CARING, SHARING, COPING AND CONTROL: ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND THE NURSING STUDENT

by

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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 method 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. These data were reduced to determine the commonalities, themes and the overall essence of the phenomenon. 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. Most of the cheating was accomplished through the use of technology. They tried to manipulate, or control, their environment to ensure they could 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, particularly within their
academic groups. Cheating to benefit the individual was frowned upon, but cheating to assist others in the program was considered normal. As such, the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lifeworlds of these nursing students was: caring, sharing, coping and control.
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Chapter One

The Research Problem

Academic dishonesty within postsecondary institutions is a significant issue. Numerous studies report that students are cheating at unprecedented rates (e.g. McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Allen, Fuller & Luckett, 1998). Cheating calls into question the quality of an institution’s academic programs, the value of its degrees and the capability of its graduates. As such, academic dishonesty has been the subject of more than 100 studies over the last 30 years. The reasons for who, how and how often students cheat are as numerous as the studies. Yet, the data provided by this research have done little to curb the 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 constructivists believe that one’s environment plays a crucial role in the development of meaning where reality is constructed based on a person’s experiences and interaction within that environment (Flick, 2006; deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). It has been suggested that as cheating is
pervasive through the education system, it may be more indicative of a flawed educational system than a student’s character (Kohn, 2007). If students in postsecondary programs are cheating at ever increasing rates, there may be cultural influences enabling this behaviour.

The purpose of this study was to provide an interpreted thick description of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience – the lifeworlds - of 11 nursing students. Based on the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, 11 nursing students were interviewed and the data analyzed to identify the commonalities and themes. By examining the lifeworld of the nursing student, the data revealed the underlying influences, perceptions and attitudes surrounding academic dishonesty.

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). As well, and more worrying is the finding that there is a high likelihood that cheating in school may be indicative of cheating in other settings (Daniel et al., 1994). In a yet to be published quantitative study on academic dishonesty and nursing students and faculty at 12 postsecondary institutions in Canada and the United States, Dr. Donald McCabe, one of the most published quantitative researchers on this topic, found that more than half of the undergraduate
students reported having engaged in some form of cheating as described by the survey (in press). This result is comparable to those found in his previous studies of postsecondary students.

McCabe expressed his unease about the nursing students’ results as, “these levels must be of concern to a profession where human life at least occasionally depends on a nurse’s ability to effectively do her/his job” (in press). Academic dishonesty within nursing programs takes on greater significance when one considers the nature of the profession these students will enter.

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, 2001); a third that students are cheating more due to the ease of access to resources on the Internet (Underwood & Szabo, 2004). The question is - who is the student behind those statistics and how does he or she understand the issue? Most of these studies are self-reported surveys where the survey instrument describes the parameters of cheating with questions and/or scenarios. These surveys have defined the terms pertaining to academic dishonesty and participants are asked to respond to the questions on a preset scale (Ashworth, 1999). The accuracy of self-reporting is often questioned as to whether students will be under-reporting or over-reporting (Culwin, 2006). Furthermore, the use of technology has enabled quantitative studies to be conducted on a massive scale. From 2002 to 2004, data were collected through a broadcast email
at 54 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada (McCabe, 2006). McCabe’s study stated that it returned data on students’ and faculty members’ understandings of academic integrity policies as set out on a four-point Likert scale (McCabe, 2006). However, the study doesn’t determine if each student and faculty member actually did know the policies and understood them, rather it recorded their perceived level of understanding. Whether they actually did know and understand the policies remains unclear. Qualitative methods, such as interviews with the participants, might have revealed the participants’ true depth of knowledge of the policies.

Over the last few years, more mixed method and qualitative studies have been conducted. McCabe conducted a qualitative study using focus groups to gain a more in-depth knowledge of how students frame cheating (1999). He found that students believed cheating to be a normal part of their lives and that they offered few suggestions as to how to reduce or eliminate it. Qualitative studies that included personal interviews are even fewer in number, and in particular, interview studies that involved nursing students. Paterson, Taylor and Usick (2003) conducted interviews that compared nursing students’ understanding of plagiarism with those of their faculty members. Somewhat narrow in scope, the interviews dealt mainly with definitions of plagiarism rather than the broader topic of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is one component of academic dishonesty and previous studies have found students do not have a comprehensive understanding of academic dishonesty (McCabe, 2005; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997). As such, I decided to conduct a qualitative study that examines nursing students’ descriptions of academic dishonesty as part of their lived experiences.

Researchers interpret academic dishonesty from their disciplinary perspectives. Educational theorists attribute cheating to poor learning environments, disengaged faculty and a
curriculum that does not teach moral and ethical principles (Austin & Brown; Underwood & Szabo, 2004). Psychologists put forth theories of poor ethical and moral reasoning, yet there are studies that have found that those students with high moral reasoning cheat as often those with lower levels (Cummings, Maddux, Harlow & Dyas, 2002). Social psychologists examine the social impact of cheating, and the relationships students have with their peers and teachers (Anderman, Freeman, & Mueller, 2007; Rabi, et al., 2006). Some researchers claim that more severe penalties equitably distributed will provide an atmosphere that deters cheating (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). Others blame our cheating culture with its overall acceptance of cheating behaviours (Langlais, 2007; Vojak, 2007; Callahan, 2004). In England, the increase in academic dishonesty has been paralleled with the broadening of university education across classes (Ashworth, Freeword & Macdonald, 2003). This study provides a more holistic approach, one that examined the lifeworlds of the students, which revealed the interconnected influences which contributed to the students’ perception of academic dishonesty.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a human science where the researcher engages in a discourse with the participant to determine the meaning of the phenomenon as it is perceived by the participant (van Manen, 1990). According to phenomenology, the meaning of the phenomenon is unique as a person’s experiences shape his or her understanding of reality. This individual reality is considered the participant’s lifeworld. The purpose is to write a thick description, a description rich in detail, of the phenomenon as it is revealed by the participants to the researcher. In traditional phenomenology, the description is to remain free from any interpretation (Fleming, Gaidys & Robb, 2003). Philosopher Martin Heidegger believed that experiences are not independent of each other, that living is an interpretive process as each person makes sense of his
or her world (Dowling, 2007). As such, hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology that concerns an interpretation of the phenomenon, in effect, acknowledging the impact one’s culture and experiences have on beliefs and perceptions. It is interpretation which designates the methodology for this study as hermeneutic phenomenology. By basing this study within the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, it enabled me to delve into the constructs of the nursing student world to discover how each participating student understood academic dishonesty. It enabled me to seek commonalities and themes between the descriptions to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was not to determine the cause of academic dishonesty. What it sought to accomplish was to describe and interpret how these participating nursing students understood the phenomenon based on their lived experiences.

**Culture**

Academic dishonesty in North America can be viewed as a cultural construct of western society. In western society, intellectual work is seen as “property,” therefore, it is a product that is owned. Ownership of ideas and words are the basis for research where knowledge is built on the shoulders of those before us. One must acknowledge those who have provided the theoretical platform on which researchers stand. Whereas scholarship was once a relatively limited profession, the advent of technology and the Internet has increased one’s access to research and knowledge. There is vast amount of information available to students, most of it “owned” by someone else. The process of teaching students about academic dishonesty becomes a process of “enculturation” (Ashworth, Freewood & Macdonald, 2003, p. 261). The cultural complexity surrounding plagiarism increases the confusion for students and academics (Leask, 2006). This is a particularly difficult concept for international students in whose culture academic dishonesty
is defined very differently (e.g. more collectivist cultures) or for those students for whom English is an additional language. In western culture, the original voice is valued and held up as the ultimate scholarship. For many newcomers, the ideology of the original voice is unfounded, with the belief that there is no original idea or voice. Hence, as Canadian and global classrooms become more diverse, the “dishonesty” problem appears to increase. “Every interaction in the classroom is an intercultural one because each participant’s linguistic and socio-cultural identity acts as a base for interacting and communicating” (Leask, 2006). The culture of a student is unique with each student constructing his or her own perceptions and understanding of the world from his or her background, perceptions and experiences. As such, each student constructs his or her own meaning of academic dishonesty.

