How College Students Cheat On In-Class Examinations: Creativity, Strain, and Techniques of Innovation

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Abstract

There is adequate consensus among researchers that cheating is widely practiced by students and poses a serious problem across college campuses. Previous studies of academic dishonesty have systematically identified the psychological and social variables correlated to cheating, but how students actually cheat has often been overlooked. Using in-depth narratives from 119 students enrolled in an introductory criminology class, this paper examines the variety of creative tactics that students use to cheat during in-class examinations. Findings indicate that students manipulate variables such as the psychological and behavioral profiles of their professors, unwitting accomplices, technology, peers, spatial environments, and their own bodies, to negotiate the contingent intricacies and dialectics of academic dishonesty.

Introduction

There is adequate consensus among researchers that cheating by college students is a pervasive phenomenon (Aiken, 1991; McCabe and Bowers, 1994; McCabe and Trevino, 1996; Spiller and Crown, 1995). The literature on academic dishonesty provides a structural framework for understanding exactly what constitutes cheating. It also documents the social and personal characteristics of cheaters, their motives, where they are most likely to cheat, and when they are most likely to cheat; but where the literature is less thorough is when it comes to documenting what the students do to cheat—that is, how they cheat. This gap in the literature exists because the techniques and tactics that students use to cheat have been largely presupposed rather than thoroughly examined.

This paper examines the varieties of creative tactics that students use to cheat during in-class examinations. Analysis of such tactics indicates that aside from the brute mechanics of cheating, some very basic variables play a role in students’ decision to cheat: the possibility of detection, surveillance from proctors, strategies for escape, projection of normalcy, and minimization of culpability. Cheating during in-class examinations is mediated by certain variables which are part of the student’s decision to cheat as well as the overall negotiation and management of the cheating strategies and processes themselves. Based upon this study of how students cheat, specific techniques for enforcing academic integrity during in-class examinations will be suggested along with speculations as to the emotional and moral attractions of academic dishonesty.

Previous Work On Academic Cheating

An understanding of cheating on college campuses today must account for its pervasiveness (Baird, 1980; Diekhoff et al., 1996; Graham et al., 1989; Hollinger and Kaduce, 1996; Karlins et al., 1988; Labeff et al., 1990; McCabe, 1992), the personal and social characteristics of cheaters (Cooper and Peterson, 1980; Flyn et al., 1987; Kelly and Worell, 1990; Newstead et al., 1996; Ward and Beck, 1990; Whitley et al., 1999), their motivations (Barnett and Dalton, 1981; Drake, 1941; Labeff et al., 1990; Schab, 1991), and the situational and environmental factors that facilitate it (Bonjean and McGee, 1965; Bushway and Nash, 1977; Genereux and McLeod, 1995; Houston, 1976, 1977, 1983, 1986).
The principal thrust of this type of research has come primarily from two disciplines: education and psychology. Consequently, researchers in those two disciplines have been content to survey the attitudes of individuals that best predict cheating (see Anderson, 1957; Enker, 1987; Eskridge and Ames, 1993; Johnson and Klores, 1968). However, aside from the attitudes about cheating that students, faculty, and peers hold, cheating is a suitable topic for researchers within disciplines such as sociology and criminology. From a sociological/criminological perspective, cheating behavior represents an illegitimate means of dealing with perceived frustrations encountered in the pursuit of a desired goal (Merton, 1938).

In the context of higher education, that goal is a college degree—seen by many students to be a pre-requisite for upward mobility. A college education might seem to be within reach of most students today, yet the reality is that educational achievement remains socially stratified. Academic dishonesty has little sociological relevance if students conform to culturally prescribed aspirations and means toward attainment of their educational goals; however, when students assimilate “the cultural emphasis on success without equally internalizing the morally prescribed norms governing means for its attainment,” then the illegitimate methods employed to achieve the desired state becomes a pivotal focus of rule-breaking behavior (see Merton, 1938, p. 678).

A recent application of two dominant criminological theories to academic dishonesty hypothesizes that students whose ambitions are thwarted from achieving their valued goals (i.e. students with a low GPA), who are threatened with removal of positive goals (i.e. loss of scholarship), and who are bombarded with negative stimuli (i.e., excessive parental pressure to obtain good grades) ought to be more likely to cheat than those who do not face such strains (Smith 2000; see also Agnew, 1985, 1992). However, Smith’s (2000) findings did not support the claims of general strain theory, and the perceived strains did not significantly affect students’ decisions to cheat.1

In some cases, attempts to address prevalent cheating have had to grapple with an absence of standardization regarding exactly what constitutes academic dishonesty, but there is remarkable consistency in the literature as to what behaviors count as cheating—especially on exams (see Cizek, 1999; Eve and Bromly, 1981; Graham et al., 1994; Wright and Kelly, 1974). For example, McCabe and Bowers (1994, p. 7) define the parameters of cheating on tests/exams as:

1) copying from another test or exam
2) helping someone on a test
3) using a crib note
4) copying from someone without their knowledge (see also McCabe and Trevino, 1996, p. 31).

Smith’s (2000: 100) work offers a more nuanced way of differentiating and classifying cheating on tests, but his questionnaire also implicitly hints that there might be other places and ways that crib notes may be creatively imported and used during an exam. This leads to a logical question that is not addressed in the current literature: what type of innovative and creative tactics do students use to cheat during in-class examinations? And once crib notes are used, what strategies do students use to destroy the evidence of their illicit actions? Newstead et al. (1996) and Smith (2000) note that prearranged signal systems are used to receive or communicate answers to and from others; if this is so, are hand signals and tapping one’s pencils the only way that cheating occurs? How do students avoid the obvious possibility of drawing the teacher’s suspicions while employing such intrusive methods of communication?
Using crib notes has long been noted as a common tactic that students use to cheat, but how students actually plan, manage, and execute the intricacies of importing the crib notes to the exam and then use it while eluding detection from proctors—a situational and routine activities approach to rule breaking—has not been addressed sufficiently in the existing literature (Cohen and Felson, 1979). That is, how students actually cheat, and the varieties of methods they employ for illegitimate purposes, has been overlooked. This gap in the literature exists because the techniques and tactics that students use to cheat have been largely presupposed and not examined as a justifiable topic in their own right.

