

Academic dishonesty in a school of nursing

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty within postsecondary institutions is a significant issue. As such, academic dishonesty has been the subject of more than 100 studies over the last 30 years. Yet, the data provided by previous research have done little to curb the academic dishonesty problem. The purpose of the study was to describe the meaning of academic dishonesty as perceived by the nursing students at an Ontario university. Using the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, 11 students were interviewed to determine their perceptions regarding academic dishonesty within the nursing program. The interview data provided rich details of how and why students were cheating as well as descriptions of their lifeworlds. This study suggested that situational factors found within their learning culture played a significant role in both why and how students in this nursing program were committing acts of academic dishonesty. The lifeworlds of the participating students had been described as being very stressful. Caring was interwoven into their learning. As such, for these students some acts of academic dishonesty were not considered cheating, but sharing.

Keywords: Academic integrity, cheating, plagiarism, nursing students, caring, curriculum, hermeneutic phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty within postsecondary institutions is a serious concern. As such, academic dishonesty has been the subject of more than 100 studies over the last 30 years. Yet, the data provided by previous research have done little to curb the academic dishonesty problem. It appears academia does not have a complete understanding of the issue, particularly from the student perspective. One concern is the rate of cheating among nursing students. Cheating in classroom or clinical settings may reduce a student's competence and hence, put patients at risk (Daniel, Adams & Smith, 1994). However, the issue of academic dishonesty is more than just a student problem. We are living in a world of technological access to almost unlimited informational resources. Students report crushing workloads and impracticable timelines (Tanner, 2004; Parameswaran & Devi, 2006; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2004). They participate in a learning environment where individual scholarship is held as the model of true accomplishment, yet seeing the individual student is difficult in the

crowded hallways and huge lecture halls. We are living in a culture that tolerates some forms of cheating while condemning others (Callahan, 2004). Social psychologists state that the increasing levels of academic dishonesty may be more indicative of flawed educational systems than immoral students (Kohn, 2007). As such, situational factors may have a significant influence on a student's decision to cheat.

Academic dishonesty is found at all levels of schooling from grade school to graduate school and is a growing problem at postsecondary institutions, particularly in schools of nursing (Bailey, 2001; Brown, 2002). Students acknowledge that many forms of cheating are wrong (Ashworth, 1999); for the most part, they say they know there are policies concerning academic dishonesty yet many choose to cheat anyway. In a 2005 study, 77% of students believed that cheating was not a serious issue (Center of Academic Integrity, 2005). Students within nursing programs in Canada are required to take courses in ethics as nurses may find themselves involved with ethical dilemmas in their profession. Yet, even with this education in ethics, nursing students are cheating at the same levels as other postsecondary students (Gaberson, 2007).

The purpose of the study was to describe the meaning of academic dishonesty as perceived by the nursing students at a university in Ontario, Canada. The data revealed that for these students some acts of academic dishonesty were not considered cheating, but sharing. Most of the cheating was accomplished through the use of technology as they tried to manipulate, or control, their environment to ensure they could continue to communicate and share with each other. As is found in many collectivist cultures, the students in this program demonstrated high levels of loyalty to each other where cheating for individual gain was frowned upon, but cheating to assist the group in the program was considered normal.

This paper includes excerpts from the larger, detailed PhD dissertation completed by the author in 2009.

BACKGROUND

The studies conducted over the past few decades have been mainly quantitative in design with students checking appropriate boxes to indicate their cheating behaviours (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997). These self-reporting surveys have returned huge amounts

of data to confirm that cheating in postsecondary appears to be on the increase, yet this information has done little to illuminate the issue in an effort to resolve cheating in schools. What is particularly disconcerting is the finding that nursing students are cheating at the same rates as students in other disciplines (McCabe, in press). Nursing is considered an ethical profession where nurses often find themselves in life and death situations. Taken a step further, research has demonstrated that cheating behaviours in the academic environment are often carried over into the workplace and could have a direct impact on the health of patients (Gaberson, 1997; Baxter & Bobbin, 2007).