Social constructivism states that learning is not an individual endeavour based on either cognitive or behaviourist activities. Learning is not something that only happens in a classroom or with formal lessons; rather, one is learning all the time (Bredo, 1997). The role of culture and the construction of one’s reality is founded in the society in which one lives. This situated or transactional perspective focuses on the relationship between humans and their environment. According to Vygotsky, this greatly complicates the learning process because what we understand about beliefs and values is all socially constructed (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, et al, 1998). The situated or transactional perspective also recognizes the role of others and their contribution to knowledge – it is not always the teacher who determines what students should know. Particularly as it regards academic dishonesty, it appears peer influence may be an important factor in a student’s understanding. That being said, two people growing up in the same environment do not necessarily think and act in exactly the same way. The experiences one has within an environment influence that individual’s reality. von Glaserfeld (2005) uses the
example of two people living in a room – they are both sharing the environment, yet if they were to share a bowl of cherries, not one of the cherries is eaten by both people. Meaning is constructed by the individual within a shared environment. As such, meanings can differ between students even when they are living a shared experience (Cobb, 2005). It is for this reason, that nursing students within the same school were interviewed in an effort to determine their understandings of academic integrity.

**Technology**

It was during the mid-eighteenth century that copyright laws were established to protect authorship (Park, 2003). Plagiarism has been described as an outdated concept based on print resources and not on the reality of today’s research techniques, the Internet and the culture of collaboration (Gurak, 2004). Today’s undergraduate students grew up during a time when access to the Internet was a normal aspect of their lives. They have used the computer for communicating, writing, creating, and searching. Downloading music and video is deemed to be free. Commercial enterprises learned quickly that more people would view their materials on content-sharing web sites like YouTube.com than when originally aired on television. In fact, some postmodernists are attempting to shrink the reach of public domain by directly challenging copyright and ownership of content (Livingston-Weber, 1999). Social software like wikis are said to be blurring the lines of authorship. Tapscott and Williams, authors of *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, stated that peer production (collaborative creation) is crafting products that guarantee the right to share and even modify community work (2006).

Traditional scholarship emphasizes the individual whereas collaborative writing puts emphasize on sharing learning within a group. Librarian Bernadette Bruster (2004) described her challenge of teaching students about citation when many resources students find on the Internet do not
reference sources. Students perceive that information belongs to everyone and as such students continue to plagiarize and cheat (Bruster, 2004; Radar, 2002).

In response, researchers are escalating the rhetoric. Academic offences like plagiarism are often described in metaphors used to describe war and disease (Leask, 2006). In reviewing the titles of some of the resources used for this paper, plagiarism and academic dishonesty were described in articles with titles such as, “Avoid the Plague…,” (Bolkar, 2006), “Academic Dishonesty, Bullying, Incivility, and Violence…” (Kolanko, et al., 2006), “Academic Original Sin: Plagiarism, the Internet…” (Wood, 2004), “Crisis on Campus: Confronting Academic Misconduct” (DeCoo, 2002). Studies of faculty state that postsecondary education, with regards to proper writing and referencing are not being taught well. Communicating to students about academic dishonesty is considered accomplished by simply including official policies in the course syllabi (Paterson et al., 2003). Hence, students are often confused about plagiarism and other academic dishonesty issues (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1977).

**Recent Studies**

This study intends to build on the research of three previous qualitative studies. In 2003, Canadian nursing professors, Paterson et al., published their study on “The Construction of Plagiarism in a School of Nursing” where they interviewed eight nursing faculty members and 10 nursing students to determine their perceptions and responses to plagiarism. The study was intended to explore and describe plagiarism within a faculty of nursing and compare faculty and students’ responses regarding their understanding and responses to plagiarism (Paterson et al., 2003). In comparing the two sets of responses, they found that faculty believed the rise in plagiarism was a student problem caused by moral breakdown. However, students did not think plagiarism was serious but was viewed as an “academic quirk” (Paterson et al., 2003, p. 147).
This study focused on plagiarism particularly and not on academic dishonesty as a whole. Their questions mainly concerned definitions of plagiarism, recognition of plagiarism, reporting structures and policies, and penalties.

Peter Ashworth has conducted qualitative research into cheating and plagiarism and has written about the methodology of phenomenology. In 1997, Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne conducted a study of cheating with 19 interviews with graduate students in the U.K. Through semi-structured interviews they provided interpreted descriptions of plagiarism as part of each student’s lifeworld. They found each student’s understanding of plagiarism was different, for example, plagiarism was a result of a lack of referencing skills or was simply a stage in the development of one’s intellectual growth. The study found that students appear to have a hierarchy of cheating behaviours in which cheating that disadvantages other students is considered unacceptable whereas paraphrasing is often overlooked or considered a time-saving strategy. The researchers felt that students’ lack of understanding of plagiarism needed to be addressed from a cultural perspective as in western culture, membership requires a deeper knowledge of why we require honesty in research and writing.

In 2003, Ashworth, Freewood and Macdonald conducted a phenomenological study of plagiarism with 12 students from Sheffield Hallam University in the U.K. Descriptions of the meaning of plagiarism were provided as well as interpreted descriptions of the commonalities between the data collected. In general, they found students were confused about plagiarism and the diversity of meanings between disciplines. Students were very much influenced by the social aspects of their environment, in their relationships with other students, faculty members and the institution. In both studies, the research was conducted with a focus on ascertaining the student’s
meaning of cheating and plagiarism without influencing the responses with the definitions provided by the researchers.

**Remaining Research Issues Regarding Academic Dishonesty**

Quantitative studies have shown that students are cheating at ever increasing rates. Are students cheating more, or are they just reporting their cheating more? Quantitative studies have reported why and how students say they are cheating, but what is largely unknown is the context in which these claims are made. When displayed in a chart or graph or explained in a study item by item, as is done in most quantitative studies, it is not clear how these factors of academic dishonesty are interconnected or contextually framed. Student beliefs about academic dishonesty are complex. McCabe states, “The ethics of cheating is very situational for many students” (2005, para 8). A student’s interpretation of cheating can depend on his or her circumstances. While each student’s perception is unique due to their experiences and background, inconsistencies can be observed within the data. Previous research shows that students are confused about academic dishonesty, including plagiarism (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; McCabe, 1999). Academic policies typically outline what constitutes cheating and the associated punishments – the what *not* to do, rather than what *to* do.

As well, technology has been correlated with increased cheating (Underwood & Szabo, 2004; Baum, 2005; Bruster, 2004). As technology-based testing increases, it would be important to understand more about how students’ belief structures about plagiarism in reference to technology factor into this issue. The students that participated in this study attend a university considered to be “high tech.” Each student is issued a laptop, has materials stored and delivered through technology in an environment that boasts a direct Internet connection at each classroom
seat. Technology plays a significant role in their education and as such, it became a central aspect to study.

Ashworth, Freewood and Macdonald (2003) contend that a student’s “consumer” mentality may also have some influence on how they frame academic dishonesty. When discussing the lived experience with nursing students, it was interesting to note how students perceived their education in relation to economic factors like standard of living. There were students in the nursing program whose goal was to get a good job, whereas others were in the program with the noble goal of helping others.

Overall, qualitative studies about academic dishonesty using interviews with nursing students are few. Paterson et al., Canadian researchers, interviewed nursing faculty and students regarding their definitions of plagiarism (2003). Ashworth and his research partners have conducted two interview-based studies with students in the UK regarding their perceptions of cheating and plagiarism. These studies suggest that students do not have a deep understanding of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, or its implications. This dissertation builds on that work with a hermeneutic phenomenological study that sought to discover how 11 nursing students at an Ontario university frame academic dishonesty as part of their own lived experiences.