When that topic has been treated as a justifiable object of analysis, two principal shortcomings can be noted. First, the novel methods that students use to cheat have not been rigorously and cogently developed. Thus, Cizek (1999) noted that in-class cheating involves “Giving, Taking, and Receiving” (GTR) of information, the use of “Forbidden Materials” (FM), and “Taking Advantage of the Testing Process” (TAP), but these categories are too broad and lack thematic coherence and specificity. Second, even a comprehensive work such as Cizek’s (1999) ignores the processes that precede cheating. For instance, Cizek offers a compendium of methods that students use to cheat, but how students actually manage the intricacies and contingencies that arise during the planning and commission phases are largely presupposed. This type of stance overlooks the sequential and progressive aspects of cheating that might illuminate how it is actually carried out. This paper attempts to remedy that gap in the existing research by classifying and collating the innovative methods that students use to adapt to their perceived strain in the pursuit of scholastic aspirations, and presents a typology of the innovative methods students use to cheat on in-class examinations.

Data and Methods

This study was concerned with identifying and classifying the specific techniques that students use to cheat during in-class exams; it was exploratory in nature, designed to elicit detailed narratives. Consequently, no hypotheses were tested. Rather than using pre-formulated surveys and coding schemes, students were instructed to be as detailed and as descriptive as possible in their narratives. The narrative responses were then inductively categorized into recurring analytical patterns (see Emerson et al., 1995). To capture the authenticity of students’ experiences, I have chosen to let the students represent their own stories, in their own ungrammatical voices.

The data for this study were collected from a medium-sized regional university in the Midwest (MU) and a medium-sized regional university in the South (SU) in the spring of 2003 and fall of 2003. The subjects were chosen from a convenience sample of 128 undergraduate students, 72 male and 56 female, who had enrolled in an introductory criminal justice/criminology course. Although participation was voluntary, and for extra credit, two respondents did not give consent to use their responses so they were excluded from the analysis; furthermore, seven respondents stated outright that they had never cheated on any exam, so their responses were not included in the substantive portions of the paper. While it could be argued that these two courses are not representative of the university population as a whole, the two courses fulfilled the general education requirements of both universities; hence, students from a broad range of majors and disciplines, as well as class standing, were represented in the sample.

Each student was asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire. The students were asked two questions:
1) Have you ever cheated during an in-class examination? (Cheating was defined as copying a test from others, using unauthorized crib notes and “cheat sheets” during an exam.)

2) If students answered yes to 1, they were directed to a second question which asked them to write a detailed narrative as to how they cheated—the specific tactics they used to cheat during in-class examinations.

There were wide variations in the length and detail of students’ narratives, ranging from one paragraph to several pages; for the purposes of this paper, narratives that are rich in descriptions and representative of the analytical category under discussion are chosen as examples.

“Qualifying” the Professor

Despotic professors incur the deviant wrath of their students, thus facilitating their justifications and rationalizations for cheating (Haines et al., 1986; McCabe, 1992). Practically, however, students who decide to cheat on in-class exams have to find innovative ways to avoid the surveillance of professors and teaching assistants. Thus, in addition to completing the exam, students who decide to cheat must first determine their potential for success; to this end, they engage in a “qualifying” process whereby they determine if “the person is desirable as a victim” (Leo, 1996, p. 266).

Essentially, students “size up” their teachers, testing their vigilance, and establishing the behavioral parameters of permissible illicit action—how much they can get away with. This process is similar to the way police detectives “size up” a suspect in an interrogation room in that students, too, create a psychological “profile” of their professors, and conjure up ways to dupe them. In the following, a student explains her decision to cheat on an in-class quiz as a function of the difficulty of the course, her pressing need to pass, and the physical limitations of the teacher:

One summer I decided to take the hardest class of my college career. I was terrified of this class for a long time, so I put it off to the very end. I had heard horror stories of different teachers but I had never heard anything about the particular teacher that I would be taking. She was the head of the department so I knew she would not play any games.

Quiz number one I mad an F after studying practically the whole morning. So, by quiz two I got smart because I saw how she operated. She was an old lady dying of cancer. She was in a wheel chair and she never moved from the spot her husband put her in. I knew that we would have to take the second quiz on loose-leaf paper. When class began and she said clear your desk of everything but a sheet of paper I took out a blank sheet and put it over my answers. I could see the answers through the blank sheet of paper. Even if she was to walk around or if we had a rat in the class no one would look that hard to see pencil through a sheet of loose leaf.

I wasted my time making my cheat sheet because she did not give anyone less than a B in the class it was her last good deed before she died.

From the outset, this student makes a distinction between regular faculty members and department chairs, assuming that the courses taught by department chairs are substantively more difficult, the teacher more vigilant and strict—“hard” (“she would not play any games”). That assumption is initially confirmed when the student fails the first quiz, despite the student’s assiduous morning study. In this narrative, the difficulty of the exam is formulated as an “extreme case,” and offered as an implicit justification of her decision to cheat (see Edwards, 2000). That is to say, the student almost talks herself into cheating.

