
How are professionals recruited by external agents in misconduct projects? The infiltration of organized crime in a university

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Abstract

Private firms, crime organizations or states may successfully recruit professionals in misconduct projects. How they do so remains, however, under-investigated. Past studies mostly take professionals' perspective, or limit the organizational initiative of external agents to perverse incentives and threats. Our study shows instead how external agents may penetrate governance bodies and professional events to recruit and control professionals, who are both aware of and reluctant toward misconduct. Our longitudinal case study used judicial and non-judicial sources to analyse how a mafia clan infiltrated Troy University, and controlled the trade of exams and admissions for decades. The clan selected Troy University because of the presence of professors pre-disposed toward misconduct. The clan infiltrated the pre-disposed professors inside governance bodies and students inside academic events to recruit the reluctant

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professors with peer pressures, situated threats and administrative controls. It then exploited a generalized code of silence to control professionals for years. Overall, the study highlights the combination of perverse and pervasive mechanisms to recruit professionals; the role of corrupt professionals as linchpin between external agents and reluctant peers; and the perverse exploitation of normal professional practices of autonomy, trusteeship and multiple embeddedness.

Keywords

autonomy, change, embeddedness, higher education, infiltration, organizational wrongdoing, organized crime, professional misconduct, trusteeship

Introduction

Professional misconduct is generally regarded an aberration that undermines the usefulness and legitimacy of professions in society (Dinovitzer et al., 2015; Muzio et al., 2016). Yet, professional misconduct might interest external agents, such as corporations, state, private users and organized crime (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Gunz and Gunz, 2006; Newburn, 2017). The appeal of professional misconduct is twofold. First, professionals control key services, such as education, healthcare, arbitrations and auditing. By steering professionals toward misconduct, external agents may obtain important benefits or remove crucial barriers. Enron and Parmalat, for instance, exploited auditors' misconduct to thrive financially (Grey, 2003; Sikka, 2009). Second, professional misconduct is hard to detect for non-professional actors. Professional work requires expert knowledge that is inaccessible to most, so that professional decisions cannot be fully standardized or scrutinized externally (Abbott, 1988; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Professional work is subject to peer reviews, but peers may be reluctant to condemn colleagues (Finn and Lampe, 1992; Kovach et al., 2009). The deterioration of professional practices is thus difficult to detect when external agents 'hide' behind professionals. Again, firms like Enron and Parmalat exploited auditors' misconduct as professional peers struggled to recognize and report any wrongdoing (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; Mitchell and Sikka, 2011). Accordingly, external agents try to facilitate and control professional misconduct (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Muzio et al., 2016). Medical studies have reported several attempts by pharmaceutical companies to influence drug prescriptions in general practice (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008). Similarly, historical studies have reported attempts by dictators to deviate the work of judges, lawyers, engineers and educators (e.g. Jarausch, 1990).

While it is understood that external agents may interfere with professional work, in-depth analyses of *how* they intentionally do so remain scarce and sparse (Muzio et al., 2013, 2016; Newburn, 2017; Palmer, 2012). Past research has mostly taken the perspective of the captured professionals, explaining the perverse and pervasive reasons why they engage in misconduct, and how they respond to external stimuli (Dixon-Woods et al., 2011; Muzio et al., 2016; Palmer, 2012). Significantly less is known from the perspective of the capturing agents, and particularly about their capacity as external agents to penetrate organizational boundaries and recruit professionals in a misconduct project. Misconduct project represent the deliberate attempt of external agents to deviate professionals from their code of conduct; and to exploit the resources and influence of the

recruited professionals to advance their private agenda. Some studies investigated how non-professional actors embedded in the organization (e.g. managers) try to influence professional work, typically toward better conduct and ineffectively (Currie et al., 2012; Llewellyn, 2001; Radaelli et al., 2017). Others showed how social agents external to both profession and organization try to influence the field in which these operate, typically toward better conduct and ineffectively (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; Muzio et al., 2016). Differently, we ask: *how do external agents penetrate professional organizations, recruit professionals in misconduct projects, and keep them under control?*

To answer this question, the present study analyses the deliberate strategies enacted by a mafia clan to recruit professors at an Italian university in their misconduct project. The mafia clan sought to facilitate the graduation of its affiliates by controlling how professors graded exams. The clan had to recruit several professors, most of whom were disinclined to pursue private interests and mafia strategies. Nevertheless, the clan successfully penetrated the university and controlled professors' behaviours. It did so with a combination of 'perverse' and 'pervasive' mechanisms (Palmer, 2012), which (i) exploited the presence of professors already pre-disposed toward misconduct, who enacted threats and controls against the more reluctant ones; (ii) infiltrated core decision-making spaces to normalize misconduct; and (iii) exploited professional features (i.e. autonomy, trusteeship and embeddedness) that were originally intended to prevent misconduct.

Perverse and pervasive antecedents of misconduct

Past research identified numerous antecedents of misconduct (Muzio et al., 2016; Newburn, 2017; Palmer, 2012). Misconduct may sometimes be an 'abnormal' behaviour that individuals perform against their profession; or a 'normal' behaviour legitimized by organizations and professions. On this basis, Palmer (2012) distinguished *perverse* and *pervasive* antecedents of misconduct.

Perverse antecedents are processes and structures that deviate from the professional norm of prioritizing the interests of clients and society. This perspective conceives misconduct as an aberration of 'normal' good conduct perpetrated by individuals who intentionally pursue their self-interest *against* their organization and clients; or fail to account for the ethical consequences of their actions. Individuals may, for instance, accept monetary and non-monetary incentives in exchange for misconduct; or they may succumb to threats (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Moynihan and Cassels, 2008). If the opportunities for personal incentives outweigh the risks of being sanctioned, individuals may consider misconduct as the most rational choice (Nadler and Lawler, 1977). Professional fields may be favourable contexts for perverse mechanisms for five reasons. First, professional work has immense impacts on society – so it is likely to attract the interest of external parties (Abbott, 1988; Buonanno et al., 2015). Second, principles of autonomy and practices of self-regulation undermine managerial and regulative attempts to interfere with professional work (Currie et al., 2012; Llewellyn, 2001). Professional work acquires an 'opaque quality' that cannot be fully scrutinized by non-professionals (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Professionals may thus hide their misconduct easily, especially if peers are slow or uninterested in monitoring their work (Kovach et al., 2009; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). Third, professional organizations may attract an adverse selection of individuals.

Individuals may become professionals out of vocation, and morally self-regulate against misconduct (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933). Furthermore, professional work has explicit trusteeship norms that prioritize client interest over self-interest (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, individuals may also exploit the profession for material benefits because they may gain exposure, power and control. Fourth, peer reviews may generate tight and defensive professional groups that deny or justify misconduct to protect their members (Kellogg, 2009; Sikka, 2009). Finally, professionals may be so focused on serving the interests of their clients that they ultimately justify misconduct (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; Grey, 2003; Mitchell, 1980).

Pervasive antecedents instead normalize misconduct in organizations and professions. Individuals may be misguided by existing roles and processes; or they may imitate behaviours observed in their social environment (Palmer, 2012). First, professionals may comply with inappropriate orders from their chain of command without questioning their integrity or appropriateness. Kellogg (2009), for instance, highlighted how junior doctors were pushed by their superiors to 'soldier up' to prevent the application of a new regulation. Second, professionals may be misguided by established rules and procedures that, even if designed to pursue clients' interests, may still elicit wrongdoing (El-Hai, 2005; Woolf et al., 1999). Third, the division of labour among professionals may enable wrongdoing. When professionals lose full control of, and accountability for, a task, they may delegate core ethical decisions to others (Solet et al., 2005; Tucker and Edmondson, 2003). Failures in communication and coordination between professionals may weaken the defences against wrongdoing, as each actor fails to act (Morris and Moore, 2000). Fourth, professionals may receive cues from peers, subordinates and clients about the appropriate conduct to navigate uncertain scenarios; or to receive social approval. Past studies have used social information processing, social comparison and liking-based theories to highlight how individuals replicate dubious behaviours pursued by (but not sanctioned for) peers, competitors and experts (Franke et al., 2013; Scharff, 2005). Professionals may replicate others' behaviours to gain legitimacy in or reciprocity from their professional group. Gabbioneta et al. (2014), for instance, highlighted cases of institutional ascription where professionals gained their status from their association with an elite organization and replicated inappropriate behaviours observed in the network gravitating around it.