**Research questions**

The central guiding question was “What is the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students at an Ontario university?”

Subsequent questions:

- What commonalities emerge from these experiences?
- What themes emerge from these experiences?
• How do the students’ lifeworlds influence the meaning of the academic dishonesty?
• What is the overall essence of the experience? (See definition of essence below.)

Definition of Terms

Academic dishonesty - The terms academic dishonesty, academic misconduct and cheating appear to be used interchangeably throughout the literature. The Centre for Academic Integrity defines academic dishonesty as dishonest behaviour related to academic achievement including cheating, plagiarism, lying, deception and any other form of advantage unfairly obtained by one student over others (1999).

Academic misconduct - continues beyond the classroom to include forging or altering university documents, writing a paper for a student, and damaging or hiding library resources (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006).

Cheating - is seen as a type of behaviour rather than a characterization of a particular student act. It involves a recognized ends and a restricted means (Rozycki, 2006). Many researchers see cheating as a cognitive process involving some form of planning (Grualva & Nowell, 2006).

Plagiarism – “the unattributed use of someone else's words, creations, ideas and arguments as one's own” (University of Western Australia, 2004).

Lifeworld - is the lived experience of a person (van Manen, 1990).

Essence – a composite description based on the data provided by all individuals participating in the study (Laverty, 2003).

Assumptions and Limitations

As the researcher, I acknowledge the assumptions and limitations in this study.

• It was assumed that academic dishonesty is a part of the lived experience of postsecondary nursing students at this Ontario university.
• The number of students in the study was limited to eleven.
• The participants are all full-time students at one particular university.

This study acknowledges that this research returned the meaning of academic dishonesty as described only by the participants in this study. The data are not representative of all nursing students.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into ten chapters. Chapter 2 is the review of literature concerning academic dishonesty, its various components, and contradictions found within the research. In Chapter 3, the specifics regarding the research design and the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology are explained. Chapter 4 provides brief descriptions of the participants as well as my background. Chapter 5 describes the commonalities and traits of academic dishonesty as provided by the participants. From this data, key themes emerged – culture, stress and technology – which are examined further in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of the theme of culture and its perceived role in the meaning of academic dishonesty as described by the participants. In Chapter 7 an analysis is provided of the theme of stress as it relates to academic dishonesty and the participants. Chapter 8 includes an analysis of the role of technology as it relates to academic dishonesty and the students. Chapter 9 is the discussion of the analysis and findings presented in the previous four chapters. The final chapter, Chapter 10 concludes the dissertation, including the contribution this study has in the field as well as directions for future research.

**Summary**

Through a hermeneutic phenomenological study, I have provided additional data to inform the issue of academic dishonesty, particularly as it relates to the participating nursing
students. Social constructivists believe that learning is not restricted to the classroom, but rather that one’s understanding is based on lived experiences as well as the influences of others. A review of the literature revealed that many aspects of a student’s culture such as drive to succeed, the economic importance of a degree, competition for limited rewards, peer influence, motivation and neutralization, and technology are important aspects that may contribute to a student’s beliefs around the purpose of education and academic dishonesty. Much of the prior research conducted on academic dishonesty was quantitative, mainly surveys, where students self-reported their cheating behaviours. By contrast, this descriptive study probes into the lifeworlds of participating nursing students to provide insight into the context surrounding these factors. Each student’s beliefs and understandings are assumed to be a result of his or her own life experiences. Interviewing these students informed me about how the meaning of academic dishonesty is framed by each student. By comparing descriptions, commonalities and themes were revealed. It is understood that the data from this study cannot be generalized as applicable to all students or all nursing students; rather it is a description of the perceptions and interpretations of the participating students. The data collected in this study contribute uniquely to the scholarship in this field as such a study has not been conducted with nursing students.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The research pertaining to academic dishonesty is extensive, yet often contradictory. Furthermore, with all that has been reported concerning academic dishonesty, studies suggest that students continue to cheat at increasing rates (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). The research does not appear to be assisting educators in understanding and, therefore, resolving the problem of cheating. Part of the problem may lie in the way most of these data were collected – mainly through quantitative methods. According to Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997), such studies make the assumption that the definition of cheating is universal and that students’ understanding of the terms is universal. However, their study found that students often do not have a deep understanding of cheating and plagiarism (1997). Academic institutions and their faculty members often assume their policies and associated punishments are clear, but the research suggests this assumption is false (Paterson et al., 2003). The literature review discusses the many elements comprising the issue of academic dishonesty, including the contradictions found within the research findings to date.

Why Students Cheat

The complexity of the issue of academic dishonesty becomes evident from the diversity of reasons students offer for why they cheat. Researchers argue students cheat due to ignorance (Jocoy, 2006; Pickard, 2006; Rader, 2002), poor professors and teaching environments (Austin & Brown, 1999; Bolkan, 2006; Hinman, 2002; Sterngold, 2004; Rabi, Patton, Fjortoft, & Zgarrick, 2006; Anderman, 2007), inadequate policies and penalties regarding academic dishonesty
(Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Martin, 2006; Zobel, 2004), peer influence (Brown, 2002; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003; Myrick, 2004; Petress, 2003; Rabi, et al., 2006), to improve grades (Cummings et al., 2002; Underwood & Szabo, 2004), opportunity (DiCarlo, 2007; McCabe & Trevino, 1993), the Internet (Baum, 2005; Bruster, 2004), procrastination (Roig & Caso, 2005) underdeveloped moral reasoning (Austin, Simpson & Reyen, 2005; Clark, 2003; Lewenson et al., 2005; Lindh, Severinsson & Berg, 2007; Szabo & Underwood, 2004), the need to get a good job (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001a; Miller, Murdock, Anderman & Poindexter, 2007); and a cheating culture (Langlais, 2006; Callahan, 2004; Semple, et al., 2004; Vojak, 2007). In many cases, these results were obtained through self-reported surveys of students and faculty, some of them involving thousands of students. For example, in 2002 to 2003, the Centre for Academic Integrity at Duke University conducted a study with data collected from 54 colleges and universities (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2006). Students have acknowledged cheating behaviours, they have checked the appropriate box for the reasons behind the cheating as defined by the researcher, yet the issue remains perplexing and unresolved. In a study of cheating among graduate business students, researchers were only able to determine 12% of the variance in cheating suggesting that the survey did not provide enough variables from which students could choose to explain their cheating behaviours (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2006).

In studies involving qualitative methods, researchers have determined that students did not have a deep understanding of what it means to have integrity in their school work (Clark, 2003; McCabe 1999; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997). This finding is supported by two studies of cheating in laboratory environments conducted using observation and interviews. Students felt that copying each other’s assignments might be considered cheating, but that assisting their peers to complete assignments was not, as students felt pressed for time to
complete assignments (Parameswaran & Devi, 2006; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2004). Students appear to assume a survival mentality in their quest to complete assignments where helping each other is akin to reaching over a cliff to assist a colleague who is at risk of dropping off the edge. In some cases, it takes on an “us” versus “them” attitude. In focus groups conducted by Dawson (2004), he found that students identified challenging the system as one reason for student cheating. The concept of an authoritarian system that is repressive has been identified in other studies (Dawson, 2004; Bernardi et al., 2004; Wood, 2004) where being honest meant complying with rules that were deemed by students to be arbitrary. Although qualitative methods may not involve the larger number of participants as do quantitative studies, the research provided by qualitative studies has, in part, informed our understanding of the issue by going beyond the statistic in an effort to find deeper meaning in the numbers. However, more work needs to be done.