After the first failed quiz, however, the student re-evaluates the professor’s suitability as a potential target for cheating after discovering an obvious limitation in the professor’s surveillance ca-
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pability: she has to remain stationary, hence, limited in her field of vision. Furthermore, the student has already identified the situational and normative contours which affect the feasibility of her illicit action during the in-class exams and quizzes: she knows that they will be conducted in a predictable way, and relies on her knowledge of situational routines to mobilize and execute her illegitimate plans. In this excerpt, the student “sizes up” the professor’s constraints in her mobility, range and scope of her surveillance, and typifications of test administration and uses them to her unfair advantage; consequently, she is able to successfully cheat without detection. In the next narrative, a student elaborates in considerable detail how he “sizes up” the professor and constructs a working “profile”:

How do you do it [cheat] without getting caught? Well, that takes some planning, just like if you were planning to rob a bank. You won’t just bust down the banks doors & yell FREEZE! No, you have to do it in a calmer & more pre meditated manner to help reduce the risk of being caught.

The first way is by knowing the professor. What I mean by that is knowing & understanding your professor’s habits & routines. In other words your teacher is human so his daily plan or the way he does things is by repetition and are usually the same. The way he goes to work, goes to the bathroom, drinks his coffee and so on. But you have to notice his habits and routine in the classroom...

Another thing learn his interests. What I mean by that is notice if he brings a magazine or newspaper and if he does this everyday. If you see him reading something on campus, notice what it is and how long he’ll read than look up. Bring a watch. Most people begin reading something they like and forget what they are supposed to be doing and in about 5 minutes they’ll look up to see where they are or look at their watch to remember what they have to do. After you notice these things a few times your set. If you are going to a test and he comes in with a magazine or paper he read daily or every other day you got him. You’ve already studied his reading habits and you know about how often he’ll look up at the class. Say he looks up about every 3 minutes. You know you have at least 2 minutes to cheat so now you got him. He is unaware of his thought less routines or habits so the chance of getting caught in virtually gone.

Oh, another things, remember that group or people you learned your professor likes or is his favorites. You want to be one of them. Why? Because someone who pretends to pay attention or participates will be most unlikely to cheat right? Well, that’s what your professor thinks. So you need to participate and ask questions you know only your professor would know so he thinks your trying to learn. This is very effective.

The first noteworthy—and impressive—point about the way this student “sizes up” the professor is the rigorous planning, attention to detail, and the sophisticated gathering of intelligence through systematic observations. Similar to the way an armed robber “cases” a potential victim through staged ploys and reading of subtle “cues,” the student does not just observe the teacher; he collects, sorts, and analyzes behavioral data, carefully noting the professor’s reading habits, body and eye movements, and general comportment in the classroom (see especially Jacobs, 2000, pp. 47-72; Katz, 1988, pp. 164-236; Wright and Decker, 1997, p. 94). Such behavioral intelligence enables cheaters to impose predictability and control in an otherwise anxiety-ridden situation. In this narrative the student notes the teacher’s favored reading materials, and brings a stopwatch to calculate the window of opportunity that he has to cheat. By knowing the professor’s habits and routines, the student is able to delineate the situational, normative, and temporal boundaries of illicit action; moreover, such systematic observations reveal the victim’s vulnerabilities and weaknesses. In other words, the student knows what he can get away with and how long he can look at his cheat sheet.
The second noteworthy point is that the student actually “cultivates” the professor, meaning that the student manipulates the professor through a “pattern of psychological dependence” (see Leo 1996, p. 271). For most teachers, I would presume, a student’s desire to learn and do well in class, through expression of interest and class participation, is a gratifying experience and an enduring source of motivation. The aforementioned student displays a sound understanding of these qualities that “cultivate” a professor; and it is precisely this occupational foible that the student usurps by establishing intimate rapport, feigning interest and participation. Like a good confidence man or a car salesman, an experienced cheater exploits the weaknesses of professors and betrays his/her trust for a chance to improve his/her grade. Once students have “sized up” their professors, and have decided to cheat (or not), then they must decide if they are going to cheat alone or do so in collusion with others.

**Collaborative Cheating**

Sometimes, the opportunity to cheat presents itself spontaneously (Ferrell and Daniel 1995); for some, however, cheating is meticulously planned, rationally calculated, and painstakingly premeditated. It is erroneous to believe, however, that all students cheat with sophistication, their “ingenuity” being used to outwit unsuspecting professors. Bluntly put, some tactics do not take much creativity at all, and only require minimal vigilance from instructors to deter—and catch—students from cheating. Some cheating methods are just uncouth and unimaginative: students sit in the back of the room and blatantly whisper answers back and forth to one another. In this section, some of the recurring, yet not so obvious, methods that students use to cheat in conjunction with their peers are discussed.

**Tactical Deployment**

Tactical deployment refers to the strategic ways that students position themselves in relation to others; this method requires students to be situated in a zone of maximal surveillance in the proximity of someone who has studied for the exam, one who may or may not be an accomplice. Usually, this person is considered the “smart” one in the class, and those who seek his/her assistance simply peek at their answers unknownst to their victims:

*When I cheated myself & some buddies would position ourselves around the smartest one in the class & the one closest would copy & we would copy off of him. Cheat sheets are to risky you can get caught real easy.*

Sometimes, the “smart” ones are confederates in the collusion:

*I found method relying on several parties in an auditorium setting. I call this method the flying ducks formation of test taking. You need a few people in order to make this procedure work. A person who studies or is a scholar is needed for this procedure. What happens is the scholar sits in front of the pack of students and takes the test as though nothing is happening. Two people sit in front of the pack of students and takes the test as though nothing is happening. Two people sit in the next row over his shoulder in a formation and compare or copy the test from him. Then in the next row, two people sit to the left over and the right over and copy the test. When looked from above the students sit in a V-formation as though they are a flock of ducks migrating to the south. This procedure works best in auditorium classes that has a slope in it, because it is easier to look at someone else’s paper.*

Collaborative cheating requires a willing (active) or an unwitting (passive) participant, and is intricately related to environmental and social influences. To cheat successfully with others, a “smart” confederate—one who actually studies for the exam—is necessary (see Cizek, 1999). Moreover, the confederate must be willing to participate in the scheme. The person who allows his/her work to be copied can be conceptualized as a
passive-social cheater since his/her role is minimally active (see Hetherington and Feldman, 1964).

