Cheating in Advantaged High Schools: Prevalence, Justifications, and Possibilities for Change

Mollie K. Galloway

Department of Educational Leadership
Lewis & Clark College

The current study explored high school student cheating in communities of advantage, gathering survey data from 4,316 high school students in upper middle class communities and qualitative data from a smaller group of students, school leaders, teachers, and parents. Results indicated pervasive cheating among students (93% reported cheating at least once and 26% of upperclassmen indicated cheating in 7 or more of 13 ways listed on the survey). Students described schools as lacking clarity or consequences regarding cheating and expressed feeling forced to cheat in a school culture that promotes getting ahead over learning. The discussion focuses on why advantaged contexts are ripe for student cheating and proposes strategies for change.

Keywords: cheating, high school, privilege

When it comes to cheating behavior in schools, the phrase "everyone's doing it" is not far from the truth (Cisek, 1999; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002). The majority of students report it is wrong to cheat, but most do it anyway (Davis, Grove, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Stephens & Gelbach, 2007). Why are so many students willing to engage in this behavior? The current study asks this question, looking specifically at the cheating behavior of high school students growing up in advantaged communities.

CHEATING BEHAVIOR

Although cheating behavior in educational settings is not new, research indicates a significant rise over the past 30 years (McCabe, 2001; Schab, 1991). In McCabe and colleagues' national study of high school upperclassmen, 74% of the students reported cheating on a test in the past year, and 59% reported some form of plagiarism (McCabe & Katz, 2009). The Josephson Institute's (2001) ethics report card showed that 59% of high school students admitted to cheating on a test in the year prior to the survey (and 34% indicated they had cheated more than once). Copying

homework is even more rampant. For example, Jensen and colleagues reported that 89% of high school students in their study admitted to copying homework over a year's time (Jensen et al., 2002).

Recent stories have shed light on the rise of even more disturbing forms of cheating. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ed Dante (2010; a pseudonym to mask the author's identity) exposed his career writing student papers for hire, from college course papers to master's theses and dissertations. Dante shared that, at any time, he was working on upwards of 20 assignments for these "cheating students" (para. 7).

These data present a stark reality: Cheating has become a pervasive problem in high school and college classrooms, and schools face a culture where the behavior has become a normalized, accepted mechanism for gaining advantage. Worse, students find themselves at a disadvantage if they play by the rules (Callahan, 2004), and the lack of serious consequences only further supports their behaviors (Callahan, 2004; Cizek, 1999; Gehring & Pavela, 1994; McCabe & Trevino, 1993).

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH STUDENT CHEATING

The obvious question is, why do students cheat? Several studies have examined various factors associated with cheating. Studies on demographic and individual variables have examined students' gender, age, previous cheating behavior, achievement, and psychosocial characteristics. The majority of studies indicate that male students cheat more than female students (Davis et al., 1992; Davis & Ludvingson, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002; Newstead, Franklin-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996). Studies on the relationship between student age and cheating find that cheating peaks at the high school level and remains prevalent in college (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Davis & Ludvingson, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002; O'Rourke et al., 2010). Previous cheating also predicts later cheating (Cizek, 1999; Davis & Ludvingson, 1995; Whitley, 1998).

Research on the relationship between achievement (particularly grade point average) and cheating provides robust evidence that those who perform better in school tend to cheat less (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Cizek, 1999; Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; McCabe & Trevino, 1997), though the effect is relatively small (Whitley, 1998). However, Schab (1991) reported that over a 30-year period, high-achieving students were perceived by peers as increasingly dishonest, and more recent studies confirm that cheating is rampant in high-achieving schools and programs (Stephens & Gelbach, 2007; Taylor, Pogrebin, & Dodge, 2002).

Students' goals are also associated with their cheating behavior. Those with a propensity to learn the material, who have deep interest in the material, and who seek personal development report less cheating than those who view the work as a means to an end or seek to outperform their classmates (Anderman, Griesenger, & Westerfield, 1998; Murdoch & Anderman, 2006; Newstead et al., 1996).

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHEATING

Beyond individual factors, numerous studies have explored how context matters. Students are more likely to cheat when they believe they will not get caught or when there are few

consequences (Cizek, 1999; McCabe & Trevino, 1993). In contrast, practices such as honor codes can act as a deterrent, particularly when they are clearly articulated, well defined, well implemented, and deeply embedded in the culture (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

School and class size have been linked to cheating behavior. Studies of undergraduates indicate that those who attend smaller schools or enroll in smaller classes tend to cheat less than those in larger settings (Davis et al., 1992; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999).

The perception that "everyone else is cheating" also plays a critical role. In fact, McCabe and Trevino (1993) suggested that peer cheating has the most significant impact on a student's choice to cheat. In their study of undergraduates, they found that students' perceptions that their peers were cheating had the strongest relationship to the students' reported cheating behavior, indicating that seeing others cheat normalizes the behavior. Rettinger and colleagues have examined peer cheating more directly (O'Rourke et al., 2010; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). In one study (O'Rourke et al., 2010), these researchers asked how knowledge of peer cheating impacts one's own cheating. They found that undergraduates who were morally opposed to cheating were less likely to cheat (even if they had direct knowledge of others cheating) compared to those who found cheating more morally acceptable. However, their results also indicated that students' direct knowledge of peer cheating had a large effect on students' self-reported cheating, even after controlling for use of neutralization techniques, where students seek to justify behavior, as well as the degree to which they were morally opposed to the behavior.

School and Classroom Goal Structure

Much of the research on contextual factors has focused on learning goals in schools and classrooms. For example, Anderman and colleagues examined middle school students' perspectives on their environment in relation to their cheating behavior. Students who reported more performance-oriented classroom and school climates (where teachers reward students for outperforming others rather than deeply understanding material) tended to cheat more (Anderman et al., 1998). Students are also more likely to justify cheating in classrooms that are more performance goal oriented than mastery goal oriented (where teachers focus on learning, improvement and effort; Murdock, Miller, & Kohlhardt, 2004).