External agents and the promotion of professional misconduct

Past research mostly overlooked the capacity of external agents to penetrate organizational boundaries and recruit professionals for misconduct. Studies on the influence of external agents, for example, corporations and states, typically focused on their attempts to facilitate the professionalization of groups or improve professionals' code of conduct. States, for instance, comprehensively provide ad-hoc incentives and sanctions; pervasive structures, such as administrative systems, standards and guidelines; and recruitment strategies, for example, admission exams and public tenders, to identify appropriate professionals (Cooper and Robson, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2007).

How external agents develop and implement strategies to facilitate professional misconduct remains instead scarce and sparse. Some studies reported how large corporations

or associations use incentives to lure professionals, for example, pharmaceutical companies trying to alter general practitioners' drug prescriptions (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008), or companies gaining auditors' support through allusive incentives (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Grey, 2003; Palmer, 2012). These external agents appear as tactical players that exploit shortcomings in the professional field for their self-interest, rather than being strategists that plan, design and implement ad-hoc interventions to facilitate and control misconduct. Alternatively, external agents are described as obtuse players that create misconduct by mistake. Palmer (2012), for instance, observed how social agents may draw the line between 'good' and 'bad' in ways that unintentionally create the conditions for misconduct. Historical accounts, by comparison, provide more direct evidence on the strategic skills of external agents to intentionally enable professional misconduct. Jaraus (1990), for instance, explained how the Nazi government altered the composition and work of multiple professions through perverse and pervasive initiatives, for example, incentives, threats, obtrusive controls and hierarchical pressures.

This body of research presents two gaps, which we seek to address. First, although we know that multiple antecedents may facilitate professional misconduct, it is still unclear what external agents actually use for this purpose. Taking the perspective of the captured professionals, past studies have focused on the key dominant interventions that 'hit the mark'; and how these are perceived and received by the professionals. Taking the perspective of the capturing agent, we seek to provide a more comprehensive view of all the interventions as intended and enacted by the external agents. Second, previous studies focus on field-level interventions enacted by external agents to pollute the institutional context in which professionals operate. They provide limited knowledge on the capacity of external agents to breach the organizational boundaries, recruit professionals in a misconduct project, and control their behaviours over time. Our knowledge remains limited to the use of perverse mechanisms (e.g. incentives and threats), while neglecting the possibility for external agents to influence also the pervasive processes in an organization. Combining these gaps, our study thus asks: *how do external agents penetrate professional organizations, recruit professionals in their misconduct projects, and keep them under control?*

Empirical context

To address this question, we analyse the strategy enacted by a mafia clan to recruit professors at an Italian university from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Italian legislation defines a mafia as 'an association of three or more people . . . whose members take advantage of intimidation, submission and a code of silence (*omertà*) to commit crimes, take control over economic activities or achieve unjust advantages for themselves or others' (Article 416-bis; Italian Criminal Code). Different crime syndicates originated from different Italian regions, for example, Cosa Nostra from Sicily, Camorra from Campania and Ndrangheta from Calabria. To preserve the confidentiality of the victims, we anonymized the university where the misconduct took place (here referred to as 'Troy'), and the crime syndicate involved (here generically described as 'mafia'). The mafia organization considered is a confederation of clans, each with full jurisdiction on a territory and not subordinated to other 'authorities'. Clans are family-based, as only family members inherit and hold key positions of power; external people can be enrolled, however, as full members, affiliates or collaborators.

The business of mafia clans is primarily illegal, for example, drug-trafficking; fraud; loan sharking; homicide; robbery; extortion; kidnapping; tax evasion; bribery.

The project of professional misconduct presented in this study involved the graduation of mafia affiliates as healthcare professionals from Troy University. The clan had a list of students (either affiliated to the clan or paying the clan for 'favours') who 'had to' pass the exam with 'good marks'. It then recruited university professors to grade affiliates' exams positively, making sure that *every* identified student *quickly* graduated; relax, prevent or resist peer reviews that might detect anomalies; and prevent or adjust the implementation of new regulations against mafia infiltration. The graduating affiliates would then be allocated to healthcare organizations (for example, clinics, hospitals and commissioning groups) to enact another stage of misconduct, e.g. provide false medical reports, divert public funding, or engage in pork barrelling. In this study, we focus only on the first stage, that is, how the mafia clan recruited university professors to facilitate the graduation of 'its' students.

Methods

To investigate how the mafia clan recruited professors at Troy University, we employed a longitudinal case study approach (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). We selected Troy University because it represented an extreme case of an 'abhorrent' external agent (i.e. a mafia clan) penetrating a professional organization, recruiting professionals and controlling their misconduct for decades. The case is extreme in the intensity of professionals' subjugation because of the methods employed by the clan. The case reveals clear strategic intent and dynamics of professional recruitment, which are elsewhere more ambiguous. The recruitment of the Troy professors can thus 'illuminate and extend relationships among constructs or develop deeper understanding of processes' (p. 1114).

To analyse this phenomenon, the study used primarily legal and historical data. The role of crime syndicates in controlling professional groups is typically inaccessible to traditional research approaches (Neuman and Wiegand, 2000) because information about the violation of rules and the exploitation of people is withheld from researchers and accessible only by police forces and legal authorities. Our longitudinal analysis thus started with evidence of the misconduct (from trial verdicts) and then analysed the design and implementation of its strategy by the clan.

Our data collection strategy sought a 'deep immersion over time in the focal phenomena with openness to many types of rich data – from text, observations and surveys to, more recently, Twitter feeds, YouTube videos and Facebook posts' (Eisenhardt et al., 2016: 1114). As the main agents of misconduct could not be directly accessed for interviews or observations, we collected the following secondary data. Arrest warrants and trial verdicts were our main sources of data. These documents comprise a wealth of primary data collected by law enforcement and judicial actors through wiretaps and interrogations. These authorities collected information on why the clan chose Troy University, on the main actors involved, on the tactics used to recruit and control professionals, and on their consequences. The interrogations and trials were thus structured as interviews. These documents focused primarily on events that violated criminal and civil law; but they also included information on the context within which these activities were performed, for example, on the context pre-existing the mafia infiltration or the behaviours of honest professionals and students in

response to misconduct. The reliability of these sources is guaranteed by the impartiality of judges presiding over the trials; by the existence of legal processes through which defence and prosecution attorneys can dispute the validity and interpretation of every single datum (and data source); and by the availability of the trial data/results to public scrutiny. Arrest warrants, for instance, are issued by judges who review the available evidence and explain the motivations for their decisions. We used arrest warrants not as indictments against individuals (because the trial would eventually evaluate their guilt), but rather as repositories of primary data (e.g. wiretapped conversations, interrogation quotes). More generally, our study was not focused on evaluating the decisions of the judges, but on analysing the available data on professional misconduct.

