"If you don't cheat, you lose": An explorative study of business students' perceptions of cheating behavior.

Tor Grenness

Tor.grenness@bi.no

Norwegian Business School

Nydalsveien 37

0484, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

Student academic dishonesty is a pervasive problem for higher education institutions all over the world. Previous studies, most based on quantitative surveys, have documented that both personal, contextual, and situational factors affect dishonest behavior among students. The purpose of the present study is to take an interpretative, qualitative approach intended to understand student *thinking* and *reflections* when it comes to perceived seriousness and prevalence of cheating. Peer interviews, i.e. students interviewing students, were chosen as the data collection method. Open and analytical coding based on the principles of grounded theory lied the foundations for the analyses. Overall the results of this study support previous correlational findings, but it also demonstrated that many students tend to talk about cheating as if this is "part of the game". It furthermore seems that students rate different forms of cheating from less to more serious, and that some forms of cheating are not perceived as cheating at all. "Everybody else does it" is obviously a widespread belief which easily leads to – as one informant expressed – "if you don't cheat, you lose". In order to deal with student cheating, the students themselves recommended fewer take-home exams and more use of continuous assessment. The findings further indicate that schools should take effort in building a "non cheating culture". Rather than to punish, convincing students that normal behavior is not to cheat, and that cheating benefits no one is probably the best way to deal with cheating behavior.

Key words

Student cheating; peer interviews; business students; cheating culture; moral standards; extrinsic motivation

Introduction

There is little doubt that academic misconduct among college and university students is a pervasive and serious problem on campuses all over the world (Beasley, 2014, 2016; McCabe et al., 2012; Mokula et. al., 2014; Zafarghandi et.al., 2014; Cronan et. al., 2018), Ramberg and Modin, 2019). Although the number of students involved in incidents of academic dishonesty varies from country to country, the overall figures reveal that a considerable number of students are reported on being involved in incidents of academic dishonesty (McCabe et. al, 2012; Ramberg and Modin, 2019). This problem has attracted the attention of scholars from different fields, in particular within education and psychology (e.g. Carrell et al. 2005; Murdock et.al. 2007). Because cheating as well as other forms of academic misconduct among students involve a relatively large part of the student body, the literature has gradually turned to questions of cause and effect (Rettinger and Kramer, 2008), i.e. trying to answer the question "why do students cheat?" (Yu et.al. 2017).

Typically, scholars aiming at answering this question have undertaken numerous studies of correlated factors of academic misconduct, and relationships have been established between cheating behavior and a host of personal and situational factors such as gender, age, academic achievement, peer environment, and organizational context to mention some. It has to be noted, however, that the overwhelming part of the research has been survey-based and thus correlational in nature (Rettinger and Kramer, 2009). Also worth noting is that despite the significant amount of research examining these and other factors associated with cheating behavior, McCabe et.al. (2012) noted that "we often don't have enough high-quality research to make strong claims about such relationships. Clearly, more studies are needed" (p.89).

The present study is an attempt to answer this demand. The study is designed so that it will complement and possibly extend the findings of mainstream survey-based correlational studies that have dominated the field of student cheating behavior. We think that choosing a qualitative, explorative design based on peer-interviewing, that is students interviewing students, will possibly contribute to new insight and understanding of the relationship between what have been seen as crucial variables.

Literature review

Academic dishonesty among students can be defined as academic behavior that does not comply with stated assessment requirements and institutional policies; when students behave in ways intended to gain undue benefit in relation to their assessment (Guthrie,

2009). Academic dishonesty is a concern on college and university campuses more than ever before (Jones, 2011). A review of the literature validates these concerns as it shows that as many as between 40 and 80 percent of North American students in higher education have been involved in academic dishonesty at least once (Moeck, 2002, Kusnoor and Falik, 2013, Grose, 2006). Although research shows that cheating is not restricted to a certain country or geographical area, the number of studies in geographical contexts other than the US is much more limited (Davis et.al. 2011). Consequently, numbers from other parts of the world are more uncertain, but there is no reason to doubt that student cheating represent a universal problem (Sharifuddin and Holmes, 2009; Ramberg and Modin, 2019.