Recent research suggests that high-achieving schools may be particularly likely to foreground relative performance and achievement outcomes over learning, and studies have examined how these contexts impact student cheating. Taylor and colleagues (2002) investigated cheating behavior specifically in an elite secondary school context. These authors interviewed students in advanced placement and International Baccalaureate courses about cheating behavior and pressures to succeed academically. Students described their school as a high-pressure context. They felt pushed by parents to meet sometimes unreachable academic standards and often did not have enough time to complete all of their schoolwork. The authors' findings indicated that high achievers in this context resorted to cheating, and sometimes frequently. Similarly, Stephens and Gelbach (2007) examined cheating in a high-achieving high school compared to cheating in an average-achieving high school. The authors found that those in the high-achieving high school were more likely to be "under pressure" to maintain good grades and "underengaged" in deeply learning the material. This particular group of students reported higher rates of test cheating,

plagiarizing, and cheating among their peers compared to students who were unpressured and engaged. They were also more likely to rationalize or justify their cheating behavior. Taken together, these findings indicate that when schools and classrooms stress performance and achievement outcomes over learning, students are more likely to cheat (Anderman, 2007), and high-achieving schools may be at particular risk.

CHEATING AND SOCIAL CLASS

In Demerath's (2009) ethnography of the culture of advancement in an elite middle-class school, he described how the context, with its focus on assessments, getting the grade, and obtaining credentials, promotes cheating behavior. More than 75% of the students in the school admitted to cheating, and from the perspective of the teachers, the "4-pointers" and the valedictorians were the most common violators. Although cheating was not the focus of his study, Demerath's findings indicate that the culture of advancement within schools in professional middle-class communities plays a significant role in cheating.

David Callahan (2004), author of *The Cheating Culture*, argued that cheating has long been used by those with privilege to increase the divide between themselves and nondominant groups. It offers the affluent ways to "get ahead" (p. 16) and sustain their privilege. Callahan suggested that, historically, those with the money have been the biggest cheating offenders, and "much of the new cheating is among those with the highest incomes and social status" (p. 22). Dante's (2010) piece on writing papers for hire further corroborates Callahan's argument. He reported that students with money—Dante identified them as the "lazy rich kids" (para. 7)—are one of the primary demographics he serves. Moreover, in a series of studies, Piff and colleagues found that study participants from upper-class backgrounds were more likely to report and demonstrate unethical decision making and behavior than those from lower class backgrounds (Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012).

Few studies have addressed social class specifically in relation to cheating, but those that have also suggest that class plays a role. In Schab's (1991) study of cheating in three different decades, more than 80% of the participants indicated that the poor were more honest than the rich. Calabrese and Cochran (1990) found that affluent private school students in their study reported cheating more than the students in a large public school. The authors speculated that the affluent students "may seek unethical means to achieve their desired ends by rejecting traditional school policies" (pp. 65–66) in an effort to maintain their social status and fulfill parents' expectations. Moreover, the authors suggested that affluent students cheat more, in part because cheating is justified as a survival mechanism. In their case study of a private middle school, Zito and McQuillan (2011) argued that students in these advantaged contexts face an ethical tension—to be honest, or to achieve high grades. They stated, "When students decide to cheat they may not be acting immorally as such; rather, they have prioritized competing ideals and decided the benefits derived from high grades exceed those derived from honest behavior" (p. 7). Still, Murdock and Anderman (2006) indicated that studies of cheating and social class remain "wide open for investigation" (p. 141).

The purpose of this study is to explore high school student cheating in communities of advantage to provide a better understanding of how social class plays a role in cheating. In particular, this mixed methods study asks:

- How often do high school students in advantaged communities report cheating (including who cheats and what cheating looks like in these schools)?
- How do those in advantaged high school settings (students, school leaders, teachers and parents) describe the factors that compel students to cheat?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A Cheating Culture?

Callahan (2004) provided a frame for understanding why what he calls "a cheating culture" has emerged in today's social-historical, economic, and political climate. First, there are new pressures in our competitive economy. As Callahan stated, "Students are cheating more now that getting a good education is a matter of economic life and death" (p. 20). Second, rewards for being at the top or being the best have increased, making people, "more willing to do whatever it takes to be a winner" (p. 20). Third, he suggested that the temptation to cheat has grown—there is little accountability, consequences are few, and settings lack systems to deter people from cheating. Finally, Callahan described the role of "trickle down corruption" (p. 23), meaning, if those in power are garnering success through cheating, others will follow in order to level "the playing field" (p. 24). Using Callahan's lens, students in advantaged communities may be particularly prone to cheating behavior because the consequences of not getting ahead are too great.

Cheating and Ethics

In framing the current study, I merge Callahan's situated analysis of why a cheating culture has emerged with literature on neutralization techniques (i.e., techniques used to rationalize or justify one's behavior), which have often been used to understand student cheating (e.g., Diekhoff et al., 1996; Newstead et al., 1996; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Whitley, 1998). Originally articulated by Sykes and Matza (1957) as part of a theory to describe deviant behavior, neutralization techniques allow individuals to justify or provide a rationalization for their deviant behavior (in this case, cheating behavior). For example, an individual may deny responsibility for the behavior, argue that the behavior does not cause significant harm (denial of injury), believe he or she has an appropriate reason for retaliation (denial of the victim), reject those who enforce the rules (condemnation of the condemners), or give attention to peers' norms rather than society's norms (appeal to higher loyalties; Sykes & Matza, 1957). In short, the actor believes circumstances permit or require violating the norm (Haines et al., 1986). These rationalizations allow an individual to deflect blame away from the self and reduce guilt, shame, or sense of wrongdoing (Haines et al., 1986; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Several studies have applied this framework to cheating. Haines and colleagues (1986) examined neutralization techniques in college students and found that students who cheated tended to neutralize. For example, these students were more likely to report that everyone else was cheating, the instructor did not care whether students learned the material, or the course material seemed useless. In their case study of a competitive private middle school, Zito and McQuillan (2011) found that students' descriptions of cheating aligned with several neutralization techniques,

including giving or getting help to understand material, feeling like the teacher assigned too much work or did not thoroughly explain a concept, or cheating to stay on an athletic team or gain entry to an elite high school. These authors noted that the students were weighing competing values; they believed it was wrong to cheat, yet they sought (and felt pressure) to get into select high schools and colleges. In the current study, the literature on neutralization techniques provides a framework for exploring justifications advantaged students provide for why they cheat.