**Who is Cheating**

Although research pertaining to why students cheat differs greatly, the research about who does most of the cheating is fairly consistent. In a questionnaire-based study of 291 postsecondary students, Szabo and Underwood (2004) confirmed earlier studies when it was determined that more males cheat than females – 68% compared to 39%. Third-year students cheated less than first or second year students (Szabo & Underwood, 2004; Brown, 2002). International students or students from different cultural backgrounds (i.e. not North American) have been identified as a group who demonstrate a high level of academic dishonesty (Park, 2003; Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). This has been attributed to differing cultural expectations around academic writing as well as a lack of language skills (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). Students who have an active social life are more likely to cheat (Straw, 2002). Younger students
were found to cheat more than mature students (Straw, 2002). Some studies found that students with lower grades cheat more than those with higher grades (Cummings et al., 2002), but other studies refute this through data that suggest no correlation between grades and cheating. In a 1994 survey of 191 nursing students in the southern USA, researchers found no correlation between cheating and a student’s maturity or between cheating and ability level (Daniel et al., 1994).

**Social Context**

One factor identified in the Szabo and Underwood study was the *perceived* level of cheating among students and their peers. Approximately 50% of students indicated they would cheat, but more than 72% believed their peers would cheat, with the highest number of those with this perception being in third year (2004), ironically, the year students recorded the lowest level of self-reported cheating. In a study of 253 nursing students, more than 75% reported seeing other students cheat (Brown, 2002). This perception continues within the context of Internet use where in the Scanlon and Neumann study, students felt that 88% of their fellow students were copying resources directly off the Internet (2002). Other studies suggest that when nursing students believe one form of cheating exists then it is the case that other forms exist as well (Daniel et al., 1994). Thus, perceptions are a significant factor. Students believe that most of their fellow students are cheating, which may be a strong influence on why they continue to cheat. McCabe and Trevino (1993) suggested that in this environment, the non-cheating student may feel at a disadvantage and may feel forced to cheat in an effort to keep up (as cited in McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001).

In 1963, Friedenberg stated that the strongest influences on a student are family and school (as cited in Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004) – however, recent literature shows a shift
toward a student’s peer group being the most influential (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001b). Not only is cheating increasing, but it is becoming more socially acceptable (Vojak, 2007). Johnston notes in her 1991 study that students will cheat if they feel it is unlikely they will be caught and that having their peers discover they were cheating was not considered a problem (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). Drinan states that solving the problem of academic dishonesty is compromised when students feel a loyalty towards each other in that there is a reluctance to “rat” on each other (1999, p. 32). In their study, Rabi, et al. (2006) found that 65% of students would not report a fellow student who cheated. This is a concern for professors, particularly in medical fields like nursing and pharmacy, where under their codes of conduct, professionals are obligated to report dishonesty within the profession. Students demonstrated more loyalty to their fellow students rather than to their profession (Rabi et al., 2006). This attitude was confirmed in a 2000 survey that found that students were unwilling to monitor the behaviour of other students – feeling that this was the role of the institution (Hendershott, Drinan & Cross). This loyalty to peers may be attributed to the growing distance between the professor and the learner. Postsecondary classes have become so large that students look to each other for assistance (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). This perception was confirmed in Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne’s study where they found students failed to condemn cheating behaviours with the justification that “all have their reasons” (1997, p. 198). Thus the importance of peer influence and support appears to play a major role in student culture.

Researchers have claimed that culture evolves through persons’ interactions with each other in a specific place and at a specific time (Triandis, 2001). These can include the beliefs and actions shared by a group of people. As such, one person can belong to a variety of different cultures, for example, one’s community, gender, workplace and nation (Zieghan, 2001). Culture
is further developed and communicated through language. Language becomes the medium through which people know one another. Vygotsky (1930) and Halliday (1993) discussed the important role language plays in learning and specifically, the role language played in the development of culture (as cited in Wells, 1994). As such, language becomes a cultural tool where experience, through the process of interaction and communication, becomes knowing (Wells, 1994). The interaction between members in a particular place and time can lead to the development of customs and cooperation (Triandis, 2001). Some students in this study demonstrated traits similar to those found within collectivist cultures, such as loyalty and trust towards the group, the advancement of group goals and an interdependence between group members (Triandis, 2001; Wagner 1995). In collectivist cultures, membership within the group provides a sense of “we-ness” as well as protection in return for loyalty (Hofstede, 1980). Members are more likely to participate in actions that benefit the group, at times not considering the consequences on the individual (Wagner, 1995). Thus, researching the nursing students’ lifeworlds, in particular their shared learning environment became an important aspect of this study.

**Morality and Motivation**

Many researchers, particularly in nursing, blame a breakdown in moral reasoning or low ethical standards as the reasons that students are cheating. In her work as an academic administrator where she regularly dealt with students who have cheated, Christine Tanner found one common element:

> Cheating was not a violation of a moral code of behavior but simply a decision that served practical ends. They felt overwhelmed by the quantity of work, the impossibility of completing all the requirements in the face of their many nonacademic obligations, and the lack of a clear relationship between what was being asked of them and what the real world would require. (Tanner, 2004, p. 291)
Faculty members and universities report that some students do not see cheating as a moral issue. Students appear not to see the connection between cheating in school and its impact, or its relationship to their proposed professional life (Clark, 2003).

Morality is often described as the beliefs of an individual that guide that person to make decisions that are good or bad, right or wrong. (Myrick, 2004). Morality is developed through both the influences of society and one’s personal understanding, hence there are variations in beliefs among individuals. However, there is a general level of morality that is accepted within a given society (Myrick, 2004). As well, while a person’s life continues and is affected by experiences and maturity, personal understanding can change. Therefore, one’s understanding of morality can change, and as well as, society evolves and moral values shift with time. Therefore, morality is constantly adapting both at the individual and societal level.

One well-known model of moral development is that of Kohlberg’s 1978 model. This three-level, six stage cognitive development theory focused on how an individual learns to think in order to act in a morally acceptable way through a process of maturation. Individuals develop through three levels of moral reasoning which are: pre-conventional (based on obedience and punishment), conventional (based on authority and social order) and post-conventional (based on universal ethical principles). Development typically reflects the person’s age and cognitive developmental level. Kohlberg felt that the role of the teacher is to guide students through the stages of moral development through the use of an underlying curriculum based on respect for all people (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004).

Critics of Kohlberg’s model state that his research was conducted mainly on boys and men (Gaberson, 1977) and further, because it is a stage model, suffers, like Piaget’s developmental theory, to which it is closely related, from similar limitations. These include
problems with measurement and with the invariance of stages. As well, people may act at
different levels depending on the circumstances. Because most nursing students are women
(with an acknowledgement that these numbers are slowly changing), the Gilligan (1982) model
of moral development is often used instead of Kohlberg’s theory in nursing research as it based
on her study of girls and women. The Gilligan model defines moral behaviour by relationships
(as cited in Baxter & Boblin, 2007). Women choose actions based on whether or not they will
hurt others. Women tend to resolve issues based on the possibility of hurting others, and thus,
their decisions are tied closely to emotions like compassion. According to the Kohlberg model,
this type of moral reasoning would indicate a low level of moral development (Baxter & Boblin,
2007).

Psychologist James Rest’s theory integrates both Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s theories into
a four-step process of ethical decision-making. At stage one, a person recognizes the ethical
dilemma; stage two involves evaluating alternatives; stage three is making the moral decision;
and at stage four the person acts on that decision based on the impact this decision would have
on others (Bernardi et al., 2004; Baxter & Boblin, 2007). According to Rest, moral development
occurs as a result of an individual interacting with the world and understanding his or her role in
it. For Rest, formal education plays a greater role than in Kohlberg’s maturational theory (Baxter
& Boblin, 2007).

A number of quantitative studies have been conducted on moral reasoning. For example,
in 2004 researchers tested 220 postsecondary students to determine the level of moral reasoning
students had in relation to their levels of cheating (Bernardi et al., 2004). Using Rest’s Defining
Issues Test (DIT) as well as the researchers’ own Attitudes on Honesty Scale, participants were
asked to estimate on a scale what a person would do in response to particular scenarios. They
found that cheating behaviour was not associated with moral development (Bernardi et al., 2004). This supports a 2002 study of 145 teacher education students at an American university (using the DIT and a survey), where researchers found that more than 76% of students who had the highest level of moral reasoning engaged in some form of academic dishonesty with the same frequency as those students with lower levels of moral reasoning (Cummings et al., 2002).