One important challenge when studying academic dishonesty or cheating is to define what is meant when such terms are used. Defining the term too broadly will inevitably led to higher numbers compared to studies using a more narrow definition (Brown and Emmet, 2001). Consequently, the variation in some of the findings among cheating studies could simply be the result of different definitions of academic cheating (McCabe et. al. 2012). For example, some studies restrict their focus to one particular behavior such as plagiarism and sharing homework (e.g. Zafarghandi et.al. 2012, Cronan et.al., 2018), while other studies includes a whole range of behaviors (e.g. Mc.Cabe op.cit). Although there is no commonly accepted, standard definition of academic dishonesty (Schmelkin et. al., 2008), it usually refers to behaviors such as cheating on exams or homework tests, copying other students' homework or assignments, unauthorized cooperation with peers, and plagiarism (Arnett et. al., 2002). Even if different scholars apply different definitions, most seem to have "wrongful acts intended to improve the student's own or others apparent performance" in common (Ramberg and Modin, 2019). A definition in line with this can be found in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (2010) which states that cheating refers to the use of "prohibited aids or other methods to attempt to deceive during examinations or other form of assessment of study performance" (Chapter 10, paragraph 1).

Numerous surveys have been conducted over the years to compile the extent of cheating at university levels. Most of these studies have focused on US students, but a growing body of the literature on cheating behavior has indicated that students from different cultures hold different perceptions and beliefs regarding cheating (Koul et.al. 2009). Among the findings and hypotheses from these studies are that Asian students are more prone to cheat because they are typically "high context" societies where in particular "altruistic cheating", i.e. helping out friends are not looked upon as wrongdoing (Koul et. al. ibid). Also, Asian students favor memorization as an effective way of learning (Hayes and Introna, 2005), and because in many Asian countries a "textbook based" teaching approach is followed, memorizing word for word the content of textbooks is the key for getting good grades. It also should be underscored that these societies all have hierarchical structures where repeating the words of the teachers is a sign of reverence, while treating sources critically is a sign of disrespect (Pecorari, 2003).

Still, we should bear in mind that cross-cultural studies on student cheating have not been able to unveil all the underlying factors playing significant roles in cheating incidents.

Moreover, such studies may lead to stereotyping students from other cultures irrespective of their individual differences (Sowden, 2005).

Although the abovementioned research shows that cheating is not restricted to a certain country or geographical area, the number of studies in geographical contexts other than US is quite limited. Consequently our current knowledge of "why students cheat" stems mostly from studies on cheating behavior among US students during the last twenty years. These studies lead to the identification of two sets of variables that contribute to our understanding of students' cheating behavior, often labelled individual characteristics and contextual characteristics (Ramberg and Modin, 2019).

Individual characteristics

One of the most common characteristics examined in relation to student cheating is gender. In general studies found that male students are more likely to engage in cheating behavior (e.g. Arnett et al. 2002; Hensley et.al. 2013). One of the explanations for this difference is that women are socialized to obey rules more than men (Ward and Beck, 1990). Other studies show that it is mainly a set of social mechanisms related to gender (e.g. shame, embarrassment, self-control) that account for the existing differences between male and female students' cheating behavior (McCabe et. al. 2012; Gibson et.al. 2008).

Another variable that has been extensively studied is academic achievement. It is found that students with lower grades tend to be more likely to cheat than those with higher grades (e.g. Burrus et. al. 2007; Klein et.al. 2007). At the same time it should be noted that McCabe et. al (2012) found evidence that students in the top of the rankings who appeared extremely competitive also demonstrated a higher propensity to cheat. This may in part be explained by looking into theories of motivation. The relationship between motivation and learning posits that students are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Anderman et.al. 1998; Dweeek, 1988, Anderman and Koenka, 2017, Crou et. al., 2020). Intrinsically motivated students study in order to gain knowledge, while extrinsically (grade-oriented) students wish to prove their ability and appear competent (Rettinger and Kramer, 2008). Several correlational studies and a few experimental ones demonstrate that intrinsic motivation causes less cheating while extrinsic motivation causes more cheating (Rettinger et.al. 2004; Jordan 2001, Krou et. al. 2020). Another factor that appears to be important is the level of students' academic engagement or preparation. Here it is found that the level of student academic engagement/preparation is negatively correlated with academic misconduct (Davis, 1993; Whitley, 1998).