METHOD

The present study used a mixed-methods approach to examine cheating in adolescents growing up in advantaged communities. This approach was particularly germane to the research questions, the first of which seeks to understand how often students cheat (and within that, how student cheating differs by demographic variables)—a quantitative question—and the second of which seeks to understand why students cheat—a qualitative question. Although some have answered the latter through quantitative means, I sought to construct an understanding of the reasons that undergird student cheating in advantaged communities. Because this question has gone generally underexplored in advantaged communities, a qualitative approach was most appropriate (Maxwell, 1998). The present study draws upon quantitative data through surveys and qualitative data through interviews, audio-recorded meetings, field notes, and open-ended survey questions.

Context

This study was situated within a large-scale, university-based research and intervention project, where middle schools and high schools come together with researchers and specialists to tackle the problem of excessive achievement pressure and help schools create contexts that support student academic integrity, engagement, and mental and physical health. Participating schools tend to be those in upper middle class communities, where achievement pressure has now been well documented (e.g., Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2009; Demerath, 2009; Levine, 2006; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Pope, 2001).

For the intervention, schools send teams of up to nine members (comprising school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and counselors) to participate in two conferences over the course of a school year. During the conferences, the teams engage in a series of workshops and work time designed to facilitate school change. Workshops include facilitated sessions on improving engagement through curriculum and assessment, nurturing academic integrity, navigating definitions of academic success as a parent, understanding college admissions, collecting and examining data, and developing student and staff leaders. In addition, these teams work with a facilitator over the course of a school year, meeting together to develop and implement an action plan for change.

To help schools gather baseline data, the intervention schools had the opportunity for their students to participate in a survey to gather self-reports on student cheating behavior, engagement in school, and physical and mental health. In addition, students report perceptions of their school climate (including the learning emphasis and level of teacher care) and their parents' goals and expectations.

Although a primary goal of the intervention is to improve academic integrity, I focus in this article on the prevalence of cheating and students' and communities' perceptions of why students cheat, because strategies for change are best determined by first having answers to these fundamental questions.

Participants

Survey

A total of 4,316 high school students from 10 of the intervention high schools (six private and four public) near a large city on the West Coast participated in the survey portion of the research. Schools ranged in size from small (five schools had enrollments between 300 and 650) to medium–large (five schools had enrollments between 1,300 and 2,200). All schools were situated in upper middle class communities, where the majority of parents hold professional jobs. Specifically, more than 93% of households (for which students reported data) had one or two parents with professional jobs (e.g., doctors, lawyers, business owners and managers, engineers, bankers, real estate agents, architects, teachers, nurses). The median household income in these communities at the time of data collection ranged between $90,000 and $120,000. The schools themselves all offer an academically rigorous curriculum, with a vast array of honors and AP courses, and the majority of the graduating seniors attend 4-year colleges and universities, with more than 93% attending a 2- or 4-year institution.

Students from all four grade levels participated in the survey: 28.1% ninth graders, 22.8% tenth graders, 23.6% eleventh graders, and 19.4% twelfth graders (M age $= 15.6$, $SD = 1.20$). Fifty-three percent of participants were female, and the majority reported their race and/or ethnicity as White (47.9%) or Asian (31.2%), with smaller percentages reporting Hispanic or Latino (4.40%), African American (1.60%), and Multiracial or self-described (i.e., they provided their own written description; 10.6%). Four percent did not report their race and/or ethnicity.

Interviews and Conference Sessions

Five students (two White females, one Asian female, one White male, and one Asian male) and five school administrators (two males, three females; all White) participated in interviews during the 1st year of the project. In total, these participants represented six schools. In three cases, a student and administrator came from the same school; in all other cases, each was the lone participant from his or her school. During the 2nd year, 10 additional high school students (six males and four females from five different schools) participated as part of the student workshops at the conference sessions.

Team Meetings

Additional members of four school teams participated through their school's facilitated team meetings during the course of the school year. School teams typically consisted of one school leader, one to two students, one to two parents, one to two teachers, and a counselor. Demographic data were not gathered directly from school teams, but teams were typically representative of their school's demographics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey

Student survey participants completed an anonymous questionnaire on cheating behavior, engagement in school, physical and mental health, and school and parent context variables for the present study during school class time. Surveys were administered by either the researcher or a member of the school staff. The school staff member was provided with a common text to read to students, with a focus on amount of time it would take to complete the survey, confidentiality of student data, and students' rights. Students were then given an assent form, allowing them to affirm or decline participation in the study.

All survey scales were drawn from previous research that had tested their reliability and validity. I focus here on a subset of these scales.

Cheating behavior. The survey included a modified version of McCabe's academic integrity scale to measure students' self-reported cheating, asking students to report how often (since coming to their school) they had engaged in one of 13 forms of cheating behavior, including, for example copying, test cheating, and plagiarism (see Table 1 in the results section for all behaviors). Students selected 1 (*never*), 2 (*once*), or 3 (*more than once*). Note that asking students to report behavior during their high school career allowed for an examination of the various types of cheating in which students had engaged over time. This kind of approach, rather than asking students to report behavior over the course of a year, has been used in other studies (see Willams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010).