Our dataset included: (i) documents on Trial A, specifically focused on the mafia recruitment of professors at Troy University and (ii) Trial B, focused on the broader strategy of infiltration of this clan in Italian public administration and private businesses. Trial A provided the main source of data. Its arrest warrants and verdicts represent large repositories of data, such as wiretaps, testimonies, police and judicial interrogations. Hence, quotes from Trial A are privileged in the findings. Trial B adds contextual data on the motivations and organization of the clan, and its actions. Contributing to the validity of the data, the trials were presided over by different judges (who cross-validated previous verdicts); and each trial went through the three judicial levels (each with different judges). Hence we had multiple triads of judges analysing the phenomenon. To be noted is that appeal and last resort for Trial A could not be accessed as they were withheld by the law courts (currently in the process of digitalizing and anonymizing the documents). We are, however, confident that we do not have incomplete or inappropriate data because we (i) had reassurances from the judges presiding over the missing trials that these confirmed the full trial and did not introduce radically new elements; and (ii) we collected data from journalistic and parliamentary sources, which provided day-by-day and summary proceedings of the appeal and last resort trials, and confirmed that no radical changes occurred. These data sources included: articles from local and national newspapers; books; documentaries; parliamentary documents (e.g. reports and proceedings of the Antimafia Commission). These data were important for four reasons. First, they further validated our main data as specialized journalists and commentators did not challenge the method and results of the trials. Second, we gained full access to data either reported partially or only referenced in the trial documents. Third, these sources added information about professionals' perceptions of and opinions on the infiltration of Troy University, and more details on non-illegal phenomena that the trial analysed briefly. Fourth, they provided information on the appeal and last resort verdicts, confirming the findings of the full trial. Ethical considerations apply to our data collection. Given the sensitive nature of the trial (with the intimidation of some individuals and legal prosecution of others), we preserved the anonymity of individuals involved in the events, excluding details on the mafia clan, and the infiltrated university, which could identify the case. We did *not* collect data (e.g. interviews, affidavits, reports) prepared by defence and prosecution, and not validated by independent third-parties. These data could be biased and reduce the reliability of our analysis. Table 1 describes our final dataset.

Our data analysis was informed by previous literature, which is rich with explanations as to why professionals engage in misconduct, but not how external agents design their

Table 1. Data sources.

Trial	Judicial document	Authors	Year	Purpose of document	Pages
A	Arrest Warrant #1	Court X	2000	Alleged clan affiliates and members are sent to trial for illegal activities at Troy University	200+
	Arrest Warrant #2	Court Y	2001		50+
	Verdict of full trial	Court X	2005	Document describes infiltration of Troy University and explains reasons for conviction	350+
B	Verdict of full trial	Court Z	2011	Documents provide data on the strategy of the mafia clan (and related organization) to infiltrate business and public administration. Documents represent the three degrees of law	2000+
	Verdict of appeal trial	Court U	2014		800+
	Verdict of last resort trial	SC Cassation	2015		5+
Additional data on mafia clan					
	Newspaper articles, documentary transcripts, reportages	Various	2000-2015	External reports, interviews, and narratives related to the 'ndrangheta infiltration of professional fields	150+
Additional data on Troy University					
Books B1		Anonymized	1976	It describes the social and political context of the Troy area in the mid-70s	240+
Books B2		Anonymized	2010	It describes social and political context of the Troy area in	220+
Books B3		Anonymized	2010	It describes the links between Mafia phenomena and social class	350+
Additional data on Mafia activities and infiltration of Public Administration					
Parliament and Mafia	Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia	Parliament Antimafia Commission	2000	Research documents on infiltration phenomena. Include analyses of cases, and background information	200+
Parliament and Mafia	Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia		2008		150+
Parliament and Mafia	Parliament Report on Organized Crime and Mafia		2015		150+
6-month Report on Mafia		DIA	2011	Report on Mafia-related phenomena. Includes analyses of cases, and background information	350+
Annual Report on Mafia and Terrorism		DNA	2013		900+
Prefectural Decree		Anonymized	2005	Document on infiltration of healthcare and professional bodies	150+

SC Cassation = Supreme Court of Cassation; DIA = Antimafia Investigation Directorate; DNA = Antimafia National Directorate.

recruitment strategies. As we could not test hypotheses, we generated theory from the data, and compared the emerging theory with existing findings on perverse and pervasive antecedents of misconduct (Palmer, 2012). We followed the advice of Eisenhardt et al. (2016: 1114), that is, gather data

... with some sort of memoing, [build] thick descriptions from the data, such as chronologies or vignettes; code raw data into first-order codes or measures; raise them to a more abstract level, such as second-order themes or constructs; use constant comparison between emergent theory and data and other tactics to generate creative insights; and engage with literature to sharpen both the constructs and the theoretical logic of the relationships between constructs.

We organized our analytical strategy in three steps. First, we identified relevant quotes from the available data and developed provisional empirical labels. For instance, one arrest warrant specified that ‘Professor [R] could reach any department for misconduct, to repay the clan for money s/he had been loaned’. This quote empirically links misconduct with money repayment. Second, we aggregated similar first-order quotes into more abstract themes, informed when possible by previous literature (e.g. Palmer, 2012). The above quote and similar ones, for instance, highlighted that some professors pursued misconduct for *incentives*. Third, we abstracted and aggregated the empirical themes in theoretical dimensions, explaining how the perverse and pervasive approaches were combined in a comprehensive strategy. For instance, we found evidence that some professors were pre-disposed toward misconduct and were recruited with both perverse and pervasive mechanisms. The coding process is exemplified in Table 2. We identified four stages of recruitment, detailed below.

The professional misconduct project

The clan required professors from Troy University to support the graduation of a heterogeneous cadre of students. Some students were affiliated to the mafia, which envisaged their graduation as healthcare professionals and their eventual placement in key hospitals. Others were ordinary students who paid clan intermediaries to get help with specific exams. Clan intermediaries signalled the name of these students to the ‘relevant professors’ who would: (i) provide the text and solutions of the exam beforehand; (ii) award sufficiently high marks; (iii) support their placement in ad-hoc specialization programmes. These misbehaviours created a ‘prodigious’ increase in student performances. The corruption was so systematic and structured that Troy University became known as the ‘University of Exams’. The legal proceedings noted the ‘anomalous trajectories’ of ‘numerous students’, who had had ‘more than mediocre’ academic careers at other universities and then ‘miraculously’ surged in performance once they moved to Troy. Students knew from the very beginning that they could get favourable marks in certain exams, and paid for this privilege. Knowledge of Troy University as a corrupt provider was so widespread among students that even foreign students queued to join the university to help their graduation:

The clan supported internal and external students of Troy University by threatening and colluding with professors. The lower difficulty of the exams, or new attitudes toward studies

Table 2. Data coding process.

(Additional) exemplary quotes	Recruiting theme	Dimension
<p>Clan leaders have long sent their children to hang out with professionals' children, and eventually marry them. They send them to the best universities to manage business professionally without a criminal record. (Judge Alfa, Newspaper interview 1)</p> <p>Witness [Alpha], former clan member and student of Troy University, noted that the Student Union was already a warehouse for clans' weapons. This was common knowledge among students. (Arrest Warrant, Trial A)</p> <p>From the seventies onwards, Troy experienced the establishment of [the elite] influencing the labour market to consolidate its power. The elite developed a network of favours aimed at replicating the system of power over time. In this overall scheme, it was crucial that the 'children' of the elite would graduate at Troy, possibly with honours. (Book B1, Excerpt)</p> <p>The University provided modules that were not available elsewhere, so it appealed to students from several other regions. It was not unusual for Troy to receive applications from students well beyond its natural 'catchment area'. The clan exploited this heterogeneity to mingle its own students. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p> <p>Professor [M] explicitly mentioned that Professor [R] could reach any department for misconduct, to repay the clan for money s/he had been loaned. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p> <p>Professor [Z] and her assistant [AA] colluded with clan members to support the case of student [BB]. The investigation revealed a large number of phone calls among the individuals, indicating reciprocal trust and friendship. Professor [Z] had collaborated intensely with the clan to gain favours that went beyond money. (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</p> <p>Professor M aggressively ordered administrators to 'mind their own business' on the admission exams as s/he had interests to defend. When removed from the Dean's Office s/he threatened the intervention of the clan. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p> <p>Colluding professors applied pressure on peers, replicating the approach they had learned from clan members. First they approached the colleagues, and invited them to be more generous in marking. If colleagues resisted, the colluding professors would allude to their 'friendship' with the clan, or directly threaten them. (Verdict, Trial A)</p> <p>Phone call records indicate an unusual number of calls from [clan members] to Professor Z that reveal how often the former asked for clarifications and updates from the latter. (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</p>	<p>Pre-existing relationships with professionals</p> <p>Weakened university arrangements</p> <p>Troy as legitimate professional provider</p> <p>Recruiting professors with incentives</p> <p>Embedding professors in clan culture and practice</p> <p>Monitoring professors through chain of command</p>	<p>Selecting 'appropriate' context</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