Contextual conditions

While individual characteristics may explain differences in cheating behavior, the contextual conditions can also be more or less favorable for acting in ways that clearly are not in accordance with academic norms (Nilsson et.al. 2004). Students are more likely to cheat when they perceive the risk of being detected as slight, and when the consequences of potential detection are regarded as low (Bisping et.al. 2008; Gire and Williams, 2007). The

school's ability to detect and impose penalties for students who cheat is of course also important (McCabe et.al. 2012). Lang (2013) argued how faculty construct the learning environment can have a great influence on student academic dishonesty and student learning. He contended faculty who construct a learning environment that helps students develop an interest and fascination in the subject matter and see the relevance of the subject matter for their lives or futures reduces the environmental factors that lead to cheating. Moreover, classroom climate research suggests that academic cheating can be significantly eliminated if faculty devote their attention to cheating and clearly communicate what constitutes academic cheating in their classroom (Beasley, 2014; Bertram Gallant, 2008, Anderman and Koenka, 2017). At the same time research indicates that many faculty "do little or nothing" to respond to student cheating (Schmelkin et. al, 2008, p 588). Many teachers believed that the time and effort to report student academic cheating through "established channels is just not worth it" (McCabe et. al. 2012, p 139).

One of the most influential contextual factors for cheating is the extent to which students perceive that their peers cheat (McCabe et.al. 2012), that is how normalized such behavior has become at the school. Normalization of cheating is when a permissive culture is developed through a shift in the collective attitudes of the students, whereby cheating is increasingly viewed as less blameable and morally wrong the more often that individual students perceive that their peers cheat (McCabe et. al 2012; O'Rourke et. al. 2010). For instance, Bowers (1964) discovered a strong positive correlation between students' self-reported cheating and their perception of peers' attitude toward cheating. McCabe and Trevino (1993, p. 533) reported that students' perception of their peers' cheating behavior is the "most powerful influence on self-reported cheating". It has also been documented that schools with a strong focus on competition and achievement tend to invoke an increased amount of cheating among its students (Anderman and Koenka 2017), whereas schools that emphasize the value of learning itself tend to display a lower amount of cheating (Miller et.al. 2007). Taken together the school's culture or ethos appears to have a crucial impact on students' inclination to cheat. The concept of school ethos refers to the norms, values, and beliefs permeating the school and manifesting themselves in the way that faculty and students relate, interact, and behave towards each other (Modin et.al. 2017). Research has pointed to the importance of these school contextual features for counteracting unwanted student behaviors (Modin, ibid). It seems reasonable to assume that they also have an impact on extent of student cheating.

What about business students?

Another finding is that there seems to be differences between majors. It seems likely that students with certain majors, such as business, are more likely to cheat than students in other majors (McCabe et. al. 2012; Rettinger and Jordan, 2005). A survey of 15000 students of engineering, business, science, and humanities indicated that business major students are the least academically honest student population (Caruana et.al. 2000). Students majoring in business were reported to have permissive attitudes towards cheating, and greater grade orientation, both of which can lead to more academic cheating (Rettinger and Jordan,

2005). A serious consequence of these findings is that studies consistently find that the propensity to cheat in college carries over to the workplace (Simkin et.al., 2010).

As can be ascertained from this overview, both individual and contextual factors have been found to be associated with student cheating. Because the present study took place at a business school, the findings of previous studies, which indicate that business students are more prone to cheat, forms an interesting backdrop. Still we have to bear in mind that the purpose of this study is not to document the extent of cheating among business students, but rather to obtain a better understanding of how these students think and reflect over this matter.

Rather than designing another study in order to test a range of individual and contextual variables' explanatory strength, the research strategy of this study was to employ an inductive research design which was qualitative in nature. This means that the goal was not to use previous knowledge of cheating behavior to develop and test hypotheses, but rather to address the broad question: *How do business school students talk about, reflect over, and react to cheating – others and own?* Hopefully this strategy enables us to obtain a deeper and more detailed insight than that which emerges from using a standardized survey, and that this insight – in the end – will contribute to an answer of two crucial questions: why students cheat, and what can lecturers and schools do in order to reduce cheating behavior?

Method

Research design and data collection

In this study, we decided on an inductive, qualitative research design. Because the purpose of the study is to expand our present knowledge of why students cheat, allowing the students' subjective views and reflections concerning unethical behavior would be of paramount importance. It was therefore decided on personal interviews as the data collection method. Qualitative interviews are well recognized as a valid means of data collection (see eg. Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), but more important; qualitative data could also expand the knowledge we have of student cheating stemming from numerous surveys that have been conducted over the years (Ramberg and Modin, 2019). It is well known that in order to cope with problems that require insight and understanding of the behavior of individuals, the researcher sometimes has to go beyond quantitative surveys and use a qualitative approach (Remenyi et.al 1998). Furthermore it was decided that the students should be interviewed by their peers. Peer interviewers are generally understood as people who have "direct experience of the topic being researched" and carry out interviews with research participants, who have similar experiences (Seidman, 2006). The benefits reported from this approach are that the shared experiences of peer interviewers and research participants facilitate access, minimize potential power imbalances, and help research participants feel more relaxed, open and honest (Warr et. al. 2011). Peer interviewers may also be able to strike up a better rapport with participants and may furthermore be able to bring new and different perspectives to the interviews due to their own experience of the

topic being researched (Blythe et.al. 2013). There is no doubt that cheating is a sensitive topic, and even a topic that may be associated with shame and /or unethical behavior. The topic of cheating could easily lead the interviewees to hold back information or not being completely honest. A reasonable assumption would be that because fellow students conduct the interviews, interviewees would be less inclined to hold back information.