Students also responded to open-ended questions on the survey regarding what caused them the most stress in their lives and why, what could be done at their school to relieve their stress, and what distinguished their most interesting classes from other classes. Although the survey did not ask specifically about cheating in these open-ended questions, some students wrote about cheating in their responses. I include survey comments about cheating in the analysis here.

Student demographics. The survey also had a variety of demographic questions. Demographic items included age, grade, gender, race and/or ethnicity, self-reported grade point average on last report card, and number of advanced placement and/or honors courses the student had taken.

Interviews, Student Conference Sessions, and Team Meetings

Five students and five school administrators participated in interviews prior to attending the initial conference in May 2004. The majority of the interviews were conducted by the primary author, but two additional members of a larger research team also conducted a subset of the interviews. The same protocol was used in all interviews. All interview participants were members of teams attending the conference. The purpose of these interviews was to hear from students and school leaders about the culture of the school, and how they viewed student engagement, health, and academic integrity. In this article, I focus primarily on responses regarding the school culture and academic integrity questions. For example, the protocol included questions about why their school was attending the conference, how they would describe their school and the nature

of academic stress on campus, how a "successful student" is defined at their school, how they viewed the prevalence of cheating on their campus, and why they thought students cheated.

Students who attended the conference with a school team were also encouraged to attend a student leadership session, cofacilitated by the author and designed to provide students with skills to be student advocates and help facilitate change in their schools. Because academic integrity was one of the conference themes, students discussed cheating at their schools during these sessions. We recorded the student session during the 2nd year of the intervention.

Finally, a total of eight meetings from four attending schools were recorded during the 1st year of the project (four from one public school, two from a second public school, one from a third public school, and one from a private school). Meetings were facilitated by an individual affiliated with the intervention. Participants worked together to decide on what school issues were most pressing to address in order to counter student stress, disengagement, cheating behavior, and/or health problems. They then discussed various plans for change in their settings.

I analyzed these qualitative data through a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory methods are designed to help the researcher make sense of the lived experiences of the study participants. Through a process of data collection and coding, researchers "aim to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). In alignment with this approach, I conducted various levels of coding. I began with line-by-line coding, noting what I understood to be happening in each segment of the data. This detailed coding better ensures that researchers do not become wedded to any preconceived theories, and they instead focus on what is emerging from participants (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004). From here, I moved to focused coding, which entailed sorting and integrating initial codes and ideas into conceptual categories. These categories provided the basis for the qualitative results presented here.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

I first examined frequencies of cheating behavior (see Table 1). Overall, 93% of the students reported cheating at least once. The two most highly reported behaviors across gender and grade level were working on an assignment with peers when the instructor had asked for individual work, and getting test questions or answers from someone who has already taken the test, ranging from 49.7% (ninth-grade male students) to 85.3% (12th-grade male students) of students who reported these behaviors. The majority of 11th and 12th graders had at some point during high school also received unpermitted help on assignments, copied a few sentences without citing, and (with the exception of the 11th-grade female students at 48%) helped someone else cheat on a test.

Although more juniors and seniors tended to report undertaking the various forms of cheating behavior during their high school careers, certain forms of plagiarism did not follow this same trend: Students across all grade levels reported copying a few sentences without citing and copying word for word without citing with a similar frequency.

Next I examined the average number of ways students reported cheating. Students could receive a score from 0 (meaning they had not cheated once in any of the ways listed) to 13 (meaning they had cheated one or more times in all of the ways listed). The mean score was 4.68 ($SD = 3.16$) for student cheating. Student responses ranged from 0 (292 students, or 6.8% of the

TABLE 1
Cheating Frequency by Gender and Grade Level

	9th		10th		11th		12th	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Working together when instructor asked for individual work	70.5%	69.6%	79.9%	76.3%	85.2%	80.3%	85.3%	84.2%
Getting test questions	49.7%	54.9%	67.9%	62.3%	76.1%	69.5%	78.4%	71.0%
Helping someone else cheat on test	30.9%	34.2%	46.5%	39.8%	61.8%	48.0%	66.9%	54.4%
Copying from someone with his/her knowledge	23.4%	22.5%	32.1%	24.3%	42.5%	30.5%	50.1%	38.4%
Copying from someone without his/her knowledge	22.4%	25.0%	36.2%	24.2%	44.5%	34.2%	47.9%	33.6%
Receiving unpermitted help on assignments	44.4%	40.8%	58.1%	47.1%	62.5%	53.0%	68.2%	60.0%
Copying a few sentences without citing	47.8%	45.0%	52.1%	51.3%	51.4%	52.5%	53.9%	50.8%
Using cheat sheets	9.50%	9.60%	20.2%	12.7%	32.8%	23.7%	40.5%	29.2%
Using electronic devices	7.50%	4.70%	7.60%	4.90%	14.8%	6.10%	16.5%	7.30%
Copying word for word from source without citing	15.2%	13.2%	18.4%	12.7%	22.1%	16.6%	19.9%	14.5%
Turning in paper copied from another's paper	21.5%	19.1%	23.7%	16.5%	28.6%	17.9%	35.6%	25.1%
Getting an extension using false excuse	21.0%	22.2%	27.8%	23.5%	34.5%	30.8%	39.6%	41.3%
Turning in work done by another	8.60%	10.3%	11.8%	8.20%	16.8%	10.7%	22.3%	11.8%

sample reporting no cheating) to 13 (79 students, or 1.8% of the sample reporting cheating at least once in all 13 ways). Consistent with previous literature, students in the smaller schools tended to report less cheating than those in the larger schools ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 2.89$ for small schools, and $M = 4.93$, $SD = 3.18$ for larger schools), $t(4275) = 10.40$, $p < .001$, though the effect was small, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. It is worth noting that one of the schools (a small all-girls private school) was distinctly different from the rest, with 23% of the sample reporting no cheating. The school had a clear honor policy and also embedded direct teaching and discussion of integrity in student coursework (this is described further in the qualitative results). When examining gender, female students ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.90$) reported cheating less than male students ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 3.37$), $t(4172) = 7.05$, $p < .001$. As with school size, the effect was small, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Table 2).