The role of large classes, auditoriums, and format of examinations has been demonstrated to be linked to student cheating in prior research (Houston, 1976). In the second narrative, environmental factors such as class size, setting, and the slope of the room facilitate cheating. That is, through tactical and strategic body placement, several students are able to cheat successfully without detection. But what is noteworthy here is the incremental and sequential nature of collaborative cheating; no one individual bears an unfair load of the dishonest work; each participant’s role in the scheme is compartmentalized, thus diminishing the likelihood of group detection and mitigating the culpability of the involved parties. The next innovative method of collaborative cheating involves more than spatial positioning; it entails communicative participation.

**Semiotic Methods**

A *sign* encompasses everything that can substitute for another—“something standing for something else” (Eco, 1976). Consequently, any sign system is *inter alia* communicative; and similar to any communicative system, the relationship between the signifier (e.g., word, object) and the signified (e.g., meaning) is arbitrary; that relationship is established through usage and convention, sometimes by collusion. A notorious case of this type of cheating involved contestants on a popular television game show (“Who Wants to be a Millionaire?”), where an audience member supplied the contestant with correct answers through a series of coded coughs. Students rely on similar methods to signal answers to one another. Consider the following two narratives:

*Another method of cheating that was successful on multiple choice tests for a while was using signs. This would work in the classes that had students facing each other. For example, I would watch a student and he or she would signal me the answer by touch the nose for A, touch the chin for B, the ear for C, and finally touch the top of the head for answer D. This method was harder so we had to pay attention and stay on the same question.*

*I had a huge exam in physics coming up and had no time to study. So I devised a plan with a friend in that class. The plan was to cheat on the exam through silent communication. The way we decided to do this was to give each object on our desk a certain letter meaning. A would be a pencil, B would be a pen, C would be a calculator, and D would be the actual test. When either one of us didn’t know the answer to one of the questions we would knock the number of the question out lightly on the desk and wait for the other to pick up the object with the letter of the right answer assigned to it. It worked beautifully and the teacher never knew what happened. We both passed the test and were never caught.*

Coughing once for A, twice for B and so on, or varying the pitch, duration, and intensity of coughs—coded coughs—to signal answers runs into an obvious problem: it is likely to engender suspicion from professors and proctors since repeated occurrences will be noticeably audible; furthermore, a pattern of such coughs might be inductively deduced by an astute observer, as evidenced by the cheating scandal on the television game show. Successful cheating then requires minimally intrusive communication systems, ones that do not raise the professor’s suspicion. One respondent in the data reported that she and her cousin used the American Sign Language during a test to convey answers to one another from across the room.

In the two preceding narratives, students rely on non-verbal communication methods of cheating so as to not draw attention to themselves; this
is accomplished by using banal objects—objects that have no inherent meaning—to assign a letter value. This semiotic cheating is facilitated by the seating arrangement; since students are facing one another, ordinary—harmless—behaviors such as rubbing and scratching one’s nose, chin, ear, and head are mutually ratified to “stand for” corresponding answers. Should the teacher suspect something and confront a student about repeated rubbing and scratching, this tactic gives the student a readily available explanation: a really bad itch.

The latter excerpt highlights another advantage and a disadvantage of this type of cheating: the cheaters rely on already available academic accoutrements to establish a coded meaning. Pencils, pens, calculators, erasers, and the actual exam are items that do not have to be smuggled into the examination room since they are requisites for school work in general; thus, this method is advantageous in that it eliminates from the outset the leaving behind of potentially incriminating evidence (e.g., crib notes). The only possible shortcoming of this technique is that the questions themselves must also be communicated to the accomplices; as a result, this tactic also faces a similar problem as with coughing: audibility and repetition have the potential of raising a professor’s suspicions. If semiotic methods of cheating are chosen so as to deflect attention from test-takers, as in the next method, it is precisely this dilemma that students negotiate through a carefully orchestrated academic conspiracy.

Distracting the Professor

Cheating, similar to committing a crime, is a function of opportunity. Research indicates that the threat of severe punishment is an effective deterrent to student cheating (Houston, 1983), as is arranging seats far apart, and the presence of highly vigilant instructors (Genereaux and McCleod, 1995). However, when other methods of cheating are delimited as a function of aforementioned environmental factors, students resort to a different—innovative—method of collaborative cheating:

*Every time we would took a test somehow we find a way to cheat. The most frequent cheating method we would use was the distraction method. One of us would go to the front and distract the teacher, while the others would get the notes out of their book sacks. Each one of us would go up to distract the teacher, to make sure everybody had the right answers.*

Colluding with one’s peers has a clear advantage over solitary cheating in that by distracting the professor, a student has ample time and opportunity to retrieve and place the crib notes in a strategic location without the fear of surveillance and detection. By distraction, we refer to cases where students walk up to the professor during an exam and ask questions about the questions, seeking clarification on a ridiculously obvious point, and feigning confusion about the wording of questions/answers etc.

A group of conspirators who do this is less likely to raise suspicion since each students’ role is compartmentalized; should the professor suspect conspiracy to commit academic misconduct, the burden of proof is placed squarely on the teacher. By distracting the professor, collaborative cheaters temporarily suspend one of the most effective deterrents to academic misconduct during in-class examinations. Not all students, however, have the wherewithal to get involved in such complicities because they lack the deviant social capital in the first place; those who face the monetary and cultural pull of academic achievement without bosom friends, and decide to adopt illegitimate methods, must manage the nuances of cheating in a solitary manner.
Solitary Cheating

The data collection instruments used by prior researchers demonstrate a firm grasp of the way students cheat during in-class examinations (Aiken, 1991; Baird, 1980; Drake, 1941; Franklyn-Stokes, 1995). For instance, using crib notes ("cheat sheets") is mentioned in virtually all of them, as is peeking at someone else’s answer sheet; writing the answers on the bottom of one’s shoes, on top of desks, and hands are part of academic folklore. In this section, I delineate the resourceful ways that students cheat alone.