(Additional) exemplary quotes	Recruiting theme	Dimension
<p>Some professors resisted the clan's intimidation attempts. The clan often escalated its threats to physical violence [e.g. murdering a professor]. Sometimes, however, the clan 'let them go' and focused on alternative options, easier to 'capture'. (Verdict, Trial A)</p> <p>The incentives provided by the clan intermediaries were often paradoxical. They would protect professors from external threats that their own clan had created. This protection would materialize only in exchange of favours. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p> <p>Situational influence: In one case, for instance, a number of old people attended an exam. Hiding behind newspapers, they monitored the exam, and left only when reassured that their student had passed the exam. (Arrest Warrant, Trial A)</p> <p>It cannot be demonstrated that Assistant [AA] enacted her misconduct to gain personal rewards from the clan, as it arguably accommodated professional (rather than criminal) pressures from her superior. (Arrest Warrant 2, Trial A)</p> <p>Peer pressure: The colluding professors infiltrated key governance bodies, where they liaised with peers and administrators, either by building new alliances or intimidating them. The same activities applied at student level, where colluding students similarly used panels (e.g. from Student Union) to recruit peers and intimidate them. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p> <p>Administrative control: Afraid of the real danger of [clan's] threats, the commission panel agreed to help the young students. It is notable, in this regard, how Professor [E] was excluded by the panel because s/he was regarded harder to convince. (Arrest Warrant, Trial A)</p> <p>The [Head of Department] had promoted a new system whereby students would be tutored by one professor, and assessed by a panel of others. This provoked much resistance from the community. Professors had not been able to reach an agreement, so [the Head of department] tried to impose her solution to modernize the school. (Professor Alpha, TV interview⁶⁵)</p> <p>[Commemorating the Head of Department] Her main accomplishment was her research [on advanced surgery techniques] that had gained national prominence. There was some initial disagreement on this research stream, but eventually s/he developed the evidence that now is used at national level. (Professor Alpha, TV interview⁶⁶)</p>	<p>Identifying a selected group of professors</p> <p>Incentives and threats</p> <p>Controlling professors with infiltrated students, pre-disposed professors, and stakeholders</p> <p>Exploiting weak peer review system</p> <p>Preserving core jurisdictions</p>	<p>Recruiting reluctant professionals</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

(Additional) exemplary quotes	Recruiting theme	Dimension
<p>Witness [Beta] reported that 'eventually, the clan controlled the activities of the University, and particular of the Medical School and its related Hospital. This business was organized by the clan, but managed by [a list of 12 names, combination of clan members, colluding professors, healthcare professionals liaising with professors]. They used their influence and that projected by the clan.' (Verdict, Trial A)</p> <p>The election of a new dean or control systems usually provokes a strong debate, but otherwise professors are very free in their discipline. The university is so compartmentalized that professors do not poke their noses into others' business. (Professor Alpha, TV interview⁶)</p>	<p>Controlling professors with network of insiders</p> <p>Exploiting weak peer review system</p>	<p>Protracting and protecting the recruitment over time</p>
<p>In a testimony, Professor [C] stated that: 'over the years, I have noticed that new students replaced those who had historically performed all the threats. But this did not gainsay our perception that they all belonged to the same organization, and therefore that it was in our best interest to remain silent.' (Full Verdict, Trial A)</p>	<p>Exploiting victim's code of silence</p>	
<p>Professor [K]'s behaviour is indicative of the climate of intimidation at Troy. Only a few hours after denouncing threats to the police, s/he retracted the allegations, arguing: 'I probably gave too much importance to the events'. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p>	<p>Gaining students' and stakeholders' support</p>	
<p>The infiltration of Troy went beyond exam marking. It was a means to control the territory – to gain favours that other stakeholders would need to repay in different forms. (Congressman C, Antimafia Commission proceeding)</p> <p>A key university supplier was by a clan member. Wiretapped conversations demonstrated that this person actively promised to 'find jobs' for [stakeholders] in the University in exchange for appropriate favours. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)</p>	<p>Gaining students' and stakeholders' support</p>	
<p>The clan did not forget the favours made for its students, asking to be 'paid back' by promoting the role of clan intermediaries at Troy University. (Verdict, Trial A)</p>		
<p>Student [X] joined the business, developing her own network of students that could be 'helped'. Using her connection with Student/Member [F], [X] signalled a list of students that were willing to pay large sums of money to her. [X] would then share some of its profits with [F], who would eventually recruit professors for the misconduct. (Verdict, Trial A)</p>		

⁶The reported interview came before Trials A and B, and described events happening during the early stages of the clan's infiltration in Troy. The informant did not intend to allude that the professors' resistance was connected to the clan. The information is useful instead to describe (i) the existence of a professional struggle to implement peer reviews and (ii) a 'normal' climate of research and teaching, where professors could operate at high-level.

cannot explain why so many students had a prodigious improvement of their marks at Troy. Corruption was so rife that students passed exams without even attending lectures or taking the exams. (Verdict, Trial A)

Notably, a young affiliate with a personal interest in medicine moved to another university to test her actual medical knowledge – knowing that s/he could return to Troy to obtain a good grade:

Witness [A] passed three exams at Troy without any help from the clan. S/he later transferred to [an A-level university] to test her real skills. The transfer decision was not problematic. If s/he failed, s/he could return to Troy and buy the exam from [professors]. (Verdict, Trial A)

The misconduct was perpetrated by a heterogeneous cadre of professors at Troy. Few professors colluded with the clan; with them the clan used a combination of perverse and pervasive processes, mostly grounded on (i) the use of incentives, and (ii) hierarchical control by the mafia hierarchy. Other professors participated against their will, so that the clan employed a more forceful approach using a different combination of perverse and pervasive processes grounded on (i) the use of threats, and (ii) professional control by the administrative system, and social influence by peers:

Troy University had bizarre phenomena related to exam marking. The clan obtained privileged treatment for its protégées. It exploited special relations with professors through economic exchanges, reciprocal ‘respect’ or connivance. Some professors colluded with the clan, and exploited these opportunities. Others succumbed to clan threats. Only few professors opposed the clan. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Selecting an ‘appropriate’ context

Before recruiting the professors, the clan targeted Troy as the appropriate context for its misconduct project. It did so for a number of reasons. First, the clan had already established its authority in the area, liaising with doctors and managers of important health-care organizations, who provided false medical reports, diverted public funding and performed pork barrelling. The capture of these individuals established the presence of the clan in the area, and opened the doors to Troy University, where they worked as professors, suppliers or administrators:

Doctor [A] owned an important clinic, and was heavily involved with the clan. S/he had a tight relationship with Member [B]. [A] used her work interactions with Troy University to entice students and professors. [B] targeted medical students; promised the help of a ‘friend’ ([A]), who had other ‘friends’ at the university. The students paid them, or provided clinical work in [A]’s clinic. (Verdict, Trial A)

The university was also influenced by a dominant elite of local politicians, freemasons and businessmen, who influenced the executive board and weakened the standards of academic rigour to facilitate the graduation of their sons and daughters. The clan liaised with this elite, hoping to exploit its relationships with professors and other professionals.