Overall, 11th and 12th graders reported cheating in more ways than the underclassmen (primarily, I presume, because they had a longer history at the school). That said, results indicated that a notable percentage of student have become "multifaceted cheaters" (i.e., they cheat through a

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Total Cheating by Gender and Grade Level

	9th		10th		11th		12th	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total cheating	3.71	3.70	4.81	4.02	5.71	4.71	6.23	5.21
	(2.89)	(2.73)	(2.93)	(2.68)	(3.58)	(2.97)	(3.51)	(3.04)

Note. Standard deviation is in parentheses below the mean.

variety of different methods). In the sample, 33% of the upperclassmen reported cheating in three or fewer ways. However, another 40% reported engaging in four to six cheating behaviors, and 26% (compared to 12% of underclassmen) reported engaging in seven or more of the cheating behaviors listed on the survey at least one time during their high school careers.

Qualitative Findings

Next, I sought to understand how those in advantaged settings (students, school leaders, school staff, and parents) described why cheating occurs in these settings. Five themes emerged from the qualitative data.

Pervasiveness and Variety

Participants not only described why students cheat but also corroborated the pervasiveness and variety of cheating that occurs in their school settings. Students offered comments like, nearly "100% of the students in my school are cheating" and cheating is "part of high school life." One student indicated that for some of his peers, cheating seemed to be the "answer to everything and to their life." Even those who were doing well in school were perceived as violators of academic integrity. The following student's remark best highlighted this feeling:

> I hate this school. It has too many cheaters. If I cheated as much as some of the honors students I'd be an honors student right now. I [have] seen people cheat on every test I have taken so far.

By all measures, cheating was viewed as both rampant and normalized.

Students, administrators, teachers, and parents also described the myriad ways in which students chose to cheat. Not surprisingly, homework copying was reported as the most common form of cheating. It happens during "the morning scramble; people will copy" or "during lunch, you know, we'll say, 'Oh, I didn't have time to do that. Can I just see your homework?'" Students and administrators described cheating on tests, including stealing tests from teachers' rooms, gaining access to test materials through teachers' computer files, asking peers who have already taken a test to provide test questions, and "stuff like looking over someone's shoulder" at test answers or writing test answers on "a pencil," "a note card," "a water bottle." Descriptions of plagiarism included "taking things from the Internet which are not cited," copying others' papers, and even students "selling essays" from earlier classes.

Two administrators described how the use of technology for cheating is playing a new role. One explained, "The ground is changing underneath you. I think the ability of technology for its use in plagiarism and even key-catchers or phone cameras or all those kinds of things are out there. . . . It's a challenging time." This same principal's school had recently faced an incident where a student placed a technological device on a teacher's computer to change his class grade. These various and sometimes new ways of cheating may make it more difficult for teachers and administrators to be aware of and keep up with student cheating methods.

Lack of Clarity and Consequences

Although pervasive, participants noted that schools provided little clarity about how they defined cheating, and those who cheat tended to face few consequences. One of the principals

stated, "There's a vagueness around cheating" and what is or is not considered cheating at her school. Students also voiced this message. For example, one expressed, "I honestly think that some people don't know what cheating is." She even questioned her own actions, trying to discern whether using SparkNotes (study guides that offer students shortened summaries of literature) or getting some ideas for her own essay after proofreading a friend's piece were considered cheating. Another student indicated the inconsistencies in students' definitions, saying, "It's hard to define cheating, for me at least. I would probably say my definition of cheating, it happens almost every other day. But other students, it would happen like once every other month or so." This same student suggested the need for more discussion: "We haven't really talked about it (the definition of cheating) at school. . . . Maybe we should start talking about this. But I think it's just barely scratched the surface at our own school."

The most common response from adults was that schools often have a policy, but staff does not adhere to the policy. An administrator described, "I think we have an Academic Code of Conduct policy, and teachers don't follow it. It's easier not to, unless it's blatant." Another similarly expressed, "We have a very elaborate system to follow on how to cite sources from the Internet, and those are apparently not always followed." One administrator even condoned the practice of cheating, regardless of policy, stating,

> So let's be honest. Okay, I copied my biology. We all did it, and we know they're doing it. Teachers get so incensed: "You're copying my homework!" It's like, "Well, you didn't?" You were in high school, and you're telling me in your entire education you didn't look at somebody else's paper at least once? Give me a break! We've all been there.

This administrator's perspective sends a clear message to students, teachers, and parents that cheating is acceptable.

The lack of clarity and consequences—or, worse, open acceptance—can lead students to feel cheating is okay. As one of the students noted in her interview, "I don't think people know how serious [cheating] is and what the consequences are . . . because a lot of teachers don't really catch them, so . . . not a lot of people who have cheated have faced the consequences."

One of the schools did report having a different system in place. During her interview, the Dean of Students at this all-girls private school indicated how they not only talk about cheating, they actively teach academic integrity:

> [There is] a difference between telling a kid what it means to plagiarize and actually giving them a paper and practicing, and having them rewrite it, and showing them why this is okay but this isn't. . . . So we're spending a great deal of time trying to sequence what they learn. In history, we're doing it from sixth grade to 12th grade, so in sixth grade, they're given a paragraph, and the teacher sits with them and says, "Okay, write it in your own words." And then they all go up on the board. "Why is this okay, but this isn't? What did you do here?" We're trying to teach how to use integrity more, as opposed to just giving them the definition.