Overall, we think that peer interviews are a useful means to enhancing understanding of cheating behavior of students, simply because interviews conducted by fellow students are able to provide information which would be difficult to obtain in interviews conducted by 'outsiders'.

However, peer interviewing comes – like any other data collecting method – also with some challenges. Some of the problems associated with peer interviewers are around bias, the detachment of the researcher from the subject of the study, the time required in terms of training and supervising the interviewers, and the quality controls on the interviews.

Empirical setting and sample

In the present case, the empirical setting is a business school with approximately 7000 full-time students. According to the schools' own statistics the student body consists of an almost even gender distribution. Applicants for the study year 2021 showed a ratio between men and women of 47 versus 53 %. The students who did the interviews were all students at the school, and the interviews were part of a compulsory assessment in a third year course in qualitative methods for marketing students. Before they started interviewing, the students had learnt how to conduct qualitative interviews – in particular interview techniques - and they had carried out practice interviews with each other. They also had to present a draft interview guide for the qualitative interviews, which was discussed in class, and eventually was revised together with the lecturers. Different forms of qualitative data analysis with an emphasis on coding was also part of the curriculum. Before starting the interviews the students were reminded that the interviewees had to be informed about the nature of the assessment, that they would remain anonymous, and that they should give an informed consent before the interviews began.

The data collection period lasted for one week during the spring semester. The students worked in groups consisting of two or three. They were told that any fulltime students were eligible as informants, although they were advised to not include first year students. This is because these students had less experience with exams, and because they had only been at the school for six months and were not expected to be fully integrated into what could be labelled "the dominating culture" of the student body.

The population thus consisted of the fulltime students with the exception of the first year students. Allowing the students to decide which students they would interview makes the sample a convenience sample. Because the student body is almost evenly gender distributed, it is reason to believe that the sample is quite well gender balanced. Ending with a biased sample is nevertheless a risk. Because the students themselves decided whom they wanted to interview, it is obviously a risk that e.g. female students preferred to interview females, that friends were chosen over unknown students, or that marketing students were

chosen over students from finance or accounting. Because the students were free to decide between individual interviews and focus group interviews, and because reporting the number of informants interviewed was not required, the actual sample size is uncertain. However, based on the number of submitted assessments a reasonable assumption would be that at least one hundred students have participated.

Data analysis.

It was required that the groups should transcribe the interviews and perform an initial analysis based on the principles from Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1968), that is perform open and – if timed allowed – axial or analytical coding of the transcripts. It was not required from the students to follow the detailed and rigid process initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (ibid), but rather lean on the principles of Grounded Theory in order to "help provide some standardization and rigour to the process" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p 4). Because the students had little or no knowledge of the topic before they started to collect data (cheating behavior was not part of the curriculum), we should assume that the codes were developed from the transcripts. The students' inductive coding thus represented the first stage of data analysis. In the next stage, the students' coded reports were assembled by the author, and a comparison across all the reports was conducted. With only limited access to the students' transcripts (submission of the transcripts was not part of the requirements) the possibility of performing the "constant comparative" method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), in which, throughout the data analysis phase the data are constantly compared to the emerging categories as well as back to the extant literature on the topic, was only partly possible. Still, this method helped the transition from codes to theoretical categories.

Yin (1994) has identified two analytical strategies related to two approaches which may be used in order to analyze qualitative data: one is to use a theoretical or descriptive framework to analyze qualitative data, the other is exploring qualitative data without a pre-determined theoretical or descriptive framework. The analysis performed in this study is based on a pre-determined theoretical framework with the use of a data categorization template in the form of an a priori classificatory scheme from the literature on student cheating.