**Motivation**

If moral reasoning is not obviously correlated to academic dishonesty at least by quantitative measures, some researchers also considered theories of motivation and goal attainment. Motivation is the inner state that drives a person to act in such a way as to accomplish a goal (Daniel et al., 1994). Abraham Maslow’s Need-Goal model (1970) states that humans have five categories of needs: 1) physiologic; 2) security; 3) social; 4) self-esteem; 5) self-actualization. Daniel et. al., argue that the role of education is to enable students to self-actualize. If something were to impede that goal, students may perceive cheating as the only way to reach it (1994).

The Vroom Expectancy Model of Motivation (1964) stated that needs cause human behaviour. Motivation fluctuates as the reward for a particular behaviour increases or decreases. Vroom stated that individuals behave in a manner that will maximize the reward over the long term (as cited in Daniel et al., 1994). In the academic realm, if a student believes that failing a course may lead to failing a nursing program and, therefore, not achieving that dream of becoming a nurse, he or she may resort to cheating to achieve that goal. The short-term negative consequences such as feeling guilty are significantly overshadowed by the goal of attaining the nursing degree (Daniel et al., 1994). This perspective was confirmed in a study of 291 science students where Szabo and Underwood determined that for most students, fear of being caught is
usually estimated to be at a low level of risk as the majority doubted they would ever get caught (2004).

Studies show there is a correlation between being goal-oriented and cheating (Miller et al., 2007). In their article, these researchers report that students are not interested in learning, but in reaching a particular goal (Miller et al., 2007). In a study conducted using surveys of 82 undergraduate students and 12 surveys, researchers found that personal interest had an impact on cheating (2007). If students did not find a subject relevant or interesting, they were more likely to cheat (Schraw et al., 2007). In a 1995 Canadian study of community college students, two of the top five reasons for cheating involved the impact those grades would have on long-term grades and future financial support (Genereux & McLeod). Cheating was more prevalent among those who were going to school for extrinsic reasons such as a better job (Miller et al., 2007). In relation to the nursing student, it may be important to determine the motivation for going to school.

Neutralization

Albrecht, Wenz and Williams developed a theory concerning the elements that must be present for fraud, or in this case, cheating to occur: 1) pressure; 2) the possibility of not getting caught; and 3) the ability to rationalize the action as acceptable, to neutralize it (as cited in Bernardi et al., 2004). In studying academic dishonesty, neutralization, the third step, becomes an important factor. Neutralization, or deflecting blame, is a process of explaining or legitimizing one’s dishonest behaviour rendering it neutral or no longer dishonest. In a 1986 study of 380 students, a correlation was found between cheating and neutralization behaviours (Daniel et al., 1997). Neutralization theory can be divided into four categories: 1) denial of the crime; 2) denial of the victim; 3) denial of responsibility and 4) condemnation of the condemners
Neutralization enables students to achieve the rewards of long-term gain with little or no consequences. A 2004 study of 220 postsecondary students found that students were able to rationalize their dishonesty at all levels of Kohlberg’s model (Bernardi et al., 2004). Even at the last level, students were cheating in response to a system they believed was arbitrary or contrary to their principles of justice. In a 1993 survey, students expressed little sympathy for opportunistic cheating where faculty members made it easy to cheat (McCabe & Trevino). In a 2006 survey of more than 500 postsecondary students in the U.K., students were cheating because everyone else was (Pickard). In the Paterson et al. (2003) study where they interviewed nursing students and faculty, they found that dishonesty was framed positively by students. The researchers found they lacked a sense of remorse or acknowledgement of the acts of cheating on the educational process. Cheating was something the “smart” student did to remain competitive (Paterson et al., p. 189).

Is there a cheating culture?

In a 1972 study, 93% of college students stated that cheating was a normal part of life (Smith, Ryan & Diggins). McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield (2001a) found that one of the reasons students cheat is the need to succeed in postsecondary education in order to get a good job or get into graduate school. Willen (2004) suggests this need not be dismissed. “This need reflects an anxiety about the future, an anxiety reinforced by their experiencing higher education as professional preparation that is a highly competitive high stakes endeavour” (p. 56). Vojak states that “academic moral compasses” are moving as students equate their education to career and monetary success (2007, p. 178). It is of concern to academics that students who would not consider stealing money or other goods are cheating in school. There appears to be a split in student perceptions of cheating. Some students are less likely to perceive all types of cheating as
having the same level of dishonesty, for example, some students do not consider that working with a friend to complete an academic paper is as serious as cheating on exams (Tanner, 2004; Austin, Simpson & Reynen, 2005; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003). David Callahan, author of, The Cheating Culture, Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead, notes this duality is prevalent in American culture (2004). An act of stealing such as shop-lifting is considered wrong by most Americans, but manipulating circumstances in an effort to evade taxes is encouraged (Callahan, 2004).

Cheating is often overlooked when it comes to money and career (Callahan, 2004). Education has been described by students as an investment in the future; a degree carries with it an economic pay off (Vojak, 2007; Myrick, 2005). “If money holds the solution to problems and the key to a successful life, then getting money becomes the primary goal, and education is viewed as the foremost strategy to achieve that goal” (Vojak, 2007, p. 186). The media refer to economic scandals like Enron, WorldCom, and more recently, Conrad Black. (Black is a Canadian businessman who was convicted in the U.S. of fraud and obstruction. As a student at Upper Canada College, Lord Black was expelled for academic misconduct – selling stolen exam papers.) Greed and the drive for material success have infiltrated all aspects of society (Callahan, 2004). In hospitals decisions that affect patients and their families are often based on financial agendas (Myrick, 2005). Market-place values have also become the basis for decisions made in an educational setting (Vojak, 2007). Furthermore, in education, dishonesty to achieve academic success is not limited to students. For example, in 2004, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that incidences of misconduct by scientific researchers had reached unprecedented levels (Langlais, 2007). It is becoming more difficult for universities to model
standards of integrity when students perceive their own teachers acting dishonestly within a society that ignores many aspects of cheating.

**The Role of Technology**

Recent literature suggests that the Internet and technology play a role in the increased number of students cheating. Researchers found a positive correlation between academic dishonesty and the increased use of technology in education (Underwood & Szabo, 2004; Harper, 2006). Computers and other high tech equipment have changed the way people communicate, work, study, and carry out health care (Myrick, 2005). The prevalence of digital resources provides an environment where academic dishonesty such as cut and paste plagiarism can be extremely easy (Center for Academic Integrity, 2005). Hinman, a professor of philosophy who researches the impact of the Internet on students, categorized students into three groups – the first group would never cheat, the second plans and continuously cheats, and the third group, comprising 70 to 80% of students, do not plan to cheat but may end up doing so in the face of time constraints or other issues. He identifies this third group most at risk for Internet dishonesty (2002). This is supported by a 2004 study (Underwood & Szabo) that found 94% of students were sufficiently experienced with the Internet to use it for cutting and pasting resources. Students were accepting of Internet dishonesty with 50% saying they would use it to cheat to avoid a failing grade (Underwood & Szabo, 2004). Szabo and Underwood found that the majority of students were sufficiently skilled to cheat using the Internet, with 32% admitting to plagiarizing using Internet resources and almost 8% cheating this way more than once per week (2004).
Studies in Nursing

There are numerous articles and research on the issue of academic dishonesty among nursing students. Often nursing researchers describe academic dishonesty as an ethical or moral issue. Students within a nursing program are taught ethics and specifically are made aware of the codes of conduct that guide their profession. Nurses in the field must deal regularly with ethical dilemmas from having to counsel patients about controversial issues to discussing with family members the progress and prognosis of critically ill patients. From first year, students are being prepared to develop the foundation and understanding necessary to deal with these sensitive issues in a practical setting. The focus of this curriculum is to develop such qualities as sincerity, patience, and truthfulness (Lewenson, Truglio-Londrigan & Singleton, 2005).