Quantitatively, this school also had the lowest reported rates of cheating. Yet this school was the exception rather than the rule, leaving students to cheat because they can (i.e., they are not held accountable) or because they do not know what constitutes cheating.

Valuing Achievement and Credentialing Over Learning

Although I was interested in understanding how often students in advantaged high schools cheated, and the ways in which they cheated, I also sought to understand why they were cheating. Lack of clarity and consequences, previously described, provides one reason, but the over-whelming reason that participants described for cheating centered on the culture of their schools and communities. Specifically, these students find themselves in schools and communities that value academic achievement and credentialing over learning or development in other areas. Participants' descriptions were replete with examples of an excessive achievement culture. For instance, in describing their school settings, students reported, "[My] school doesn't really focus on the person. . . . They focus on the person's grades. . . . So the school doesn't focus on making better people; they just focus on having people make better grades" or "I think they (teachers and administrators) value results over hard work."

Participants described the critical role that parents play in sustaining this achievement culture. In one team meeting, the group discussed how parents compare their children's test scores, if only to be able to say, "My kid is better than yours." In another, parents and students expressed how parents pay for their children to take a high school class at the local community college the summer before they will have that same class in high school. The goal here is to give students a "leg up" in the more challenging academic classes. Moreover, during the student conference session, the students discussed how some parents "spend like thousands and thousands of dollars [for] six months of [SAT] classes" so that their child can improve his or her score (and likelihood of getting into a more selective college). The students did not describe this as a rarity; to the contrary, they stated these kinds of practices are "the standard." As one student reported, the community rallies around these practices because the school and students are garnering achievement success, as measured by test scores and college entrance. He stated,

> Like the community itself is saying, "Yeah, do all you can do. And be the best because [our school] is really high," and they want to keep it that way. So then they sort of keep the ball rolling, and if the system keeps itself contained and it's going well, then they don't really change it. So . . . it's going well in the sense that we're ranking really high.

The students took on the values expressed by their school, their parents, and their community. They became "more worried about the grade than actually learning." As one of our principals described, "It's the rare kid . . . that really is here to learn. I know parents don't stress with them that they're here to learn for learning's sake. They're just learning to get into college." Another administrator indicated that many of her students "feel they just need to get through; work hard and get through high school so they can have a life in college."

The students' voices similarly reflect their upper middle class community's values. During one of the conference workshops, a student shared his perspective, which was corroborated by the rest of the group: "Right now it's not cool to love learning. It's cool to work the system. So the kids are holding each other back in the way that they don't allow each other to learn." In other words, those who seek to learn are not respected, but those who "work the system" (i.e., cheat and get away with it) are.

This culture is strong enough that even when students or families share a more learning-oriented perspective at home, students are drawn to different goals and purposes at school. This was highlighted during an interview with one of our high school seniors:

> A successful student at Ridge, I think for most people is—I feel like this a lot of the time too, so I understand—is whoever got the best grade. Because sometimes I just look at my GPA and go, "Should've done better." You know? But I'm glad my dad says you just need to retain the information, just kind of encouraging me to study. Because when I go to school I think I forget what my dad said and I just think about the grade. That's kind of the atmosphere at Ridge, you know? It's about the grade.

Similarly, another student described how he struggles to maintain learning-oriented values:

> My grades rarely reflect what I've learned. . . . And the extracurriculars I do, I usually start doing them because I really like them, but then having so many things I feel obligated to do makes me just like resent the activities and makes me resent the whole school experience, because I feel like I'm doing it for a product. And if I was just doing what I wanted to be doing, I wouldn't be able to get to where I wanted to go.

Several participants spoke about the need to shift these deeply embedded values. One of the principals described his attempts:

> I say to parents, "You need to think about who your kids are as opposed to what they do." And that's a hard thing to do. . . . We tell our kids so much, you know, "How'd you do on the test? What's going on there?" as opposed to really having conversations about: "What kind of person are you? And how are you interacting with your friends? And . . . are you a person of honor?"—those parts that are more important. And we want certain things for our kids; but what do we really want for them? Those are larger questions. . . . We have to be about learning; we have to prize inquiry and the achievements of learning.

Another school leader expressed that although some do accept this "broader definition," it is not "widely accepted."

Forced to Cheat

In a culture that values achievement, credentials, and getting ahead, students feel like cheating is a necessity. They describe this in part because they feel pressured, and in part because it seems the only avenue to meeting the community's values and goals.

Under pressure and overwhelmed.   The participants described how students feel pressured, stressed, overwhelmed, and overloaded, and they cheat simply to keep up. We heard about students being "overloaded with more than they can possibly physically do," being constantly asked to do work that is "really high stakes" or "absolutely overwhelming," and just generally being "stressed" and "pressured." One student described a typical ethical dilemma these students face in their current school culture:

> It's 1 am; I have just finished 3 hours straight of a calc problem set, Spanish vocab work and history reading and I still have to write an English essay. I can turn in nothing and get a "0" or I can download something from the Internet and take my chances.

Another expressed how cheating becomes a necessity:

> It's so hard to survive [junior year] without getting help from your friends, as in like help on home-work. . . . Because [teachers] give you so much that sometimes it's just really hard to finish it all. And as long as you do well on the tests, the homework doesn't really matter.

The cynicism and sheer frustration in these students' voices is almost palpable: "I think that the administration/teachers need to realize that a lot of kids in our school are cheating their way through school, not because they want to but because we are given SO much." Although students believed school was about learning and gaining knowledge, it becomes too easy to "lose focus because you're so worried about the grade that you find ways to cut corners because you have so much work to do and you just try and get the best score you possibly can," and sometimes "by whatever means necessary."

The culture provides no other choice. Students and administrators described how the value of achievement was so entrenched that students saw no other viable alternative to cheating. They engage in cheating to survive in the system, and they rationalize their behavior. An admin-istrator shared, students "want to be successful, and they don't think. I think sometimes they get themselves in a corner. And don't find a way out."