Unwitting Victim

Collaborative cheaters deploy themselves in strategic ways in relation to "smart" confederates; if the "smart" person is not an accomplice, then the one whose work is surreptitiously copied is not a passive cheater but a victim—a victim of theft (see Bunn et al., 1992). Consider the following narrative:

I tried my hardest studying but I just cannot get it. Maybe I can get away with looking off that smart girl that sits next to me. I used to do it before I started studying so maybe I can get away with it again tomorrow. I hope I do not get caught. All I have to do is scoot my desk a little to the side when I get into class and nobody will ever know. Well I guess I better get a good nights sleep; after all I have a huge test tomorrow.

Good I am here early and nobody is in class yet. This is where she sits so I am going to sit right here one over and one behind. I really hope I do not get caught, I am so scared. Yes she sat there, it’s all over now, I’m going to make at least a “B” now but I’ll hope for a “A”.

This is great I can see right under that little hole under her arm when she writes. First answer is D. One down and ninety-nine to go. This is too easy its like taking candy from a baby.

Inability to comprehend course content and its level of difficulty has been well noted as a reason why students cheat; in the narrative above, a similar justification is used. The decision to cheat in this case, however, is neither opportunistic nor spontaneous; it is premeditated the night before, the plan of illicit action well rehearsed in the cheater’s mind. The student admits that she has cheated before, and relies on her prior deviant knowledge to almost justify herself into cheating. She already knows what she will do to cheat in the first place. Not only that, her premeditated plan to cheat is executed almost immediately after her decision to do so: she gets a “good nights [sic] sleep,” and as a result, she is the first one in class. By arriving early, she secures a seat near the “smart” girl. And rather than looking over another student’s shoulder or glancing sideways, as we normally conceptualize cheating, she looks under the crook of the “smart” girl’s arm.

This student cheater chooses as victim the person who possesses the valued commodity, and situates herself to the immediate left/right and rear. In other words, to know who the cheaters are, instructors must know where the good students sit. This runs contradictory to what we as teachers normally assume about the nature of cheating and practice in the classroom since there is a professorial tendency to direct surveillance to the corner and in the back—where the “bad” students dwell and congregate, while leaving “good” students alone; but in actuality, cheaters are not far from the good students. Consider again a previously discussed narrative:

Oh, another things, remember that group or people you learned your professor likes or is his favorites. You want to be one of them. Why? Because someone who pretends to pay attention or participates will be most unlikely to cheat right? Well, that’s what your professor thinks. So you need to participate and ask questions you know only your professor would know so he thinks your trying to learn. This is very effective.
This student cultivates the professor into thinking that he is a good student and for good reason. Being considered one of the “good” students not only reaps rewards when on the borderline of a higher grade, but it also averts the suspicious gaze of professors. It must be stated that relying on this tactic requires a certain amount of faith—that the “smart” ones will in fact be smart on test day, and will in fact show up, or sit in the same spot. That is, this method of cheating leaves too many variables to chance; for students who seek to impose order and predictability in an otherwise anxiety producing situation, they do it themselves.

Creative Smuggling

Creative smuggling refers to the innovative and illicit means that students use to import unauthorized notes to the examination site, “with the intention of defrauding an educational institution out of academic credit for personal gain” (Smith, 2000, p. 99). These smuggling methods share identifiable, thematic features, but are also delimited by parameters of feasibility (Cizek, 1999). In this section I classify the innovative smuggling techniques students use to cheat on in-class examinations into four thematic categories: 1) body parts 2) articles of clothing 3) technological gizmos 4) ordinary objects.

Body Parts

Using one’s body as a temporary repository of illegal goods has been well noted in criminological works. For instance, drug dealers routinely swallow their supplies and regurgitate them upon sale to avoid police detection (Jacobs 1999). Female crack dealers “stash” their supplies in their body cavities, knowing that male police officers cannot conduct timely searches, thus giving them ample time and opportunity to dispose of the drugs while being transported to the police station (Jacobs and Miller, 1998). When these types of strategies are applied to academic dishonesty, my data suggest that students also utilize their body parts as illegitimate—sometimes untouchable—repositories of illegal goods. Consider the following narrative:

Instead of writing the answers in my hand, I would write them on the side of my fingers. If I were asked to present my hands for inspection, there would be no visible evidence of the crime. When the teacher would scan for cheating students, I would put my hand on my forehead “in frustration” and read the answers from between my fingers. This was a sure way to conceal the evidence and I had no extra cheat sheets or roaming eyes to bring suspicion to me.

Although this student relies on a rather elementary method of cheating, she adds a slight variation to the method. Instead of writing on the most visible parts of her hand (palms), she writes the answers on the sides of her fingers where they are not readily visible. Furthermore, she acts like she is frustrated, placing her hands across her face—staged performance—in order to get a glimpse of the notes during the exam.

Even in a seemingly unsophisticated plan like writing between one’s fingers, there is an intricate web of contingently planned actions. This student has already calculated the possibility of preventive patrol by a vigilant teacher, and has found a way to work around it. Furthermore, by using her body part as a resource, she removes the evidence of the crime as she exits the room, thereby eliminating another step in the cheating process that may be a liability. This is one of the primary advantages of writing the answers on one’s body. Consider a similar tactic:

Another common technique was, writing words on your hand and arms. That way it want be so obvious that you are cheating. Most people just lie their arm straight down across the desk. Many people find that it is a lot easier to hide also. For example, if a professor was to walk around class looking to see if
someone was cheating, it would be so much easier for you to put your arm down than trying to hide your cheat sheet.