Through the progression of the nursing curriculum, it is expected that students develop a level of morality that enables them to determine the difference between right and wrong (Kenny, 2006).

Nursing students appear to be cheating as much as any other group (Brown, 2007). Also troubling to nursing educators is that nursing students are cheating both in the classroom and in their clinical practice (Baxter & Boblin, 2007). This is a concern as nurses are in direct contact with patients. Trust is the foundation of the relationship between nurse and patient. In a 2003 survey of Canadians, it found that 94% of the population trusts nurses (Canadian Press/Leger Marketing, 2003). It is expected that the nurse’s professional integrity is at the highest level, and as such, would attract students who share those values (Semple, Kenkre & Achilles, 2004). This does not seem to be the case, however, as there appears to be a contradiction between student behaviour and institutional expectations. Paterson et al., (2003) found that nursing faculty viewed plagiarism as a reflection of the low moral standards of students and they expressed their concern about students in clinical practice and as researchers. However, when interviewing
nursing students, they felt that plagiarism was situational and not an indication of a student’s integrity. “Just because I forget to put quotes around someone’s words doesn’t mean I won’t report a medication error I made” (Paterson et al., 2003). Although lower moral standards are often cited by faculty as a reason for nursing students to cheat, the research reveals that students with high moral reasoning cheat as often as students with low moral reasoning. However, other studies with nursing students reveal that neutralization is an important predictor of cheating behaviour (Daniel et al., 1994). Nursing students are able to justify their cheating as not being academically dishonest.

In a yet to be published study of academic dishonesty and nursing students, McCabe (in press) reported that nursing students (graduate and undergraduate) at 12 postsecondary institutions in Canada and the U.S., cheat at the same level as other postsecondary students. However, he did find some differences, for example, the level of collaborative cheating behaviours was significantly higher than students in other programs, and cheating for individual gain was significantly lower.

In studies of nursing students, academic dishonesty can include both classroom and clinical settings. Cheating in the classroom and cheating in clinical practices can have a direct impact on patient care (Bailey, 2001; Baxter & Boblin, 2007; Daniel et al., 1994; Gaberson, 1997). Whether students see that same connection is questionable. Unethical conduct in a clinical setting can include falsifying records, failing to report errors such as with medication, or documenting treatments not performed (Daniel et al., 1994). What is more troubling is that cheating in a clinical setting is often more difficult to recognize as it usually arises when a patient is directly affected (Baxter & Boblin, 2007). For example, a student failing to report a mistake may go unnoticed by supervisors, but it could have a direct impact on a patient’s well
being and it is only at that point that the student’s error would be uncovered. Baxter and Boblin state that many students do see the potential impact on patients from cheating in a clinical setting, but often do not see the impact on patients from cheating in the classroom (2007). According to faculty, students must be competent in their classroom studies to provide them with the background to be competent in clinical settings (Gaberson, 1997). Although the reasons nursing students give for academic dishonesty are the same as those students in other studies, Gaberson notes that the curriculum in nursing may also be contributing (1997). She discusses the emphasis on perfection that is often prevalent in nursing education. “Good nurses don’t make mistakes” (Gaberson, 1997, p. 16). This emphasis on perfection is not uncommon in medical fields and does play a role in student culture.

**The Impact of Stress**

In a 2002 study of nursing students in Ireland, researchers determined that nursing students were under extreme stress, particularly in areas concerning academics, relationships with faculty, finances and clinical experiences (Timmins & Kaliser, 2002). Stress can impact a person’s ability to make informed decisions (Rettinger, 2007). Stress can impair a person’s evaluation of risk where emotion, such as a feeling of dread, can be the basis on which a decision is made (Beach & Connolly, 2005). The participants in this study reported high levels of stress. The repercussions of stress can lead to academic dishonesty as well as other coping strategies.

**Implications for Curriculum, Teaching and Learning**

Just as there is a variation in the data as to why students cheat, there are many inconsistencies concerning what roles the faculty member and institution should play. Faculty members are seen as those on the “front lines” policing student work on the “hunt” for any form of misconduct. For many faculty members, this is not a role they want to play (McCabe, 2005).
Studies show that in many situations, faculty members know of cases of cheating, yet choose not to pursue them (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Hendershott, Drinan & Cross, 2000). Reasons for this include unclear definitions of what exactly constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Challenging a student can be extremely time consuming. The procedures for confronting a student who has cheated may not be clear. Others feel that the institution does not provide the tools or training for properly conducting these challenges (Leask, 2006). In a 2004 survey, most faculty members handled incidences of cheating on an individual basis believing it to be a problem between the instructor and student (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). In their study of 82 postsecondary students, Schraw et al. found situations such as the lack of monitoring on high stakes exams increased cheating (2007). As such, some students are cheating because they can. They know that some faculty members are reluctant to pursue some forms of academic dishonesty or that the policies surrounding dishonesty are unclear and therefore, able to be successfully challenged (Austin & Brown, 1999).

Errey (2002) suggests that one reason there is a rise in cheating in postsecondary institutions is a result of poor education in academic writing. She felt students did not have sufficient training in writing. As such, students were plagiarizing as a result of a shortage of time. “Students felt they had not had enough academic writing practice to give them the needed confidence to work faster” (Errey, 2002, p. 18). For most faculty, teaching proper citation and referencing was not part of their job, as such, it became the students’ responsibility to teach themselves these academic skills. However, research has shown that cheating begins at a young age and continues through school (Schmidt, 2006). Rarely does it begin in postsecondary contexts. Teaching students to write and cite properly may solve the problem of accidental plagiarism but does not address the overall issue of endemic academic dishonesty.
Institutions may be encouraging plagiarism by putting students who have achieved high marks on a pedestal (Willen, 2004; Anderman, 2007). When students see that it is the level of achievement that is honoured rather than the steps taken to achieve those marks, it may actually encourage cheating within student ranks. Therefore, instructional practices where there is competition for grades are associated with cheating (Anderman, 2007).

According to Scheurman, many problems in education result from educators not paying enough attention to the epistemologies within their classrooms, schools and disciplines (1995). Personal beliefs will influence the way students address problems. “Epistemic development and prior experience interact with factors situated in the immediate environment in which reasoning is assessed” (Scheurman, 1995, p. 3). He goes on to state that students’ epistemologies can change when students are provided with a context that promotes an awareness of their beliefs and an opportunity to reflect.

Constructivist theory states that reality is constructed, a claim which would suggest the importance of examining the beliefs of teachers, students and the larger school as these beliefs may influence the students’ beliefs, and therefore, behaviour. For example, in traditional lecture halls, chairs are locked down with the focus on the podium – this reinforces a transmission method of teaching where the expert delivers information to passive novices. Often, postsecondary education emphasizes individual over cooperative achievement where there is competition for limited rewards (Toohey, 2002). Such situations send the implicit message that power is in the hands of the teacher and institution.

In the theory of internal/external locus of control, success or failure can be attributed to people’s ability to control their environment. For example, a person with an internal locus of control feels responsible for his or her own success or failure (Cranton, 1989). A person with
little external locus of control perceives the self as powerless and attributes success or failure to luck, fate, or other powerful individuals (Cranton, 1989). In his 2001 study, Fassett interviewed postsecondary students to determine their beliefs around the role of education, educational success and failure. He found that students had both internally and externally controlled beliefs about educational success, but that they dismissed their own internal beliefs in favour of those of their teachers and schools. According to Fassett, their understanding of success and non-success were psychological constructs (2001). Students believed they were working outside a system over which they had no influence or control, but that had power over them. This is supported by a 2004 study that found some students were cheating in response to a system they found non-responsive (Bernardi et al., 2004). Some students perceive education as an individual endeavour where success means meeting the needs of the instructor (Fassett, 2001).