The students were even more direct about why they cheated. One student wrote on the survey,

> Why do you think students [at this school] cheat so much? Do you think it's to survive? Do you think it's to impress/live up to parents? Do you think it's to get into a good college? YES. Do you think we do all this for ourselves? Do we have a choice? NO.

Students felt like they had to succumb to these external pressures; working within the system was imperative to getting ahead (and thus maintaining status as part of an elite). It was the cultural way in these advantaged communities.

During a group conversation at one of the student workshops, the young people discussed how "students are abusing the system." One female participant described how cheating behavior and learning to take advantage of the system was "being instilled in the tradition of kids, like you have to do these things to get into college. . . . [Students] feel like they're being forced to do all these things." An administrator worried about the developmental consequences for students when they are willing to give up their integrity:

> As I look at our issues of academic integrity, when we talked to kids, I think their sense was that telling the truth was more costly than the consequences of not telling the truth. Do you know what I'm saying? That if in any way their chances of getting into an elite school were damaged, that their integrity, their honesty, if that was road kill on the way, that's okay.

The students who were part of the interviews and the conference workshops indicated that they did not want to participate in these behaviors, but it was almost a natural consequence of the context. During a conference session, one student participant expressed: "I like love learning, and I came into this like wanting to get a good education and be successful in life for the right reasons, but then you reach this point where like . . . " Her peer finished her sentence: " . . . you get corrupted."

The consequences for not cheating can be, in the students' views, devastating: "It's cheat or be cheated; because everyone is doing it, you don't want to be the only one not doing well." Some even described cheating as ethical:

> The reason why people are cheating or are abusing the system is because they feel the need that if everyone else is cheating, quote–unquote, or padding their résumé, that if they don't, then they're screwed. So basically it's just like, it's not necessarily that we're compromising our morals and values; it's like you're compromising for like a just reason. It's like hard to say, but like you're compromising it for sort of a good.

This Is All a Bit Suspect

Although the students felt wrapped up in the cheating culture (and most indicated participating at some level), they also felt that somehow their community's values had gone awry. They expressed that the values and behaviors of the community were "not normal," were "ridiculous," or had become "contorted and twisted." One student described how "kids are fighting for like that 1%. . . . They're like dreading the fact that they got a 91% when their friend got like a 92% or something." They were surprised that parents would pay money for extra coursework or SAT preparation classes. During a conference session, the students also reported not wanting to be caught up in "studying" for tests they felt were an inaccurate portrayal of their learning and knowledge, where they believed one can cheat to get ahead:

> Male Participant: Like everyone's taking out little SAT books, and I'm like, no, I'm not prepping for it at all because . . . this isn't testing my knowledge; it's testing how well I can take a test in a constrained time.
>   Male Participant: . . . Yeah, and how well your guessing strategy works. . . . What's the point of it now? If you can cheat it, how is that a measure of your intelligence anyway?
>   Male Participant: It's totally down to a science, how it's like if you skip it, it doesn't count against you, but if you guess you get one fourth of a point. There's a strategy. It's not even worth it. Like it comes to the point where if this is going to determine what I do for the rest of my life, then it's like, I don't want to do it.

They realized that "buying into all [this] is kind of like perpetuating the system."

Others questioned their peers' perspectives on the very purpose of school. One of the students we interviewed expressed, "I don't think [students] know maybe how serious it (cheating) is, and how stupid it is! Because you could've been learning that stuff." Another described herself as the atypical student, but indicated, "I just want to do my best . . . if I don't get into this college—like, fine, whatever. . . . I just want to know that the work I'm doing is the best I can." These students wondered why their system had gotten so far afield from what they felt school should be about ("learning," "gaining knowledge," developing as a person).

DISCUSSION

This study provides strong evidence for claims that cheating behavior is pervasive among students growing up in advantaged communities. Not only did most of the students in the present study report or describe cheating, but both the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest students are

utilizing a wide variety of methods to cheat, including 26% of the upperclassmen who reported cheating in seven or more of the 13 ways listed on the survey. These multifaceted cheaters are working the system, and with little accountability or consequences associated with their cheating behavior, I speculate that this group will continue to use cheating as a mechanism to get ahead in college, graduate school, or even career (see Cizek, 1999; Sierles, Hendrickx, & Circle, 1980).

The qualitative results highlighted that the cultural values and practices, and the actions of the community to uphold those values, created a climate ripe for cheating, and for justifying one's cheating. The students in this study did not so much describe cheating as wrong (though they may believe it is), but rather they described it as necessary and reported feeling forced to sacrifice their integrity, morals, and ethical standards. They questioned, How else can we keep up with an overwhelming amount of schoolwork? How else can we maintain our hard-earned status if everyone else is cheating? How else can we get into our (or our parents' or community's) college of choice without abusing the system? These neutralization techniques align with Sykes and Matza's (1957) work and corroborate other research suggesting that students generally point to external factors as causes for their cheating behavior (see Murdock & Stephens, 2007). This rationalizing is also similar to the psychological concept of self-serving bias, where individuals tend to credit their successes to internal attributes and their failures to external attributes (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Krusemark, Campbell, & Clementz, 2008). In the present study, being thought of as unethical would pose a threat to participants' sense of self. However, because students attribute their cheating behavior to external circumstances that are out of their control, they are able to maintain a positive sense of self (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999).

Results also indicate that the culture of cheating among peers helps sustain students' individual cheating (see also McCabe & Trevino, 1993; O'Rourke et al., 2010). The idea of "cheat or be cheated" is powerful here. When students believe there is pervasive cheating, or when they see or experience common cheating, they are more likely to cheat. As McCabe and Trevino (1993) noted, the pervasiveness normalizes the behavior. Moreover, when everyone else is cheating, the students feel disadvantaged by not cheating. As one of our students articulated, they are cheating for a "just reason," for a "good"; otherwise, classmates who had not studied or worked hard could use cheating to "unfairly" benefit themselves. In this kind of justification students make cheating ethical, allowing them to maintain their sense of integrity and simultaneously attain the status and success they believe they are afforded because of their hard work.