Findings

TABLE 1

Data structure

First-order codes	Theoretical categories
• Cooperation on take-home exams are common • It's pretty common to feed your calculator before an exam • Many will not agree that they're cheating • Collaboration is accepted to a certain degree • Many do not regard collaboration as cheating • Helping out fellow students is OK • Cheating at some minor exam as long as it is not your Bachelor or Master thesis	**ACCEPT**
• There are different forms of cheating • Some forms of cheating are more serious than other • Copying the work of others is the most serious • Because this is not serious research, copying or paraphrasing is not that grave • This was not my bachelor thesis, only a two-credits course • Its not serious cheating to insert formulas on your calculator • Collaborating is cheating, but not very serious • Plagiarism is serious	**SERIOUSNESS**
• Much work, much to do generally, partying, not enough time to prepare, laziness • To avoid getting D's or E's • Pressure to perform • Not sure I'll use what I have inserted on my calculator, but it's a form of security, takes away the stress • Many don't trust in themselves • Makes me less nervous • Low moral • No risk of being caught • Sloppy control during exams • Everybody else did it so I did it too • Take-home exams invite to cheating	**MOTIVES**
• Unfair to those who do not cheat • Cheating may easily be a habit • Cheaters get jobs they're not qualified for • Cheating at school, could lead to cheating in your future jobs too • If you don't cheat you'll lose	**CONSEQUENCES**

In this section we will present our findings. We will draw on two data sources; the interview transcripts handed in, and the analysis presented in Table 1. Some of the student groups had done field notes, and to some extent these field notes also provide interesting information. The finding section will be organized in order to relate the various results to the theoretical concepts developed from the literature as shown in Table 1.

One initial, interesting and somewhat disturbing finding is that many students do not regard cheating as something abnormal or as fraudulent behavior. Obviously, not all informants share this attitude. "Cheating is cheating", "those who cheat make it difficult for the rest of us" are only two of several critical expressions. Still, based on the totality of interviews, the overall impression is that a significant part of the students does not perceive academic dishonesty as totally unacceptable. For example some of the students state that "feeding your calculator with information is an acceptable form of cheating", or "having illicit information on your calculator is obviously cheating, but it is not a very grave form of cheating".

Statements such as the two cited above tells us that different forms of cheating are perceived differently as for their *seriousness*, and thus how acceptable they are. For example, some students perceive that helping out fellow students is not really cheating. In their view, in order for something to be called cheating, it has to benefit the cheater in one way or another. If what you do benefits other students and not yourself, this is actually not considered to be cheating, but rather it is performing a "good deed", an act of benevolence. What this tells us is that students do not consider acquiring illicit information in the same way as they consider providing information to a fellow student. However, it is not clear from the data whether the participating students who expressed these views are the ones who give information, receive illicit information or perhaps are doing both.

Giving information is perhaps easier to rationalize (Rettinger and Kramer, 2008), but it is also possible that students see the transaction of giving and receiving illicit information as a whole, meaning that the responsibility has to be shared equally.

It is thus possible to draw the conclusion that different forms of cheating, are viewed differently as for how serious they are perceived to be. For example, feeding your calculator with formulas or other quantified information is, as we have underscored above, generally not viewed as very serious. According to more than one of the interviewed students, pre-feeding your calculator before an exam is primarily something you do in order to lower your stress-level. You actually don't believe that it will be necessary to use this information during exams, but just to know that it's there, in case you find yourself in trouble, ease the nerves. At the opposite end of the scale we find copying parts of other student's work – in particular if this happens without the student's knowledge or consent. However, in line with the giving – receiving logic above, copying fellow students is generally not viewed to be a serious thing to do as long as the parties involved agree on the act. "If you are unsure of something during a take-home exam and discuss it with a fellow student it can hardly be called cheating". At the same time we also find statements such as "on take-home exams plagiarism is pretty grave", but it is difficult to know what the students mean when they use the word plagiarism. Based on the totality of data the students do not seem to be much

concerned about plagiarism the way it is usually defined. Rather it is reason to believe that when they talk about plagiarism most mean some way of copying other students' work. This interpretation makes sense with reference to how serious they view this act to be. Previous studies have shown that students do not perceive plagiarism to be a serious form of cheating, rather, students believe it to be a violation of academic etiquette (Park, 2003, Ashworth and Bannister, 1997). In line with the reasoning reported over, an explanation of the lenient attitudes students hold toward plagiarism is because this form of cheating will not harm others (Lim and See, 2001). Finally, one should note that knowledge of students' perception of seriousness could be vital for schools' efforts to come up with effective anti-cheating strategies as Curtis and Popal (2011) found a negative correlation between perceived seriousness and the rates of academic dishonesty.

Regarding the *motives* for cheating, the students mentioned both "too little time to prepare", "avoiding flunking or an inferior grade" as well as "very stressed before an exam".