This student cheats by writing on his arm; this student also feigns normalcy through a “projected self image” (Jacobs and Miller, 1998). That is, students are aware of behaviors that are normatively associated with test taking, and they are used to project a normal appearance during the course of their illicit action. Thus, a student who is “frustrated,” and in exasperation, puts her hands to her head—a rather common sight—to dupe the professor into thinking she is dazed and confused when in actuality she is sneaking a peek at her crib notes; a student who has written the answers on the underside of his forearm straightens it out and puts his head on it to cover his fraudulent method as the proctor stalls by.

Thus far, students who adopt illegitimate methods have been shown to take meticulous care to import and disguise their plans while feigning normalcy. Moreover, they prepare their notes, mentally rehearse their plans, and execute them with a vigilant proctor already configured into the plan. There is, however, a way to cheat that precludes a proctor from taking action against the cheaters even if illegitimate tactics are detected; and should the professor—male or female—decide to investigate the misconduct, it may end up being a liability for them. Consider the following narrative:

It was a long skirt that came down to my ankles with a slit on both sides. Before every test I would write all the answers on my thigh. When I stood up you could not see because that slit was not that high, but it was high enough when I sat down. When I sat down to take my test, my skirt came up a little. I then crossed my legs and I could see all the answers that I had written on my leg. If he passed by my desk I would uncross my legs and I was good to go.

This female student uses her body as an unauthorized cheat sheet, but instead of writing the answers on her hands and arms, she writes them on her legs; and similar to the meticulous planning we have seen in prior tactics, she has also rehearsed the plan well: she wears a skirt that is of a particular length and style so that the answers become accessible and under her complete control—when she crosses her legs; should she encounter a proctor while looking at the answers on her thighs, she can uncross her legs to hide evidence of her illicit actions.

The obvious benefit of this method is that it utilizes a body part that is unlikely to generate suspicion; that is, teachers do not normally expect students to write things in sexually suggestive places; but more significantly, by writing the cheat sheet near a precarious place, it insulates the cheater from trenchant surveillance and detection.

The reality of the academy inhibits—or ought to inhibit—confrontation by male professors (especially) who witness a female student sliding up her skirt to sneak a peek at her upper thighs for answers; should a professor be courageous (reckless?) enough to accuse such a student of academic dishonesty, the cheater has at her disposal a trump card of her own. That is, she is able to counter his accusation with an accusation of her own: “What are you doing looking at my legs in the first place?” By countering an accusation with another accusation, she is able to realign the footing of the encounter in a way that now puts the professor on the defensive; that is, he must now deal with her accusation—an accusation that emanates the pungency of sexual harassment. In this ploy, gender is a valuable resource that is employed as an innovative tactic for the sake of a passing grade, a tactic that is uniquely and culturally available primarily to female students.
Articles of Clothing

An obvious advantage of using one’s body parts as a cheat sheet is that the evidence of misconduct is removed with a student’s departure from the examination site; in other words, students who cheat in this manner do not have to concern themselves with the disposal of incriminating evidence. A similar point can be made of clothing. In my data, students regularly admitted taping crib notes onto articles of clothing on the day of the exam. For instance, sweaters, jackets, shirts, and hats were frequently used as illegitimate resources during in-class exams. Consider the following narrative:

Now cheating in basic classes isn’t that hard either best way is a hat just pull it low. The teacher can see the top of the head but has no clue where the eyes are going, hats give the perfect angles for viewing neighbors tests.

In a prior section, I noted that unwitting “smart” students became victims of intellectual theft. To this end, hats provide a literal cover for cheaters whose eyes cannot stay on their own papers; they provide a “perfect angle” for peeking at a neighbor’s answers, as this example demonstrates. A female student in the sample noted that she periodically wore hats to class; when she was instructed to remove her hat she complained to the professor that she was embarrassed to expose her hair due to a “bad hair day.” As a result, she was able to keep her cover and peek at others’ answers.

Sometimes, the crib notes are pasted onto the brim of hats so that students who cheat in this manner only have to glance up to view the answers. Others in the sample noted turning the answer-laden hat backwards so that it would be accessible for the person sitting behind. As a countermeasure and deterrence against this type of cheating, having the students—male and female—remove their hats is all that would be required. Consider another common garb that is used as a way to cheat:

I would tape a cheat sheet upside down on the inside bottom of my shirt. While taking the test I could turn the bottom of my shirt up and get the formula, answer, etc.

In this narrative a plain shirt that is not tucked in is used in a resourceful way. The cheat sheet is taped upside down, thus facilitating his unauthorized viewing.

Technological Gizmos

Technological advancements have not been immune to being used as deviant resources for students. Consider the following typical narrative that involves the use of a calculator:

This does not sound like much but we all had HP48 GX calculators. The brilliant thing about these calculators is that they can send information back and forth using an infrared light. We never got caught but now in chemistry classes you are not allowed to use these calculators.

While scientific calculators have made academic life easier for students, they have also become the scourge of the sciences during exams (see Schab, 1991). In this study, virtually all of the students enrolled in the sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) and mathematics admitted to cheating using a calculator. They would do so by programming formulas and equations into the calculators themselves. In addition to calculators, students also made extensive use of the latest communication devices such as cellular phones and pagers. Students confessed to transmitting answers to and from a confederate using text messaging; some even admitted to snapping photographs of the exam with a camera phone, and forwarding it to their colleagues for storage in fraternity/sorority test banks. This would indi-
cate that professors have one more reason to banish communication devices from classrooms in addition to their usual annoyance.