The present study's findings are particularly disheartening when one considers the broader ramifications of the students' (and their communities') beliefs and actions. Because today's schools are less focused on learning, and more on credentialing (Demerath, 2009; Labaree, 1997), raising test scores, and graduating "students who will help corporations" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 26), students will see no good reason to refrain from cheating. Kincheloe suggested that in this kind of consumerist culture:

> Men and women from more dominant locales suffer an informational alienation that erases issues of power, justice, and privilege. Those from less-dominant locales are denied access to institutions that provide tickets to social mobility by the use of a rhetoric of standards, excellence, and values. (p. 37)

Brantlinger (2003) further described how this plays out for those in "the educated middle class" (p. 17), stating, "[They] probably do not consider themselves imperialists, capitalists, or even advantaged; nevertheless, they are enthusiastic consumers of material culture and cherish the commodified credentials that enable them to manage public affairs" (pp. 17–18). Consistent with

these notions, the students in our study did not talk about their privileges, or how they were getting ahead in the current system. Like Kincheloe (2007), Brantlinger, and other researchers have proposed, privileges often remain invisible to the dominant group, and rather, it is those who are marginalized who are best positioned to see and articulate the advantages of the dominant class (see also Delpit, 2006; King & Howard, 2000).

Instead, the students in our study revealed the overt focus in their school communities on getting the best grades, being at the top, and getting into the "right" colleges, and they share how this has negative implications for their integrity and their overall well-being. As this study shows, many of them do cheat; they are a product of the system and seek to maintain their elite status and uphold community values. Yet many also feel forced to participate in the culture, and the qualitative findings indicate they are not sure they want to be part of it. Thus, although their current culture is ripe for cheating, it may also be ripe for change.

Countering the Problem of Cheating

Countering cheating behavior in our schools is no easy task, but the results here suggest the need for deep examination of context and more specifically the culture of achievement and individual advancement (see also Demerath, 2009) that is entrenched in these upper middle class communities. Although some researchers and practitioners support implementing honor codes as a way to address culture, in schools like those in the present study, I believe that honor codes will not fully address the underlying root causes of cheating behavior. As Cizek (1999) stated:

> To tackle cheating requires facing much larger issues, such as what education is about, what tests are for, what the role of a teacher should be, and what one's view of human nature is . . . I suspect that it may be normal to avoid thinking about the bigger questions, precisely because they are more consequential and compel action. (p. 201)

The reflection and subsequent action Cizek describes is a necessity. I recommend starting from the students' notion that something is awry with the current culture in these schools. Advantaged schools must address their current definitions of success and the systems that perpetuate them. Here, communities need to explore how definitions of success are historically and culturally embedded and how they are shaped by current sociopolitical and economic trends. This requires communities to articulate, examine, and become more public about what they mean by success and how their definition impacts the way they do things, from school and classroom practices and policies to resources, curriculum, teaching, and assessment. This dialogue and open sharing should start at the elementary level and continue through students' high school experience. Through this more systemic approach communities may begin to make inroads and reduce cheating behavior. Of course, the schools and communities like those in the present study may not want to make these shifts. The current structure of schools meets the needs and goals of the professional middle class, and the schools are doing "well." But one must ask, at what cost?

Study Limitations

The current study examines student cheating in advantaged communities. I did not, for example, gather data from schools that primarily serve traditionally marginalized students (e.g., students of

color, students living in poverty) to compare quantitative data or emergent themes in these different contexts. In delimiting the study to those in advantaged communities, I cannot generalize the quantitative findings to other populations. In addition, the qualitative results about why students cheat are transferable in so much as readers view them as applicable to their own settings, and I expect that discussions about why students cheat would look different in other settings and school cultures.

Future Research

Findings from the current study also suggest avenues for future research. First, given the study's focus on advantaged communities, it would be useful to examine cheating in a more diverse sample of schools. Using a qualitative approach would allow for broader exploration of why students cheat, how reasons may differ by social class, and how those in marginalized communities view cheating (e.g., do they describe it as a mechanism for furthering status of those in power, acting to further marginalize those in nondominant groups; do they describe the "trickle down" effect that Callahan, 2004, discussed)?

Second, this research found students who were multifaceted in their cheating. Future research could distinguish not only who these students are but also how they view their school and community context, why they cheat, and how they justify their cheating behavior. If previous cheating predicts future cheating, understanding their purposes and tackling the problem of multifaceted cheating seems imperative.

Third, parents seem to be one driving force behind the achievement culture the students describe. A study examining parent messages and parent–student interactions around expectations, values, behaviors, and so on, would shed additional light on how parents perpetuate the culture and student cheating behavior.

Finally, even advantaged schools are not homogeneous. I recommend that future research focus explicitly on those who may be traditionally marginalized in these settings (e.g., African American, Latino, and Native American students; English Language Learners, students receiving special education services; students from working-class families or families living in poverty). How do these students and families view the achievement culture and how does it impact them? How are they represented in this dominant paradigm?

Conclusion

Cheating is not a new phenomenon, but the normalization of cheating behavior and an excessive achievement, win-at-all-cost culture appears to be growing. In an educational system where inequities abound (see Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006), cheating becomes another mechanism by which communities of advantage sustain their privilege, and it places youth in a difficult position of choosing between their integrity or doing whatever it takes to meet cultural and class standards. Schools must be willing to examine how the culture of privilege and the ensuing cheating behavior in such a culture maintains advantage. Engaging in this process and creating a shift will require bold and challenging work, but such contexts can begin to counter traditional notions of success and provide students with spaces where they feel they can deepen rather than sacrifice their integrity.

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