We think that the word "stress" could perhaps sum up many of the motives mentioned by the students. Students in general seem to perceive exams, in particular traditional exams where no exam aids are allowed, as a rather stressful experience.

When talking about motives quite a few students also mentioned what has been labelled "peer pressure" (Rettinger and Kramer 2008). As we have already pointed out in the literature review, McCabe and Trevino (1993) view students' perception of their peers' cheating behavior to be the most powerful influence on self-reported cheating.

"Everybody else do it so why not me"?

This is a classic statement which implies that many students believe that cheating is so widespread that not being a cheater makes you some sort of an outlier. Believing that "everybody cheats" also becomes a motivator because many students seem to believe that cheating creates an unfair competition. "If you don't cheat, then you're bound to lose". "If I don't cheat while everybody else do, and I get a poorer grade than the cheaters, it's unfair".

Another factor worth mentioning is that cheating is obviously not viewed as some form of "risky business". "I have never heard of anyone who has been caught". "The elderly people who is supposed to watch us during exams are not able to detect anything". "It's just too easy to cheat". Some also mentioned that the school's decision to replace many of the traditional exams at school with take-home-exams lead to more cheating, simply because take-home-exams make it easier to cheat.

"Cheating has no consequences for your career after graduation".

If students believe that "Cheating pays off" – even helps you in getting better jobs, they completely overlook that cheating in school is linked to an increased risk for future unethical actions in later working life (e.g. Graves, 2011, Lucas and Friedrich, 2005, Lawson, 2004). Having developed a cheating behavior in one context is thus likely to spill over to another (Bowers, 1964). Another problematic consequence of student cheating is that it may create

negative rumors and hurt the school's reputation as an institution for allocation of future education opportunities and positions in work life (Whithely and Keith-Spiegel, 2002). The belief, then, that "cheating pays off" is not only wrong, it is also a very dangerous assumption. Integrity in academic work is a critical benchmark of every profession. For this reason, special attention should be devoted to addressing academic dishonesty in higher education to prevent the potential transfer of these practices to the workplace.

It has to be noted, however, that several students were genuinely concerned that the cheaters really did not learn what they were supposed to learn and could get jobs they were not qualified for.

DISCUSSION

When it comes to studies of student cheating, survey-based studies have dominated the field, and almost all recent studies have relied on students' self-reported data of academic misconduct. With rare exceptions, prior studies have taken a segmented rather than a holistic approach when studying student academic misconduct. In other words, they selected a few important factors that are hypothesized to be linked with academic misconduct (Whitley, 1998). Over the years these studies have established links between cheating behavior and a host of personal and contextual factors such as age, gender, personal moral, perceived "cheating culture", teaching effectiveness and school leadership. Despite the research efforts of identifying factors that were significantly associated with academic cheating, knowledge supporting the causal link between various factors and academic cheating is still lacking (Yu and Glanzer, 2017).

A qualitative approach and peer interviews

Choosing a qualitative approach is obviously not sufficient in order to fill this research gap. We still think, however, that a qualitative method, like the one used in the present study, may contribute to a better understanding of "why students cheat". It is well known that qualitative methods produce data that differ from the output of survey-based research in several ways. Most important a qualitative research approach produces a more detailed description of participants' – in this case the students'- feelings, opinions and experiences, and interprets the meanings of their actions (Denzin, 1989). A qualitative approach enables the researcher to obtain deeper insights into the issue under investigation. It is also worth mentioning that the present study's use of peer interviewers, in this case students interviewing fellow students, may further strengthen our understanding of student cheating. The benefits reported from studies based on peer interviewers are that it minimizes potential power imbalances and help research participants feel more relaxed, open and honest (Croft et. al. 2016, Flemming et.al. 2009), and that peer interviewing may also be able to bring forward new and different perspectives (Thompson et. al. 2015).

Based on what the students expressed during the interviews, it appears that many of the students who participated in the study, either have heard of someone who cheats, know personally someone who cheats, or have cheated themselves. This result fits well with the

results of a review over various studies of US students over the past five decades where the scholars found that more than two-thirds of college students consistently self-reported being involved in incidents of academic dishonesty (McCabe et. al. 2012, p. 71). While the literature on academic dishonesty has tended to focus on identifying students' demographic background correlates to cheating (Yu et.al., 2018), what makes the present study different from most previous studies, is that it gives the students an opportunity to express their attitudes to and experiences with cheating in their own words. We think this is an important step in the right direction, because it makes it possible to reveal not only how respondents rate their experiences and attitudes towards cheating on a five point or a seven point scale, but to give their responses the form of a narrative intended to "render the actual – and to do so persuasively" (Van Maanen, 2011, p 232). In the present study, a rather striking observation is that many students seem to regard cheating as something that could almost be labelled as "part of the game". The manner in which they *talk about cheating*, that is their wording, reveal that many react with no more than a shrug when this topic is brought up. If a traditional survey had been chosen as the method for the study, this kind of insight would not have been possible.