**Ordinary Objects**

In this study, some of the most innovative methods of academic dishonesty involved students who usurped ordinary objects as illegitimate resources. For instance, one student related that he had a friend who wrote the cheat sheet for a chemistry exam in the corner of the frame of his glasses, and peeked at it during the exam, a tactic that is difficult to envision, but not impossible to undertake. Consider the following narrative of a student who cheats by using a rubber band:

> Basically, the night before the test, you can take the rubberband, preferably a thicker one, and stretch it. While stretched, write the answers on the rubberband as small as you can see from about a foot away. Write the answers as close together as you can. When the rubberband is unstretched it will just appear to be colored solid black, but stretched it will reveal the answers. I haven’t met a teacher that was suspicious of a rubberband. When the test starts, just start playing with the rubberband. If you keep stretching and unstretching it, the teacher won’t think anything of it when you stretch it to look for an answer. The trick is that you need to keep a steady pace of stretching + unstretching the rubberband, and you can’t break that pace when you look for an answer.

Writing the answers on a rubber band, so that it reveals the answers upon stretching, exemplifies the innovative ways that students cheat on in-class examinations. There are other features of this technique that make it noteworthy. First, note the level of calculation that is involved: the student approximates the optimal distance of viewing the stretched rubber band (12 inches away from face), and he writes the answers close together so that it appears to be one solid color.

Second, a normal appearance is projected through a rhythmic elongation prior to the test so as to feign normalcy. By engaging in such behaviors prior to the exam, the student cultivates the professor as a victim since the student manipulates a harmless and ordinary object in innovative ways to dupe the professor into a false sense of normalcy. Another highly creative method of cheating involves using an ordinary academic accoutrement as a resource:

> I noticed that someone was preparing a cheat sheet. I asked myself what is he doing? He wrote his answers on two small pieces of paper with very small print. The thing that was amazing was how he hid it. He has one of those Bic pens. You know the ones you can see through. Well what he did is he took off the cap of the pen and actually put the cheat sheet in the pen.

Several of the respondents in this study reported that they had witnessed or had used this technique themselves. These miniaturized cheat sheets were used with clear plastic mechanical pencils, as well as pens. Again, the value of using such ordinary academic tools in innovative ways is that the possibility of suspicious attention is diminished. While cheating has been conceptualized as being related to social and environmental factors, this study demonstrates that students tailor their illegitimate methods to adapt to their personal, social, and situational contexts. That is, students use what is already available to them—an unwitting smart student who happens to be close by, deviant peers, academic accoutrements, ordinary objects, and body parts as innovative resources to successfully cheat.

**Conclusion**

For some students, a rift between the culturally prescribed symbols of success (i.e. a college degree) and the absence of legitimate opportunities for their attainment translates into adopting innovative methods of adaptation (Merton, 1938).
Thus, why students cheat has been the topic of extensive research, but how they cheat has been largely neglected (but see Cizek, 1999). This paper supplements the established findings on academic dishonesty by delineating the innovative techniques that students use to respond to perceived strains and frustrations encountered within the context of pursuing a college degree.

Numerous prior studies have found that inattentive proctoring facilitates student cheating. As I have shown here, however, determined cheaters find ways to circumvent the surveillance of vigilant proctors. Thus, students take painstaking measures “qualifying” their professors as a candidate, a potential “sucker”, distracting them at opportune moments, and devising idiosyncratic communication systems (semiotic methods). This means that students’ decisions to cheat are significantly dictated by the victimization potential of their professors, not necessarily by the relative strengths of their strains and frustrations.

Previous studies of academic dishonesty have systematically identified the psychological and social variables correlated to cheating, based primarily on subjects’ responses to surveys. For instance, prior researchers have adamantly maintained that students’ propensity to cheat is influenced by the attitudes of their peers. However, my analysis indicates that peers are integral and collusive agents in the cheating processes, in the way academic dishonesty is manifested. Moreover, the variety of tactics used to cheat illustrates the creativity and ingenuity of students today (that is, the ones who decide to cheat). Even a macro-level variable such as gender has been observed to be adapted as a micro-level situational tactic in cheating scenarios.

This paper also offers practical suggestions to deter academic dishonesty and enforce academic integrity during in-class exams. Traditional criminological thought suggests that the severity and swiftness of sanctions would serve as adequate deterrents (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Some institutions have adopted honor codes to deter cheating while maintaining academic integrity, a tactic that has generally been regarded as successful (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). My data, however, suggest a more routine activities approach to “crime” prevention strategies (Cohen and Felson, 1979); the first step in formulating and implementing such policies involves knowing how rule-breaking behavior is conducted (see Wright and Decker, 1994).

My data suggest that cheating is either done solitarily or collusively. In the latter instance, paying attention to in-class group dynamics (i.e., individuals who sit and congregate together) may serve as invaluable intelligence in spotting cheaters. Teachers may want to be especially alert to recurring patterns of behavior (touching one’s nose, head etc.) from students during in-class examinations. In the former instance, it may be prudent for professors to know who the “good” students are and where they sit in order to cast a vigilant eye on the students who sit near them (see Cisek, 1999, p. 40-43). As my data indicate, cheaters are never far from the “good” students. It may also be practical to inspect ordinary items (e.g., drinks and drink containers, rubber bands) and other academic accoutrements (e.g., pens, calculators), along with non-troublrousing body parts (e.g., hands, arms) since they may be used as cheat sheets. Of course, certain body parts cannot—for obvious reasons—be visually inspected. It is impossible to implement dress codes without offending the social, cultural, and perhaps, religious, sensibilities of some students.