Troy University had a pre-existing reputation for ‘cutting corners’ with the admission and the graduation of students for the ‘children’ of the dominant elite. Hence, some professors were already directly connected with the mafia clan, and others had already accepted various forms of bribery from the dominant elite:

Clan Leader [C] graduated at Troy Medical School and developed intense relationships with the political and industrial elite in Troy. These relationships were also exploited by his brother [D], for years a full professor at Troy University and an executive in a leading hospital. (Antimafia Commission Report)

Troy University, thus, was not a heavily guarded professional system focused on ensuring rigour and transparency. Rather, administrators and professors had bent regulations and processes to their interests. At Troy University, therefore, the clan did not need to disrupt strong professional barriers, nor create a network of ‘bad professors’ from scratch. It could instead revise pre-existing academic practices and re-orient them toward a more ambitious plan of not just helping a few students ‘here and there’, but rather create a more structured commerce of exams and graduations:

[Congressman E]: We must continue to investigate the relationships between the mafia and the deviated freemasons and politicians in Troy. The infiltration of Troy University was made possible by these preconditions. [Congressman F]: [Trial A] suggests that the infiltration of Troy University did not begin with this clan and has probably not ended with their arrest. (Antimafia Commission, proceeding 1)

The clan looked for a university with a sufficiently high reputation for the graduation of its affiliates. The clan did not infiltrate universities with a public reputation for being ‘too easy’ or ‘corrupt’ because their graduates would be viewed with suspicion and not be employed by private and public Health Care organizations. The clan targeted Troy University because it had a good reputation and was the reference academic hub in the area. Rankings suggest that Troy is an above-average provider, with good indicators related to medical training. Troy University has a number of nationally-known alumni and is located in an important city in Italy. Its medical graduates regularly find jobs in healthcare organizations in and outside the region. Hence, Troy was ‘above suspicion’: ‘The region became lively economically and culturally due to its industrial and urban growth. The University provided specialized courses not available elsewhere, and established itself as the key education institution in the region’ (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A).

Recruiting and colluding with ‘pre-disposed’ professors

Once the clan had established its presence in Troy, it began recruiting professors who had already collaborated with it or had signalled their availability to engage in misconduct. These individuals used the profession to achieve material goals, and asked for a *quid pro quo*. Hence, they were recruited through perverse mechanisms, that is, financial and non-financial incentives (e.g. money, support in career progression, inclusion in elite networks, and help in other professional activities): ‘Professor [M]’s support can be explained with:

evidence of financial gains (confirmed by witnesses); escalating the University's ranking thanks to the clan's support; participating in drug trafficking, gaining additional money' (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A).

These professors did not just perform misconduct, that is, manipulate the admission, marking and graduation of students; they also managed it, that is, by identifying other corruptible peers, providing incentives and threats, infiltrating the administration to disrupt monitoring activities, and liaising with external stakeholders, for example, health-care professionals, politicians, businessmen and freemasons:

Professor [M] identified and threatened peers for the clan. Also [M] was employed the Dean's Office where s/he prevented attempts to denounce threats and monitor exams; and ostentatiously paraded her friendship with clan members. The clan was strategically interested in placing [M] at the centre of power in Troy; [M] exploited this support to fulfil personal interests. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Using the profession for personal benefits, these professors developed a close relationship with the clan. This relationship was reinforced by two additional mechanisms.

First, *the clan embedded the pre-disposed professors in their culture and practices*. The clan established perverse psychological contracts with the 'friendly' professors, combining threats of repercussions against any betrayal with promises of rewards. The clan communicated its goals and practices to these professors, who incorporated and replicated them over time. The investigation revealed how these professors exchanged nicknames with the clan, appreciated their secret identity as mafia collaborators, and subordinated professional interests to criminal ones. The trusteeship norms aimed at the protection of students and society were subordinated to trusteeship norms toward the clan (considered a new 'client' to serve or a new 'leader' to follow). Rather than being victims of the clan, these professors participated in its functioning and reinforced its practices:

Professor [M] developed a strong relationship with current and former students close to the clan. He took advantage of these relationships receiving money or professional favours in his clinic. The relationship became so intimate that clan members used humorous nicknames to refer to him. [M] exploited this aura of danger to intimidate peers, and mimic mafioso behaviours. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Another implication was that these professors perversely denied the legitimacy of the victims and denied the injuries perpetrated to students and society. The misconduct victimized: (i) honest students, who devoted more effort to study, performed better in exams, but were ultimately denied a competitive advantage over the others; (ii) citizens who were exposed to incompetent healthcare providers. Consistently with the mafia culture, these professors regarded honest individuals as 'simpletons' who were not smart or brave enough to participate in the misconduct themselves.

Second, *the clan subjected the pre-disposed professors to its direct chain of command*. As these professors co-designed and participated in the misconduct strategy, they also became a potential source of threats. The clan implemented pervasive, obtrusive controls to regulate professors' behaviours and prevent any betrayals. The professors were surrounded by clan members that issued orders, controlled their behaviours and

implemented punishments. Professors who did not abide by these rules would be punished ‘through blood’ within the community. Keenly aware of the repercussions, the professors did not even conceive the possibility of betraying the clan:

Once the requests of misconduct had escalated, Professor [G] became reluctant to continue her relationship with Professor [M] and with the clan. S/he was pulled back into the clan, however, by allusive threats. Her car, for instance, was stolen and ‘by chance’ found by a young clan member in a graveyard, with a note saying that ‘next time, it won’t be just the car’. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Being engaged in other illegal activities, these professors could not pull back from their commitment. The clan threatened they would lose everything, and be disbarred from the profession, so that they had to share responsibilities for the misconduct:

The clan intentionally engaged professors in drugs and weapons trafficking, thus strengthening the bonds. It threatened professors with revealing their engagement if things went wrong. If that happened, their professional careers would be ruined. (Verdict, Trial A)

Recruiting and controlling non-disposed professors

Only a few professors colluded with the clan, so their recruitment was insufficient to support the masterplan. Students asked for help in passing exams that were controlled by professors with no disposition to, or experience with, misconduct. To recruit this cadre of professors, the clan adopted five different initiatives. First, the clan intermediaries *identified a selected group of professors*. The clan did not engage every professor at Troy University since the risks of over-recruiting outweighed its benefits. Clan members excluded ‘incorruptible’ professors who (i) refused incentives and threats, and reported them to police; and (ii) were connected with antimafia groups or law-enforcement agencies, and thus had greater chances of receiving protection. The clan would need to fight these individuals physically, thus risking over-exposure of its presence in the university. To avoid this, it was not inconceivable for the clan to ask students to pass exams on their own account:

During a wiretapped conversation, a student complained to Member [H – also a doctor] about the refusal of Professor [I]. [H] refused to retaliate against [I] arguing that this would escalate beyond tolerable levels: ‘[It] is not reasonable. He’s a real a***ole, who can screw you in front of everybody. If I act, I will hurt her, but this could create a media storm. Let’s stay quiet for a while. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Similarly, the clan did not recruit professors who managed easy or low-credit modules. Again, the benefits were not worth the risks of over-exposure. A network of advisers (consisting of ‘friendly’ professors and students) surveyed the modules and identified core exams that had to be controlled for their importance or difficulty; and an array of professors who could be ‘safely’ captured. The clan then (i) directed its students toward ‘safe’ destinations (e.g. Surgery and Dentistry); (ii) recruited the relevant professors first with allusive threats, such as ‘you know who we are’ – and only subsequently with more

aggressive approaches; and (iii) sometimes rejected students' demands when they were not confident they could control the professors:

Doctor [N], a clinical lead in a district hospital was sure s/he could recruit 'her' professors with 'certain outcomes'. 'I can guarantee you it is a certainty... I told Affiliate [Q] to reach Professor [P] for this favour. [Q] knows how to keep [P] quiet and [P] knows what to do.' (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Second, the clan *recruited professors through threats mixed with incentives*. Threats were necessary to push the reluctant professors toward misconduct; the incentives bound the professor to the clan. Accepting the bribe meant that professors were co-responsible for the misconduct, and thus could not deny their responsibility. The incentives took the form of financial, career or networking rewards. The clan appeared especially keen to exploit the interests of these professors as medical practitioners, in order to increase its presence in the medical field. High-status professors in the Medical School were also medical practitioners in public hospitals or private clinics. As some struggled to attract clients or sustain the costs, the clan proposed financial resources to buy new technologies, or 'free personnel' in clinics. Some professors accepted the favour, assessing that 'small' favours in higher education could generate large benefits in healthcare:

Professor [R] had financial problems that led him to ask for loans. The clan exploited this weakness, furnishing the loan with a 'reasonable' interest rate. Instead of resorting to traditional loan-shark techniques, the clan asked for 'favours' in her tenure as professor and doctor. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Professors who refused these offers were threatened through physical extortion and psychological intimidation. The investigations report how clan members threatened professors first with psychological threats, and gradually escalated with small bombs, gunshots and actual physical injury. As the cliché suggests, therefore, the clan made offers that professors could not refuse. Professors eventually became familiar with the mafia method, and accepted the incentives and misconduct to avoid the threats. Consequently, through intimidation the clan invaded professors' autonomy and controlled their decision-making without much need to escalate its intimidations:

Key examples of clan intimidation: (i) Professor [G] found an unknown individual in her office, who promoted the case of a 'friend' in allusive terms; (ii) Professor [S] was shot outside the faculty; (iii) small bombs exploded outside exam rooms; (iv) gunshots were fired outside [T]'s home. (Verdict, Trial A)

Third, the clan *infiltrated students and used the pre-disposed professors to control the reluctant professors*. Reluctant professors represented an even higher risk of betrayal than the pre-disposed ones. To minimize this risk, these professors were also constantly monitored by the clan. Instead of using its direct chain of command, the clan infiltrated lower-status members into the university, that is, (i) students benefitting from misconduct, (ii) corrupted professors; and (iii) additional clan members acting as 'parents', 'boyfriends', 'uncles' or 'dear friends' and 'showing up almost daily' in the corridors or during the

exams. The ‘constant sense of being monitored’ by ‘arrogant and intimidating people who had no reason to be there’ generated a pervasive ‘intolerable climate of oppression’ (Professor L, Verdict, Trial A). On top of this, the clan also used external stakeholders (e.g. businessmen, suppliers, politicians, freemasons) gravitating around the university. These clan intermediaries used a combination of peer pressure, situational influence and administrative control to guide professors’ behaviours. The corrupted professors used their experience and peer influence to entice the reluctant professors, observe their behaviours from the inside, and exert peer pressure:

Professor [M] threatened peers and paraded his friendship with well-known clan members. [M] intimidated key people in the Dean’s Office to be allowed to join their meetings. Once there, he behaved aggressively, demanding favours in exchange for his support for the Dean’s re-election. [M] alluded to clan interventions to have these requests satisfied. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Differently, students contributed to a more situational influence on professors. These students had free access to university spaces, so they could observe professors’ behaviours daily, and impart ‘punishments’ and ‘warnings’. The clan infiltrated its students in various departments of the university, so they could put pressure professors. These students also intimidated peers, secretaries and administrators, gradually gaining their (often grudging) support or silence. Students’ pressures were manifested through small, but eloquent gestures – enough to create a climate of oppression and showcase the presence of the clan, but not sufficient to over-expose themselves and the clan:

Professor [L] reported that [four students] usually remained in the Faculty during the exam period. Student [O] particularly spent a lot of time ‘promoting’ the cause of other students... There was a common pattern: a student (or ‘friend’) first demanded ‘favours’ politely, then allusively, and finally aggressively. At that point, another student or ‘friend’ joined the former, calming things down and suggesting that ‘if things get resolved’, everybody will be alright. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

The influence of corrupted professors and menacing students ran deep in the administrative system of the university. The clan put the ‘right men in the right places’ to (i) prevent complaints from reaching police forces and (ii) inhibit the creation of better monitoring systems. The clan helped the election of a ‘friendly’ professor as new Dean; in exchange, s/he included relevant clan supporters and affiliates in the Dean’s Office and turned a ‘blind eye’ to the infiltration. For instance, some professors reported to their line managers that they had received threats from ‘students’; these complaints were ignored, however, and never submitted to the academic boards and to the police:

Professor [L] had reported several threats that s/he had received, but no action was taken by Professor (line manager) [S] and the Dean, who refused to forward the complaints to the police. The university administration worked against her demands, as there was a generalized tendency to minimize any intimidation, for fears of retaliations, to preserve the ‘good name’ of the University, but also because of the lack of individuals willing to report and manage the complaints. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Honest professors were isolated from key roles in the university. Professor L was ostracized because of her stubbornness; an admission panel was threatened by Professor M to ‘mind its own business’ when it tried to exclude an inappropriate student. The infiltration of key university bodies ran so deep that clan members openly manifested their presence in academic meetings:

Professor [P] reported the irregular presence of clan members in the Dean’s Office: ‘They regularly walked in and out of the rooms with confidence and even offered me coffee.’ Professor [Q] added that, with the new Dean, s/he saw [bad apples] swaggering around his office. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

The clan transformed Troy University into a closed system, deflecting the attentions and support of regulators and external parties. Hence, professors – while often disinclined to participate in the misconduct – found few alternatives to it, as they feared for their lives and for their academic careers. Clan supporters also prospered outside the university. These professors were given more responsibilities in key processes and liaised with stakeholders gravitating outside the university: ‘Clan control extended to its constant presence in the main elective bodies; to deep relationships with the administrative staff; to hegemony in the Student Union. Here they successfully prevented any control or any improvement of the monitoring system’ (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A).

Fourth, the clan *exploited weaknesses in the peer review system*. Professors could have spotted irregularities in others’ marking and graduation practices, and formed a united front to fight against the clan infiltration. Notably, several professors acknowledged an ‘intolerable climate of intimidation’ in the university, and sometimes discussed this privately. However, there is no evidence that professors allied to confront this problem. In part, this was owing to the presence of the clan in key structures and processes. Hence, professors did not have free spaces where they could plan a defensive strategy without the intrusion of clan supporters. In part, professors had a pervasive reluctance to ‘stick their noses into others’ affairs’ that was informed by their professional autonomy. While investigations did not pay extensive attention to this aspect – as it did not violate laws – several commentators argued that even ‘honest’ professors had been slow to monitor others’ behaviours; as well as reluctant to allow external, impartial, parties monitor their own behaviours:

Any attempt to denounce misconduct in Troy was always rejected as non-scientific. Professors would discuss their problems only with their peers, and refuse to answer our questions. We asked about bombs and blood, arguing that ‘keeping the peace and quiet’ could have killed any of them. And yet, professors argued that the accusations were not scientific, and thus worthless. (Journalist, Newspaper extract)

The clan could exploit the fact that professors already worked in disciplinary siloes and did not intrude in the jurisdictions of their peers. On the one hand, it captured the professors individually, without threatening the entire social network of peers gravitating around an exam. The clan handpicked the recruited professors and peers, who may have sensed the presence of a mafia clan, but did not have enough elements to denounce the specific corruptors and corrupted individuals: ‘Our evidence shows that professors were captured individually. [Colluding professors, students or stakeholders] got close to the

professor, asked him/her to take care personally about that favour, unless his/her peers were not already colluding with the clan' (Verdict, Trial A).

Notably, professors never reported their suspicion that one of their peers was engaged in misconduct, unless s/he personally threatened them.

Fifth, the clan *did not intrude in other core professional jurisdictions*. The clan avoided areas of professional work that professors might have protected more jealously. The investigations did not provide any proof that the clan tried to control, for instance, any areas of research and teaching. The clan did not need them as controlling the assessment and admission of students sufficed:

Our investigations found evidence that the 'system' regarded only the passing of specific exams, the admission of otherwise inadmissible students, and the support of their specialization. For other areas of professors' work, there is no evidence of any clan interference. (Verdict, Trial A)

This was a sensible choice because teaching curricula were strongly protected against radical changes in the past. The Medical School experienced examples of professional resistance, even during the clan infiltration. New content on abortion and end-of-life pathways, for instance, were met with hostility by conservative professors, who actively campaigned against these innovations and openly intruded in peers' jurisdictions. By comparison, professors raised very little resistance against the growing perception of misconduct in the university.