Academic dishonesty is a highly complicated issue. Most of the previous studies in this area have been quantitative in design. By comparison, relatively few qualitative studies have been conducted, and those that have are beginning to provide insight into the quantitative data that have been previously reported. Some of the concerns with large scale quantitative studies are that they typically capture general traits and perceptions of students and faculty. The individual behind the statistic is rarely seen. For example, one study found that almost 88% of students were copying off the Internet (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002); another found that high school boys use crib notes at twice the rate as girls (California Dept. of Education as cited by McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001); a third that students are cheating more due to the ease of access to resources on the Internet (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). The question is - who is the student behind those statistics and how does he or she understand the issue?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. The central guiding question was "What is the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students?" Eleven students were interviewed to determine their perceptions regarding academic dishonesty within the nursing program, which included an examination of their learning culture. Students ranged in age from 18 to 50, one male and 10 female, and from different ethnic backgrounds. An email was sent to all nursing students at the school looking for participants. It was proposed that 10 to 12 students participate but as only 11 came forward, no random selection was done. Participants included representatives from each of the four years of the program.

Phenomenology is a human science where the researcher and the participant engage in a discussion to reveal the meaning of a phenomenon as it is understood by the participant. While traditional phenomenology focuses on the fundamental description of the phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenon enables the interpretation of

the description. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was not to determine the cause of academic dishonesty, but to describe and interpret how these participating nursing students understood academic dishonesty based on their own lived experiences.

RESULTS

The researcher found that for all the students interviewed, with the exception of one first year, academic dishonesty was part of the lived experience of these students. If they were not participating in cheating, they had witnessed it in their postsecondary learning environment. Academic dishonesty is a complicated concept and it was apparent from this study that these nursing students had conflicting views. For example, all the 11 students interviewed said that they were honest students who did not cheat. Yet, it is the opinion of the researcher that all but two cheated on a regular basis. Their descriptions of academic dishonesty demonstrated that they had a limited knowledge of the scope of academic dishonesty and its associated policies and penalties. For these students, academic dishonesty was mainly associated with plagiarism. However, while academic dishonesty was considered wrong, many students were participating in behaviours that could be considered dishonest by university policies, such as collaborating on online quizzes and on the social networking site Facebook; they were sharing papers, assignments, passwords, and other materials. For these students, these behaviours were not academically dishonest, but took on another meaning.

DISCUSSION

Language plays an important role in the development of culture (Triandis, 2001). When analyzing the interview transcripts, it became apparent that "caring" played a significant role in the lives of these students. They are learning through a "caring curriculum," study textbooks on the philosophy of caring, incorporate and practice caring in their academic and clinical environments. It became apparent that parallels could be drawn between the philosophy of caring and what was happening as far as academic dishonesty in this program. For example, a caring nurse empathizes with patients; s/he sets aside judgments which might interfere with the care of the patient; does what s/he can to heal the physical and mental pain experienced by patients; plays a role in the recovery of the patient while respecting the autonomy of the patient (Watson, 1985). These caring traits were conspicuous when discussing the relationships these students had with each other and in the discussions surrounding academic dishonesty. One aspect of the study revealed that students were transferring the concept of caring from nursing situations to their fellow students where they commonly assisted fellow students

who were at risk. Caring and sharing were not considered cheating.