Enforcing academic integrity by limiting the opportunity for academic fraud in the first place is no small task, but it is one that is manageable: professors can do simple things such as making sure that desks are free of scribbled notes, that book bags are closed, that hats are removed. Further, they can look for gazes that repeatedly veer off into areas other than the test; multiple versions of exams can be administered in small
classrooms rather than auditoriums; instructors can also employ additional proctors during exams, adopting wide and fixed space seating. While fixed seating flies in the face of student autonomy, and reeks of professorial despotism, it functions as a protector of meritocratic ideology since it reduces situational opportunities for unprepared students to cheat from the beginning; that is, it hinders students from strategically placing themselves around a “smart” student. It robs potential cheaters from victimizing an unwitting student, a student who has—ideally—diligently toiled for the grade.

Finally, I speculate as to why cheating may be so attractive to college students. Cheating, like criminal behavior in general, represents the adoption of illegitimate means of responding to a perceived frustration in the pursuit of a valued goal. As critics of strain theory have noted, however, explaining the prevalence of cheating as a function of materialistic motives ascribes an overly instrumental view of human behavior, and neglects the moral and emotional dimensions of rule breaking (Katz, 1988). So what non-material gain does cheating provide? We can begin by noting that the origins of students’ strains and frustrations are irrelevant to the psychological and social reality of the consequences which may result. The result of having an overly active social life, numerous extracurricular activities, a demanding work schedule, and consequently being unable to devote the necessary study time, is a highly stressful and anxiety producing condition. Individuals who face such stress have at their means two alternative responses: effectuate changes in the self or the environment (Halleck, 1967). Cheating represents an adaptation to that stress.

The most effective way to reduce tension and stress in one’s condition, according to Halleck, is through motoric activity/physical action; and if we apply this conceptual framework to student cheating, we can begin to see the non-material allure of cheating. As outlined in this paper and evident from my data, cheating involves a significant investment of one’s time, energy, and resources; moreover, it involves a considerable amount of physical action prior to and during the exam. That is, students have to sift through their assigned readings and notes and determine which ones they will place in the cheat sheet; not only that, they must expend great care and cunning while cramming such information into their cheat sheets; next they have to devise where and how they will store their unauthorized notes and how they will retrieve them. For a standard fifty minute exam, it is possible to spend three to four times that much time thinking, writing, and preparing to cheat. And during this process they actively—physically and mentally—become engrossed in the task at hand.

That is, frustration, a highly noxious and tension producing state, is incrementally transformed into physical action; it is precisely during this corporeal metamorphosis that an individual senses the tingling sensations of hope (obtaining a high/passing grade), along with a non-negligible heaping of excitement and the possibility of danger (O’Malley and Mugford, 1995). But most significantly, these actions provide creative outlets for students to transform their impotent and frustrated existential situation into an autonomous mode of being in the planning, preparing, and execution of their deviant plans (see Halleck 1967, p. 77).

Students who are caught cheating face embarrassment, shame, and possibly, expulsion. Thus, the risks associated with cheating are very real. Yet, despite such formal and informal sanctions, research indicates that an astounding 60-70% of college students admit to cheating. I am almost certain that most (if not all) instructors have wondered why students spend their time planning, rehearsing, and executing illegitimate plans when they could spend that same time devoting themselves to their studies. A simple answer would be to say that they are lazy; that cheating constitutes an easy and immediate gratification...
to an otherwise pressing need. However, to view cheating as an impulsively conceived and executed form of academic dishonesty, and conceptualizing cheaters as persons lacking “self control” as a result of poor parenting and deficient moral training, overlooks a socio-structural fact (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990): cheating persists across class, race, gender, and national boundaries (Cizek, 1999). The cheating act itself is suffused with an unmistakable tinge of existential boundary crossings that are manifested in the corporeal, emotional, and moral experiences of cheaters (Katz, 1999). Thus, a more troubling—and theoretically titillating—answer would be to explore how cheating presents a set of morally fun challenges that students attempt to work through, that somehow, the possibility of outwitting authority figures provides an unfathomable moral and sensual delight for those who commit such acts (Forsyth and Marckese, 1993). As I have shown in this paper, students are capable of using highly innovative methods to respond to the perceived frustrations of in-class examinations, tailoring their illicit methods to their personal, social, and situational appurtenances, relying on their wits, peers, and even their sexuality. It is perhaps the allure of these moral and emotional challenges and gains through illegitimate means that is perhaps even more worthy of further investigation than the allure represented by the more material challenges and gains so often represented as underlying students’ motivations to cheat.

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REFERENCES


Notes

1 Smith (2000: 160) concludes: “Among all variables examined low self-control possessed the greatest predictive power. This study finds encouraging support for the theory’s ability to explain another form of misconduct among the many that have already been investigated. Thus, the predictive breadth and scope of self-control lends further credence to its claims of theoretical generality.”

2 The respondents were asked to identify only their gender to examine if tactical differences existed between the two sexes.

3 When I initially mentioned this technique to colleagues, they seemed to be genuinely impressed. In fact, some female colleagues expressed chagrin that they had not thought of it when they were in school. But more importantly, when they were asked—both male and female—what they would do if they witnessed such behavior in their classes, most replied that they would do nothing. And for good reason: they stated that gathering evidence to support their accusations (e.g., asking them to lift up their skirt to check for answers) would be nothing short of sexual harassment. Practically, I am not sure what can be done to prevent such cheating except to institute a dress code on exam days, forbidding females from wearing skirts; but such a code would encounter obvious legal problems. Theoretically, male students could do the same to female professors; but in my data, I encountered no such creativity on the part of the male students. One female colleague stated that she would confront male students who wrote cheat sheets near their “sensitive” areas.

4 I am aware that this recommendation leads to another theoretical quagmire, one that now merely adds a label as a function of spatial proximity, not necessarily independent behavior.

5 Of course, this suggestion is based on the assumption that the exams will not be administered in a large auditorium that seat 500 plus students; moreover, it assumes that students who are forced to sit in a certain order will not form alliances and collusions of sorts.

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