Although qualitative studies are not designed in order to test theories, but rather to extend them, it is none the less interesting to note that the findings of the present explorative study support previous survey-based results on student cheating. In spite of the fact that the informants did not relate to pre-set categories and items, their views on motives and causes of student cheating are generally in agreement with previous findings, (e.g. Rettinger and Kramer, 2008; Park, 2003). This goes for low risk of being caught; "I have never experienced that anybody has been caught for anything", perceptions of seriousness; "It is not serious cheating to insert formulas on your calculator", perceptions of "cheating culture" at the institution; "All the others cheat, so why should'nt I?", and moral standard of fellow students; "My impression is that students' moral is generally lower at this school".

The last quote is an interesting one, because previous studies have found an inverse relationship between the moral standard of an individual student and the student's permissive attitudes towards cheating (Hubbard et. al. 2009, Finelli and Carpenter, 2007) which tells us that cheating or not cheating depends, at least to some degree, on personal moral. The fact that some of the informants suggested that cheating probably could be explained with reference to the moral standard among the business students, also tells us that schools and teachers should not assume that students share their intuitive moral understandings. It is thus necessary for educators and schools to make it clear that cheating is not merely a utilitarian choice, but rather a moral choice, and that any form of cheating is morally wrong and cannot be justified by any circumstances (Eisenberg, 2004).

Regarding motives for cheating, the relationship between motivation and learning as well as the relationship between motivation and behavior have been studied rather extensively. For example, Anderman et.al. (1998) found that students are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. While intrinsically motivated students study in order to gain knowledge, extrinsically motivated students are more performance- and grade oriented. For example, Williams et.al. (2010) found that students majoring in STEM (science, technology,

engineering, mathematics) or business performed a majority of cheating behaviors on campuses. Their explanation was that these majors are historically focused on extrinsic results and competition.

Not all students value mastery in learning. In contrast some students define higher education as a consumer-driven marketplace for social advancement where studying is an economic transaction rather than a learning experience (DeLuchi and Korgen, 2002). Students with this view are more inclined to hold cheating as acceptable, because it has the potential to raise their grade point averages, resulting in increasing their competitiveness within the job market (Bunn et al. 1992). It is possible to assume that many business school students could easily hold this kind of reasoning. The link between extrinsically or intrinsically motivation and cheating is not fully explored, but studies by Jordan (2001) and Rettinger et. al. (2004) indicated that students motivated by performance are more likely to cheat than students motivated by learning. A meta-analytic investigation by Krau et.al. (2020) demonstrate that extrinsic goal orientation and amotivation were some of the largest positive correlates to academic dishonesty. A survey of 15000 North American students from different disciplines indicated that business major students were the least academically honest student population (Caruna et. al. 2000). This could imply that business students are more extrinsic or performance oriented than other students. A recent study on motivation, learning strategies and performance of Swedish business students (Bengtsson and Teleman, 2020) confirm prior results as their findings document that business students are more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated.

If these findings hold, they could contribute to explain the cheating behavior among business students. That business students seem to be more extrinsic motivated could be explained by an assumption that a good many of these students have chosen a business school primarily in order to have an education that qualifies for good (paid) jobs, rather than the experience of learning.

School culture

Previous research has shown that schools where we find a strong focus on competition and achievement tend to invoke an increased amount of cheating among its students (Anderman and Koenka, 2017). Still, this is not the whole story because research also tells us that individual students' motivation is not sufficient in order to explain differences in cheating behavior. For example, Murdock et al. (2004, 2007) found that contextual variables have an even stronger effect on the likelihood of cheating than do individual students' attitudes. As we have stated above, probably the most influential contextual factor for cheating is the extent to which students perceive that their peers cheat (McCabe et al. 2012). Thus, the combined effects of extrinsically motivated students operating in what they believe to be a cheating culture offers an even more powerful explanation. Other factors, like for instance risk of being exposed, also help explaining cheating behavior, but we still think that the combination of students' individual value systems and the perceived culture of the school have the strongest explanatory power. As Rettinger and Kramer (2008: 8) states: "Once again, the culture that students observe plays a substantial role in determining their cheating behavior". Students often look to their peers, and the belief that

many other students are cheating, and that others believe cheating to be acceptable, can constitute "peer pressure" to cheat.