Some researchers say that students cheat because of a lower levels of moral reasoning, yet studies have found that students with high moral reasoning cheat as much as those with low moral reasoning (Tanner, 2004; Patterson, Taylor & Usick, 2003). Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo said that, "human behaviour is more influenced by things outside us than inside us" (as cited in Kohn, 2007). This study suggested that situational factors found within their learning culture play a significant role in both why and how students in this nursing program were committing academic dishonesty. The lifeworlds of the participating students had been described as being very stressful. While completing their studies, these students worked closely together in a program specifically designed for their future profession. As a result, they had little contact with students from other disciplines. Clinical practice integrated into their curriculum fostered deep bonds between students as they coped with the stress, and at times, trauma that can be experienced in healthcare settings. Their clinical experiences and isolated nature of the program assisted in the development of close working bonds between the students. Coupled with the stress, these bonds fostered interdependence among groups and their members. Students demonstrated traits of collectivist cultures such as loyalty to one's group and the priority of group goals over individual goals.

Students in this study appeared to be neutralizing their cheating behaviours. An important factor in decision-making is the necessity for people who make the decision to justify it (Beach & Connolly, 2005). When students justify cheating behaviours, it could be considered neutralizing or nullifying that behaviour. Neutralizing the acts of dishonesty enables students to continue to commit academic dishonesty without acknowledging that they have done anything wrong. For example, sharing papers with friends is not considered cheating, but helping another student. Researchers have found that the higher the levels of academic dishonesty, the greater the use of neutralizing statements (Murdoch & Stevens, 2007). The participants in this study did use neutralization to justify or nullify academic dishonesty. For example, several students said that sending passwords to quizzes was not cheating as it was not mentioned in the course outline, that the workload was heavy, that a particular situation was an invitation to cheat, that the professor doesn't care, that cheating only occurred on small assignments so it doesn't matter, etc. In Murdock and Steven's study, cheating and the associated neutralization are contextual meaning the dishonest act and the accompanying excuse are not a result of low morals, but of social conventions (2007). As such, academic dishonesty and its acceptance by both

the cheater and those who witness it are dependent on the situation. For example, students are more accepting of cheating when it is done under duress than if it were done simply to get a good mark. In individualistic cultures, neutralization is an example of denial of the crime, the victim, and responsibility. However, the students in this program exemplify many traits found within collectivist cultures. Most of the academic dishonesty involved assisting group members. In collectivist cultures, assisting group members is an obligation and is not considered dishonest (Triandis, 2001; Chapman & Lupton, 2004).

While certain types of academic dishonesty were viewed by participants as wrong, for example, cheating to improve one's personal performance, for the most part, these students were tolerant of other's cheating behaviours. Students reported high stress levels where desperation, it was said, can drive even the best student to cross the line into dishonesty. Stress can impact a person's ability to make a decision and assess risk (Rettinger, 2007). Students were consistently sharing papers, assignments, quizzes, answers, and reflective notes in an effort to assist each other through the program.

People develop behaviours and attitudes in response to fulfilling needs, avoiding aspects like pain or dealing with their reality (Brill & Levine, 2005). These coping mechanisms may be conscious or unconscious (Brill & Levine, 2005). Watson (1985) frames coping as protection – people will use various mechanisms to protect themselves in stressful situations. In this study, students suggested that most of the academic dishonesty that occurred at their university was a result of dealing with the extreme stress levels experienced by these students. These students reported heavy course loads combined with the clinical components of the program. As such, students have developed numerous methods for coping with the workload, some of which could be considered academic dishonesty. In an effort to assist each other, many students were crossing the line where too much sharing became acts of dishonesty according to the policies of the university. For example, Facebook sites for completing assignments could be considered unauthorized collaboration. Sharing papers where students would incorporate another's ideas, "lift a paragraph or two," or copy references was not considered cheating, but helping fellow students through a tough assignment. However, most of the participants did not have a comprehensive understanding of the definition of academic dishonesty or the associated policies. As such, it may be difficult to determine where the line is between honesty and dishonesty, particularly when there is an interdependency between group members. It is the researcher's contention that most of the participants did not comprehend when "sharing" was

considered academically dishonest. By their own accounts, few participants were purposefully deceitful, in fact, they all said they were honest students. However, their coping mechanisms of sharing, their learning culture built on caring, provided opportunities for neutralizing cheating behaviours.

