's one hell of a superposition!

Trapped cats, corporate villains and confused classicists teach me that something is missing in research discourse, namely tools to facilitate:

- **Confessions:** appropriate words to help societies describe and address behaviour; contradictory to their own and the sector's value system.
- **Reputations:** best practices for 'calling out' such behaviour, which don't simultaneously bring the whole movement down like a house of cards.

In the UK, in particular, we have a deep cultural problem — even if we had the words, we probably would resist using them, living, as we do, in a nation that would rather tip-toe around an uncomfortable issue than speak plainly about it.

But when Kimberle Crenshaw⁴ describes 'intersectionality' as an "analytic sensibility", she encourages me to think that there is a way out of this cultural problem. Could it be that a critical theoretic approach is one of the sharpest methods available to analysts concerned with wicked problems that lurk within tricky psycho-social phenomena? That is certainly what has happened with the concept of 'intersectionality' over the last few years.

I don't know what other analytic sensibilities exist 'out there' for our use, but I sincerely hope, as a community of researchers, we won't need another 50 years to discover them.

The Author

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Notes

- 1 Schrodinger initially devised the analogy to demonstrate a paradox inherent in the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum physics, which maintained that certain entities can exist in all states at once and will only be confirmed as being in one state or another when observed (or by having some other interaction with the outside world).
- 2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fraud_deterrence
- 3 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/if-something-is-wrong-do-you-dare-say-so-9554158.html>
- 4 <https://www.ft.com/content/4fdc1354-a061-11e6-891e-abe238dee8e2>