Conclusion and recommendations

Grounded theory as an approach is concerned with discovering, rather than testing, theory. Choosing a qualitative, grounded theory–inspired approach is, as we see it, especially appropriate because the findings of this explorative study contribute to improve our understanding of student cheating in several ways. Contrary to the majority of previous studies where standardized questionnaires have been used in order to reveal students' attitudes and behavior concerning academic misconduct, the present study invited students to express their views on cheating in their own words. For one thing, this method produces richer and more nuanced data than what you'll get using a standardized questionnaire, but even more important, using qualitative peer interviews may also have opened the doors to the students' mindsets concerning the matter. As we have discussed above, the way students talked about cheating reveals a deeply questionable attitude among some of the students. Several forms of cheating are seen as not very serious, and hence viewed as fairly acceptable, but many also tend to think that cheating is so widespread that it becomes almost normalized.

Obviously studying cheating behavior among students implies a substantial risk that the students being interviewed are holding back information and/or telling the interviewer what they think the interviewer would like to hear. Even though the researcher who have chosen to do personal interviews will always face such challenges and will try to meet them one way or another, we still think – as we have underscored above – that choosing peer interviews to be the data collection method substantially reduce many of the challenges with doing personal interviews.

In order to cope with the problem of student cheating, the recommendations from the students themselves that the school should reduce the number of take-home exams and increase the number of continuous assessments will possibly represent steps in the right direction. Implementing solutions like more frequent checks, and increasing enforcements and penalties are typically how schools react, but such interventions may have the unfortunate side effects that students perceive these as indications of mistrust and often rebel as a result (Rettinger and Kramer, 2009). Teachers' attitudes and behaviors are also important. Anderman and Koena (2017) recommend several strategies to encourage a classroom goal focusing on mastering the content over grade evaluations. They propose that teachers emphasize mastery, effort and growth when presenting assessments in the following ways: minimize the importance of publicized grades, clearly communicating expectations, and openly discussing academic dishonesty.

The underlying problem of coping with a "cheating culture" is a challenging one. The strong effects of peers' norms on cheating attitudes suggest that this is an era where considerable effort should be directed. It is well established that the influence of peers exert normative power over student behavior (Reason, 2009). The influence of peer environment on cheating is substantial (Bertram Gallant, 2008). The development of a "cheating culture" is

thus for the most part the result of student perception of their peers' cheating behavior. However, Rettinger and Kramer (2009) have demonstrated that students often overestimate their peers' cheating behavior. This is important to recognize for institutions aiming at building a culture that stops cheating before it starts. A core message in an internal campaign could thus be that the normal behavior is *not* to cheat, and that no one benefits from cheating. On the contrary, cheating is a serious breach of trust in relation to your school that could possibly also hurt the schools' reputation, and ultimately the students' attractiveness in the job market. Reducing the level of cheating is also an important prerequisite for creating a more equitable allocation of opportunities, and for preventing individual students from "down-grading" their moral compass during their schooling.

Lastly it is important once more to underscore that student cheating and disregard of institutional policies do not occur in an environmental vacuum. Consequently the main task of an institution is not to detect cheaters, but rather create an environment where academic dishonesty is socially unacceptable. Kohlberg (1984) suggested that schools should encourage and facilitate the participation of students in developing a social contract that defines norms, values and students' rights and responsibilities. The resulting climate should hopefully provide the necessary conditions for shared understandings and acceptance of academic integrity policies.

Limitations

Finally it has to be noted that this study is not without limitations. The students interviewed are students at a private business school. Hence, we do not know if these students' attitudes toward academic integrity is in any way influenced by the fact that they pay a substantial fee and thus, as indicated by DeLuchi and Korgan (2002), may regard themselves as customers rather than students. The combination of a convenience sample and peer interviews also restrict the possibility to generalize. Even if we regard the use of peer interviewing as a strength, the risk of ending up with a biased sample (as discussed in the method section) is fairly obvious. Consequently we are not able to claim that the students who have been interviewed are representative of the student body of this particular business school, or of (business) students in general. Similar studies at a public business school, and/or on a sample of non-business students would possibly produce more reliable data, and therefore provide a better basis for testing the hypothesis that business students are more prone to cheat than students of humanities or science. Additional research is also needed to identify effective strategies that help build a strong culture of academic honesty and promote students' cognitive and moral development.

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