Participants in this study did describe academic experiences where they felt vulnerable with little input or ability to control their environment. When students were placed into groups where there are differing goals, the high achieving students felt vulnerable to the lower achieving students, the so-called 60 percenters. They were resigned that they would have to do a larger portion of the work than other group members. The frustration levels were reduced when students were able to choose their own group members for assignments. Students were vulnerable to the time pressures, to teachers and staff, to parents, and to patients in clinical. Their lives were focused around meeting the needs of others while ignoring many of their own needs. The students in this study did very little socializing. The groups of friends they developed at school were a cultural reaction to their place and time. For the most part, these groups were formed in response to the academic needs of the students and as such, members were interdependent. Group goals were extremely important.

Students were quick to take advantage of a professor who was not technically competent. Students tried to manipulate their environment to ensure they could communicate and share with each other. Students would express frustration when laptops were required tools for the program then faculty would try and control the use of the laptop in class and on assignments. As such, students would use their superior technological knowledge to thwart efforts by faculty members to ensure a secure test environment. In such cases, student use and understanding of technology was superior to that of the professor and as such, the students took control of some of the assessments and classroom activities. They would share answers through instant messaging, send each other quizzes or passwords, accessed materials from other sources to get the answers, or developed Facebook sites for completing assignments. The students were exerting their control over how the assignments were to be completed.

However, when Turnitin.com, the plagiarism detection service, was introduced, the balance of control went back to the professor. In response, students were dropping the course, writing assignments in such a way that wouldn't be flagged by the program, or choosing subjects for papers where the information would not be standard. Students expressed concern that if faculty members were going to use Turnitin.com that assignments be designed in such a way that it would be difficult to have similar

papers handed in from the class. They were expressing their powerlessness in the situation where poorly developed assignments could lead to unintentionally plagiarized papers.

While most of the cheating was conducted through technology, it was apparent that even without the presence of technology, the cheating would continue. In conversing with students, when technology was removed, they would use traditional methods such as discussing tests and answers with those who had yet to write the test.

Students were in a collaborative program with a caring curriculum and as such were learning to be empathetic, responsive and develop relationships with people who needed their help. Caring was interwoven into their learning. As such, for these students some acts of academic dishonesty were not considered cheating, but sharing. Students were assisting one another in their overall goal of becoming a nurse by sharing papers, access to quizzes, assignments and more. In some cases, students understood that this was academic dishonesty, yet in other situations, they did not perceive their actions as cheating. To care means to be non-judgmental. The students in this study demonstrated tolerance of others who were committing academic dishonesty and in some cases, reported being sympathetic towards those who were cheating due to circumstances.

As is found in many collectivist cultures, the students in this program demonstrated high levels of loyalty to each other, particularly within their academic groups. Cheating to benefit the individual was not acceptable, but cheating to assist others in the program was considered normal. This study confirmed a recent quantitative study of nursing students which determined that for nursing students, cheating for individual gain was significantly lower than other disciplines while collaborative cheating was significantly higher (McCabe, in press.)

CONCLUSION

In an effort to better understand academic dishonesty, it becomes important to examine the issue from different perspectives. As such, this study, using the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, focused on the students' perceptions of their lives and the role that academic dishonesty played in their learning experience. These descriptions were then interpreted by the researcher through commonalities and themes. The curriculum was built on the theory of caring which students demonstrated in their interactions with their patients and with each other. They were sympathetic to the issues expressed by their fellow students. Students reported high stress levels and as such, developed numerous coping methods in an attempt to reduce their workloads

and stress levels, some of which could be considered academic dishonesty by the university. These nursing students used neutralizing statements to nullify their behaviours from being dishonest, and in some cases, did not comprehend that their actions could be considered cheating. As such, academic dishonesty becomes one tool students use to ensure successful progress throughout the nursing program. The meaning of academic dishonesty as perceived by these nursing students was caring, sharing, coping and control.

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