Protracting and protecting the recruitment for 30 years

The 'University of Exams' lasted for almost 30 years – a long period of misconduct that was seldom punctuated by violent actions. The clan did not need to constantly adopt aggressive behaviours to exert its control over the recruited professors, and to continue recruit new professors in Troy University. Rather, it used a combination of four perverse and pervasive initiatives to protect the recruited professionals from external investigations and internal defections; and continue recruit new professors. Two actions were already presented above, that is, the pervasive infiltration of governing bodies and social influences within the university, and the perverse exploitation of professional autonomy. These mechanisms supported the recruitment of professors, but also served the purpose of 'normalizing' the misconduct by protecting them from sanctions. For the sake of brevity, we focus here on only two additional features.

First, *the clan exploited the 'code of silence' entrenched in mafia victims*. The investigations exploited the pervasive fear of mafia retaliations underlying professors' and students' *omertá*. The clan did not need constantly to threaten honest individuals because these were all aware of the mafia method, and remained silent fearing even worse consequences. Professors and students made sure that they did not know too much, not to expose themselves to additional risks. It was sufficient for the clan to perform small gestures to communicate its presence and preserve the *status quo*:

The clan used its power to generate a scenario of *omertá* and subjugation. This climate was characterized by a looming menace which did not need to be made explicit with grand gestures. The victim already knew the consequences of refusals. (Verdict, Trial A)

Second, *the clan gained the indirect support of students and external stakeholders*. The clan provided perverse incentives to students and external stakeholders, who thus had reasons not to report their suspicions. Students suspected dubious marking practices as they noticed the ‘small gestures’ of the clan with professors and peers. They remained silent, fearing retaliation *and* recognizing that they were not massively inconvenienced by the *status quo*. The clan ensured that their protégées did not acquire ‘too high’ grades, and attract the hostility of other students. The clan was worried that the gap between marks and skills could be so transparently wide that students would complain about it. The clan expected its protégées to be ‘good enough’ rather than the best in the class; and sanctioned situations where professors were too generous or students went too far:

Three students ranked well above the rest of the class. Clan intermediaries became very concerned that this could attract too much attention: ‘We’ve made a mess!’ They had instructed two students to copy all the right answers, but the instruction was wrong. While the excellent result of one individual could be normal, three individuals with scores well above the others raised suspicions. (Arrest Warrant 1, Trial A)

Several students contemplated the perverse benefits of the ‘University of Exams’, and moved to Troy to take easier exams. These students knew they could graduate rapidly, and exploit the *status quo*. Troy experienced a phenomenon of ‘adverse selection’ because talented students moved away from Troy and were replaced by those who had failed elsewhere. Regular students also had no compelling reason to denounce misconduct, as it could delegitimize their grades and because the inflation of grades was convenient. As students’ careers could be complicated by a scandal in their university, they were not incentivized to denounce cases of professional misconduct.

Besides these considerations, the clan reinforced its pre-existing ties with the ‘dominant elite’ by exchanging the support and silence of external stakeholders (politicians, businessmen, healthcare organizations) with favours. Political groups, for instance, exploited professors’ pork barrelling to gain additional votes for the elections. Likewise, healthcare organizations and businesses exploited university contracts and other financial incentives. Because Troy University was the key provider of professional education, it possessed resources (e.g. access to grants) and influence (e.g. pork barrelling) that incentivized stakeholders not to monitor and prevent misconduct:

Clan influence expanded into local politics and business. The relations between Member [W] and Politician [Y] are certain. [Y] informed [W] that a government role was available and they should ‘talk about it’. [W] argued: ‘we have thousands of votes’ from professors’ pork barrelling. Doctor [T] revealed that the clan provided jobs in companies working for the university. (Verdict, Trial A)

Discussion

Our case study investigated how an external agent recruited professionals into its misconduct project. Most research has focused on the enablers of misconduct as perceived and performed by professionals (Gunz and Gunz, 2007; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Morris and Moore, 2000; Sikka, 2009). Few studies took the perspective of the external

agents penetrating organizational boundaries and steering professionals' behaviours toward misconduct (Muzio et al., 2016; Palmer, 2012). These studies present an important gap in our understanding of professional misconduct, that is, they overlook the interplay of perverse and pervasive mechanisms when external agents recruit professionals in their misconduct project. In these studies, professionals are recruited primarily through perverse mechanisms, such as incentives and threats (Moynihan and Cassels, 2008). Studies on pervasive mechanisms instead explain the broader contamination of institutional contexts and professional associations (Jarusch, 1990). To instead investigate the interplay between perverse *and* pervasive mechanisms, our study focused on an 'abnormal' misconduct project (i.e. corrupted exam marking) designed by 'abhorrent' social agents (i.e. a clan), and mostly executed by 'normal', reluctant, professionals. Our findings reveal that the capacity of the external agent to recruit these professionals could not be explained simply with the use of incentives. Rather, the external agent: (i) *infiltrated* the professional system to implement perverse interventions and control pervasive processes; and (ii) used a *stepped approach* to normalize the misconduct. These findings represent our main contributions, and will be discussed in the following sections.

Infiltrating pervasive professional processes with a Trojan horse for perverse reasons

Past research suggests that professionals mostly enact misconduct as a deviant behaviour because of perverse mechanisms; *or*, alternatively, as a normal behaviour because of pervasive mechanisms (Palmer, 2012). Diversely, the mafia clan studied here strategically combined perverse *and* pervasive mechanisms to recruit and control professionals in a misconduct project. This is somewhat surprising, as the lack of control over organizational and professional processes of the mafia clan may suggest a primary, if not exclusive, focus on perverse antecedents, for example, incentives and threats. Contrary to this hypothesis, however, the mafia clan was capable of nesting pervasive mechanisms into perverse ones to achieve superior outcomes. For instance, while the mafia clan used incentives and threats to unsettle single professionals, it used a broader socio-administrative system (e.g. consisting of affiliated students, corrupted professors, deviated Dean's Office and external stakeholders) to exert constant pressure on several professionals at once. The activation of both perverse and pervasive mechanisms allowed the mafia clan to reach individual professionals, and customize its influence on their specific needs and/or fears. Our findings highlight a stark dichotomy between interventions targeting predisposed professionals (mostly grounded on incentives, hierarchical control, co-participation in the strategy) and those targeting reluctant professionals (mostly grounded on threats, and internal controls from pervasive mechanisms).

This result furnishes insights into how external agents penetrate organizational practices that are otherwise jealously protected by professionals. Rather than attempting to disrupt and revise these practices, which likely engender strong resistance from professionals (Currie et al., 2012; Llewellyn, 2001), external agents may find professional environments where organizational practices have been weakened by professionals predisposed to misconduct, and exploit the presence of these actors to import their misconduct project. In our study, the external agents *infiltrated* the organization to first import

their project from outside and then normalize it from the inside. The infiltration strategy blurred the line between perverse and pervasive mechanisms, since the abnormal incentives and threats were channelled by ‘normal’ professional structures and actors (e.g. students, Dean’s Office, professional peers).

We thus suggest that the infiltration of professional structures supported a *perverse and intentional use of pervasive mechanisms to recruit professionals in a misconduct project*. This is different from what has been previously reported by the literature, according to which pervasive mechanisms tend to create misconduct unintentionally, for example, obtuse controls and inefficient communication systems might aim to ‘do good’, but backfire (Gabbioneta et al., 2014; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Palmer, 2012). In these circumstances, professionals replicate misconduct over time without complaining, because they take cues from superiors, peers, clients and guidelines, and do not perceive their behaviour as misconduct. In our case study, the external agent achieved a similarly pervasive effect (i.e. professionals replicated misconduct without complaining) despite the fact that professionals were keenly aware of the abnormal nature of their misconduct. This is because, while incentives and threats motivated the misconduct, the control of pervasive processes (e.g. peer pressure, situational influences, governing bodies) preempted the capacity of the reluctant professionals to fight back. Particularly, the reluctant professors had no space where they could safely isolate themselves from the agents of misconduct, and where they could form a united front against them.