**Aspects of Nursing Curriculum**

For the purposes of this study, I examined the basic theories on which the nursing curriculum at this university was founded. The BScN program was based on the curriculum foundation of Em Olivia Bevis (1982) and the caring philosophy of Jean Watson (1985). According to Bevis (1982), nursing curriculum, in general, has moved through five phases over history. Each phase rejected parts of the previous philosophy and embraced other aspects carrying them on to the next phase. Phase one was asceticism which centred on self-denial and deprivation, a form of martyrdom, obtained through holy orders. Nursing was a calling where the focus was on the self to achieve a higher level of spirituality. The health of a patient was not as important as his or her salvation. In the 1920s, Bevis described asceticism as joining romanticism. Nurses rejected the idea of self-denial and shifted their loyalty to the physician, their nursing school and the patient. They became grounded in the physical world devoting
themselves to the role of physician’s helper in the service of others. In World War II a shortage of nurses demanded that nursing become diversified with shorter term training for technicians, aids and assistants under the direction of a nurse. Bevis described this phase as pragmatism where nurses still responded to the demands of the physicians rather than patients. In the 1950s, the rise of humanism saw nursing evolve to seeing their clients as needing care rather than just needing medicine. It was a more holistic philosophy that was concerned with the “physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects” of the patient (Bevis, 1982, p. 40). The final phase is humanist existentialism where the human is a thinking being free to make choices, and therefore, is accountable for those choices. This philosophy recognizes the autonomy of the patient, and the care that is required to respect that patient.

Watson's philosophy and science of caring is a major component of the theoretical base on which the BScN program is built. In her book (1985), Watson discussed how in many nursing curricula, nursing was founded on procedures and rules rather than on understanding and empathizing with the ill patient. According to Watson, caring is fundamental to nursing and as important, if not more important, to the treatment of patients as curing. As such, students in the nursing program are taught to care, to empathize with the patient, develop relationships based on caring, and how to withdraw from that relationship in a healthy way.

Research into the philosophical and humanistic components of caring began in earnest in the 1980s. There continues to be some debate amongst academics, including some within nursing, as to whether caring is a quality that a person is born with or whether it is taught (Leininger, 1990). Watson (1985) emphatically writes that “a caring attitude is not transmitted by generation to generation by genes” (p. 8) but in fact, is a cultural response, one that is learned. As such, most nursing curricula focus on the theoretical and clinical aspects of caring (Leininger, 1990). Nel
Nodding, a researcher who writes extensively on caring in educational environments, stated that true caring can only occur when there is a relationship between the carer and the cared-for (2005). The two must want to participate in this relationship in order for caring to occur. For this reason, caring at a distance, for example, sending money to organizations who support children overseas, may not be a true caring relationship as the carer (donator) cannot see the impact of that the caring act. According to Nodding, some may confuse caring with sympathy (2005).

Nursing academics would agree with the importance of developing a helping-trust relationship, however, this contrasts from the nursing perspective of caring where the nurse may be called upon to care for people in situations where the patient is not able to respond to the nurse, or maybe deceased – yet, according to nurses, it can be a true caring relationship (Watson, 1985). In his book, *Being and Time*, hermenutic phenomenologist Heidegger discussed the philosophy of caring stating that human motivation to care can actually impede the person’s well being (1926). Dependent care, where the caregiver takes over all care of the patient, may interfere with a person’s ability to self actualize or care for oneself (Scudder, 1990; Bishop, 1990). Authentic care provides the opportunity for the patient to gain an awareness of self and make decisions regarding self care (Scudder, 1990; Bishop, 1990). According to Leininger, caring is complicated and one of the least understood concepts (1985). While the science of caring is to remain neutral and detached, caring is closely associated with emotion, those felt by the care recipient and the care giver (Watson, 1985). “A science of caring requires the nurse to examine and try to understand the meaning of human actions and values that determine human choice in health and illness,” (Watson, 1985, p. 5). The concept of caring is complicated, particularly for nurses whose desire to help another by satisfying immediate needs, may distract them from assisting in the development of long-terms needs.
In an effort to better understand the nursing students and their lifeworlds, it is important to understand the foundations on which their learning culture is structured. The nursing curriculum, its philosophy of caring, the interaction between students, their experiences and language, all contribute to the students’ perceptions of their educational environment and the development of their culture.

Summary

The literature review reveals a western society where many forms of cheating are ignored or encouraged (Callahan, 2004). The role of postsecondary education has changed where students now attend school to obtain a job that will provide for them a satisfactory economic future (Vojak, 2007; Willen, 2004). As such, being goal oriented correlated to cheating (Miller et al., 2007). Schools themselves have grown to be large institutions with classes of hundreds of students. The growing distance between faculty members and students may turn students towards their peers for support and understanding (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). The workload for students is extremely demanding leading to a situation where survival becomes the ultimate goal. The availability of technology makes access to resources a simple endeavour. Access to the Internet has been correlated to higher levels of cheating (Harper, 2006). Students believed most of their fellow students were cheating (Brown, 2002). Faculty members themselves, the gatekeepers of academic integrity, are somewhat reluctant to challenge students because the institutional policies on academic dishonesty are often vague (Paterson et al., 2003). As a result, students cheat because they are able to with little chance of getting caught. A student’s level of moral reasoning does not appear to have an impact on the decision to cheat (Cummings et al., 2002; Daniel et al., 1994;) yet neutralization, or deflecting blame and responsibility, does appear to have a direct correlation (Bernardi et al., 2004).
The data presented in this literature review provides the background for in-depth probing of the lifeworlds of the participating nursing students. As students construct their own beliefs and perceptions based on their culture and experiences, this study of nursing students has revealed other factors that appear to be influencing these students’ understanding of academic dishonesty. While much is known about why students say they cheat, the information remains somewhat fractured. More qualitative research, such as this study, may inform us as to how this information is interconnected, and how the learning culture of students contributes to their understanding of academic dishonesty.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

Introduction

The data collection, analysis and writing of this study were conducted following the qualitative research methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. This methodology was particularly appropriate because, while the data gathered through quantitative methods such as surveys and statistics are valuable, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to uncover the lived experience of the phenomenon, in this case, academic dishonesty, and provide an interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon from the point of view of the participants.

The purpose of this study was to provide an interpreted thick description of academic dishonesty as perceived by postsecondary nursing students. A thick description is a description that is rich in detail providing the perceptions and understandings of each individual being interviewed (Cresswell, 2007). An interpreted thick description provides an analysis of the all descriptions in an effort to determine common themes and elements. For this study, the central guiding question was “What is the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students?”

Rationale for Choice of Methodology

Much of the prior research into academic dishonesty has been conducted using quantitative methods. Researchers have reported results of surveys conducted with thousands of students in hundreds of schools. For example, in 1964, William Bowers surveyed students on 99 campuses in the USA to determine how often students were cheating and why. In 1993, McCabe
and Trevino returned to nine of those campuses to conduct a similar study. They found that there were substantial increases in students cheating, from 39% as reported by Bowers to 64% in their study. McCabe acknowledges that with a self-reported survey, the results do not reveal if the increase was a result of more students cheating or more students admitting to cheating (2005). In 1999, McCabe conducted a study of 32 high school and college students using focus groups to gain an understanding about how students think about cheating. He stated:

Most of the research [into student cheating], however, has utilized survey techniques, which define the topics that respondents are to address. As a result, it is not clear that the most relevant questions have been asked, and that we truly understand how students themselves frame the issue of cheating. (McCabe, 1999, p. 681)

Although quantitative studies have provided valuable results, there is much opportunity for qualitative studies to provide deeper insight into the issue, particularly from the perspective of students’ understanding of the issues.