In order to strategically combine perverse and pervasive mechanisms, the external agents needed to build a Trojan horse. We labelled the case as ‘Troy’ to resonate with the Iliad, and convey the notion that external agents had to infiltrate the organization. Unlike the Iliad, however, the mafia clan in our case study did not just use ‘soldiers’ from their own camp (e.g. clan members), but populated the ‘belly’ of the horse with *insiders* (i.e. pre-disposed students, and administrators) who knew the profession and/or the organization from the inside. The role of the pre-disposed professors was especially important. External agents typically lack legitimacy and expertise to move freely in the professional organization, so they need individuals that can provide these resources on their behalf. The pre-disposed professionals were necessary to have: (i) *internal knowledge brokers*, who understood professionals dynamics and knew who could be corrupted and how to hide the misconduct; (ii) *internal carriers of misconduct*, who exerted an administrative and social influence on others; and (iii) a *linchpin* between the interests and goals of the external agent and the practice and norms of the profession. These professors were recruited by the mafia clan through perverse mechanisms, but also co-designed and implemented recruitment initiatives targeting individual peers and infiltrating the governing bodies – which could have been out-of-reach, expensive or risky for the external agent. The importance of the pre-disposed professionals as linchpins between ‘abhorrent’ external agents and ‘normal’ professionals resonates with earlier studies on organizational change and professional resistance. Past studies noted that regulators and managers struggle to orient professionals toward new practices, and need to engage hybrid managers acting as ‘two-way windows’ and translating their strategy to professionals (Burgess et al., 2015; Llewellyn, 2001). Very similarly, the pre-disposed professors acted as ‘two-way windows’ as they embraced the logics and interests of the external agents and knew the norms and practices of the profession.

Exploiting 'normal' professional features for 'abnormal' recruitments

Past studies have highlighted that processes of professional change initiated by external agents are often triggered by a precipitating jolt and then unfold slowly, as non-professional agents may need to exploit precipitating jolts (e.g. the death of patient, financial scandals) and still need to implement incremental interventions with the help of professionals (Greenwood et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2006). The proponents of these changes tried to evolve organizational practices toward 'better conduct' or remained neutral about the ethical implications (Greenwood et al., 2002; Kellogg, 2009; Muzio et al., 2013). Relatively little is instead known about processes of professional change where 'good conduct' is meant to deteriorate. Shedding a light on the latter, our case study described a process of change that was not activated by any visible and 'abnormal' event, and at the same time was relatively rapid. Misconduct projects, unlike positive professionalization projects, aim to go unnoticed and thus seek the 'silence' of externally not visible and rapid changes. To achieve this, our findings suggest the importance of organizational affordances (i.e. contradictions and ambiguities in professional conduct that pre-existed the recruitment strategy). The misconduct project was pursued in a weakened professional context, where existing arrangements already legitimized imperfect exam marking exercises, and where some individuals had already liaised with external agents. The identification of a flawed professional context was the first stage of a stepped approach that, however, did not exploit precipitating jolts or the emergence of new players (as in Greenwood et al., 2002), but on the contrary a stable professional environment where incumbent players were already afforded some degree of misconduct. The mafia clan built on these weaknesses to expand the diffusion and depth of the misconduct. These findings resonate with earlier research on 'organizational affordances' (Van Dijk et al., 2011; Radaelli et al., 2017) which argued that innovations and changes are more likely to emerge in professional contexts with unresolved contradictions and ambiguities. Professionals, in these contexts, need to make sense of the ambiguities and solve the contradictions; thus they are more inclined to change their practices. Likewise, with misconduct, professionals need to make sense of different interests and logics that coexist in their environment. They may thus be more inclined to deviate from norms.

We suggest that 'organizational affordances' are not necessarily perverse and extraordinary features of professional organizations; they may be pervasive and 'normal'. Our case suggests that professional work possesses three main forces – that is, autonomy, multiple embeddedness and trusteeship – that are originally meant to protect the professions from misconduct but simultaneously supported contradictory goals (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). First, autonomy is expected to protect professionals from external influences, and yet at Troy University it had pervasive effects on misconduct. The mafia clan did not disrupt practices of professional autonomy because they guaranteed its 'opaque quality' against peer reviews and external monitoring; hence misconduct could be hidden and justified more easily. Furthermore, the clan exploited the fact that professionals were already respectful of peers' autonomy and did not monitor their conduct. Professional autonomy was not even revised, but exploited and ramped up with administrative and social systems that further discouraged collaborations and mutual control. Second, professionals are naturally embedded in multiple environments, which in theory impart greater quality to their

services. Professors, for instance, are expected to navigate other professional and industrial environments to increase the relevance of their teaching and practice. This multiple embeddedness may have pervasive effects on misconduct once professionals negotiate their work and its outcome with other professions or interest groups (McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Muzio et al., 2016). Medicine professors, in particular, are likely to work in the healthcare field; to negotiate resources with multiple suppliers for their teaching and clinics; to attract the interests of politics and business – and so on. It follows that professionals (i) are intrinsically exposed to multiple professional interests and non-professional ‘temptations’ and (ii) almost inevitably serve multiple clients (e.g. students, patients, industries, citizens). The contradiction between the norms of the multiple contexts in which professionals are embedded can be exploited by external agents to make the notion of ‘good conduct’ more fluid, and gradually engender misconduct. For instance, by exchanging misconduct with improvements in clinical work, professionals ‘balanced the ledger’ between the interests of patients with those of students. Finally, professionals’ trusteeship norms may have pervasive effects on misconduct, which contradict the intended benefits on clients. Trusteeship norms prioritize clients’ interest over self-interest, and thus are meant to prevent misconduct (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, pursuing the interests of clients ‘too much’ may backfire and generate negative outcomes. Our study highlights that professionals pursued the interests of some of their clients (e.g. patients) at the expense of others (e.g. students and taxpayers). External agents may exploit the ‘grey area’ between different trusteeship norms to normalize misconduct with ad-hoc incentives.

Conclusions

This study has investigated how an external agent recruited professionals in its misconduct project. Our findings highlighted the possibility to infiltrate professional and organizational boundaries using a combination of perverse and pervasive mechanisms. Professional organizations may host individuals that are pre-disposed to misconduct. External agents can exploit their expertise and status to co-design a misconduct project. Thanks to their mediation, external agents may become able to ‘handpick’ and control professionals that are otherwise reluctant to enact misconduct.

Further research can build on our contribution. In our case, an illegal external agent (i.e. a mafia clan) successfully recruited professional actors (i.e. professors) and influenced their work to pursue a misconduct project. Future research could extend our findings by exploring additional scenarios. First: what happens when external agents are legal organizations using permissible incentives to pursue their private agendas (e.g. companies providing universities with on-field projects or professional opportunities)? How professional actors manage, or mismanage, the challenge of gaining external benefits while preserving good conduct represents a fertile area for future contributions. Second: what can professional organizations do to prevent or react to the infiltration of illegal organizations? Our case represented a success from the point of view of the mafia clan. Other studies may conversely elaborate theories on how professionals identify external threats and protect themselves. Third: do external agents change when they develop partnerships with professionals? Our study focused on the external agents’ bad influence on professional actors. Future


research may highlight if and how professional actors may in turn influence the work and goals of external agents. Fourth: do external agents use other approaches to infiltrate or exploit professional actors? Particularly, future research could explore if and how external agents might pursue their private agendas by exploiting professionals' good conduct, rather than deviate it.

To conclude, we want to highlight some considerations on our methodology. We relied closely on secondary sources, most of which were collected by actors (e.g. law-enforcement agencies) for non-research purposes. Key informants were inaccessible for primary data collection, and this is indeed typical of several instances of professional misconduct and illicit activities. We believe that the use of secondary sources is vital for increasing the number and quality of studies on these elusive topics, as we could analyse data that we could not have collected on our own (e.g. insights into the criminal activities obtained directly from wiretapped conversations). By navigating this trade-off, we believe that the literature on professional misconduct could gain access to vital, and yet otherwise inaccessible, phenomena.

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