Quantitative scientists typically use methods that attempt to remove the researcher from the study and present data that are identified or controlled in such a way as to provide universal statements (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenologist Max van Manen stated that such logical systems may narrow rather than inform our understanding:

Human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself, including its complex and ultimately mysterious nature. It is a naïve rationalism that believes that the phenomena of life can be made intellectually crystal clear or theoretically perfectly transparent. (van Manen, 1990, p. 17)

Human science, such as hermeneutic phenomenology, acknowledges that there is not just one reality, but multiple realities that evolve and change. In his book, *Being and Time*, phenomenologist Martin Heidegger stated that a phenomenon is “that which shows itself in itself” (1926, p. 51) that is, the phenomenon as it is in a person’s lifeworld. It is through discourse between the researcher and the participant that the phenomenon is revealed. It is the
role of the researcher to determine the visible or conscious aspects of the phenomenon, but also
to discover the structures of the phenomenon, its component parts as described by the participants. Through discourse, aspects of the phenomenon that were long “covered up” or forgotten may be revealed. However, the possible meaning of the phenomenon as known in the participants’ lifeworlds is determined through interpretation of the data. It is this interpretative process which designates the methodology for this study as hermeneutic phenomenology.

In his study of cheating, Ashworth justified his qualitative design by stating that quantitative methods do not “set cheating in the context of the student’s lifeworld, and prefigures in the very instrument of measurement the meaning which ‘cheating’ is supposed to bear” (1999, p. 711). The study, conducted using interviews of 19 postsecondary students in the U.K., revealed that students defined cheating in many different ways beyond the scope of rigid quantitative instruments. As a result, the perspective of students was not identifiable through typical quantitative instruments leaving an important source of data untapped (Ashworth, 1999).

By contrast, qualitative studies using interviews often enable the participant to reveal information that they may not have with a questionnaire (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). In two phenomenological studies of cheating, researchers provided descriptions of cheating provided by postsecondary students in the U.K. Commonalities between the descriptions were noted as well. In the 1997 study, researchers concluded that the educational environment played a key role in a student’s decision to cheat. They found that students felt alienated, doing work that lacked creativity and originality in an environment where they were anonymous (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997). In the 2003 study, again the educational environment played a predominant role in a student’s perception of the cheating issue. Some students felt that the rules around academic dishonesty were only pertinent to the school and not to academia in general. Students
described different meanings of plagiarism, stating they were often confused by the differing disciplinary requirements concerning their work (Ashwood, Freewood & Macdonald, 2003).

Building on previous research, this study used hermeneutic phenomenology to provide an interpreted description of academic dishonesty as provided by the participating Canadian nursing students. Not only did I seek to understand the individual’s perception of academic dishonesty, but I was also searching for common themes and structures between each of the interviews. Through hermeneutic phenomenology, this study continues this research into academic dishonesty focusing exclusively on nursing students. These data should inform our understanding of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of the participating nursing students.

**Theoretic framework: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Constructivism**

The methodology that guided the data collection, analysis and report writing was hermeneutic phenomenology. This methodology was chosen because the question is based upon the meaning of the phenomenon of academic dishonesty as part of the lifeworlds of the nursing students. Phenomenological human science is the study of meaning lived in the everyday world (van Manen, 1990).

One of the basic principles of constructivism is that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 2005). In constructivism, the role of the researcher is to attempt to understand the world or culture from the point of view of those who are living it. Constructivists understand that in a person’s life, there can be multiple realities, some of which may be in conflict with one another (Mertens, 2005). This is a key point in this research as quantitative data have shown that many students believe cheating is unethical, yet continue to cheat or overlook the cheating behaviours of other students (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Vojak, 2007). Using a
hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the purpose of this study was to discover how participants construct academic dishonesty as part of their lived experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology evolved from traditional phenomenology where the goal of the research was to report the essential essence of an experience through description. The phenomenon is reduced to its basic structures which are then described (Dowling, 2005). According to traditional phenomenology, consciousness is an object that could be regarded objectively (Fleming et al., 2003). For Heidegger, however, a hermeneutic phenomenologist, existence can only be described in relation with others. He espoused that a lived experience was an interpretive process and that consciousness cannot be separated from human existence. Heidegger described this as “being-in-the-world” (Maggs-Rapport, 2001; Dowling, 2007). As humans, we make sense of our world by living within it rather than being disconnected from it (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). In traditional phenomenology, the purpose is to obtain descriptions free from all influences. Hermeneutic phenomenology, by contrast, reveals the commonalities between the descriptions to better understand the meaning of the overall phenomenon. Hence, phenomenology evolved into hermeneutic phenomenology to include not only being, but also understanding.

The hermeneutic phenomenology theories of Max van Manen are often used as the basis of research by those in health care and social scientists due to its flexibility in supporting a broad range of research problems (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). He described phenomenological research as one based in “thoughtfulness” where the researcher has a keen interest to discover and share through writing the meaning of a lived life (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). As such, the role of the researcher within the process is critical. Because of the commonalities of understanding, the researcher participates in a dialogue regarding the phenomenon (Dowling, 2005). For van
Manen, the dialogue or interview has two roles – to develop a connection through conversation about the experience while gathering data that will assist in the conception and understanding of the phenomena (van Manen, 1990). This caring or thoughtfulness about the phenomena and the subjects may account for the reason why phenomenology is often used by researchers in nursing and education. Researchers in these fields often have a deep commitment to understanding the lived experiences of their patients or students. Nurses want their patients to get well; educators want their students to learn.

The Role of Culture

Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that a person’s understanding of the world is situated within language and culture (Caelli, 2000). Known as intentionality, it recognizes that humans are aware of and are connected to their worlds. “Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences” (Laverty, 2003). As such, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to not only describe but to gain an understanding of the phenomenon as lived by the participant in his or her environment (Caelli, 2000). These shared meanings are embedded in language and culture through the common lived experiences of every day life (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995).

Understanding the role of culture in this study is imperative. I was looking for more than just a description of academic dishonesty, but to understand the role academic dishonesty plays in the lives of the nursing students. As such, it is important to derive from the students a thick description of not only the phenomenon (academic dishonesty) but also the environment in which it is found. Simply knowing a description of academic dishonesty does not provide that the depth of understanding that can be found through knowing the context in which it survives. The cultural influences on students provided insight into academic dishonesty. In traditional
phenomenology, each phenomenological experience is unique and thus generalizing across experiences is not valid. This study, by contrast, enabled me to explain and interpret commonalities and themes prevalent through the participants’ experiences.

**Methods**

Phenomenologists often state that there are no fixed methods in phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). Heidegger states that phenomenology is a “methodological conception” – the *how* of the research process (1926, p. 50). Fixed steps in the research process may constrict the gathering of narrative data. As such, phenomenology is discovery oriented and often the question will determine the methods used. Although van Manen avoids providing strict methods for conducting phenomenological research, he does outline six steps in the “methodical structure of human science research” (1990, p. 30).

1. determining the phenomenon which interests the researcher
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it
3. reflecting on the essential themes
4. describing the phenomenon through writing
5. maintaining a pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole. (pp. 30-31)

Following the theory of hermeneutic phenomenology, this section will describe the methodological steps that will be used in this study.

**Role of the Researcher – Self-reflection**

I have a keen interest in academic dishonesty. This complex topic has many influences and interpretations depending on the point of view of any of the participants - the view of the student, the faculty member, the institution, and so on. The first step in the research process was
to begin a process of self-reflection. I wrote about my own lived experience and perceptions of academic dishonesty, not only at the outset of the research process, but continually throughout the study. As such, I kept a journal to record my preunderstandings of the phenomenon as well as personal reflections throughout the research process. The purpose of the self-reflection is to become aware of my own history and prejudice regarding the phenomenon. “The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issue being researched” (Laverty, 2003, p. 17). The fact that I was studying this topic confirms that I was not independent, yet all efforts were made to remain objective. “Research is a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them” (Mertens, 2005). A hermeneutic phenomenological study requires the researcher to reflect on his or her preunderstandings throughout the research process. As such, a description of my background in the subject and a reduced version of my reflections are included in Chapter 1.

Participants

It was proposed that 10 to 12 full-time students be interviewed for this study; three students from each of the four years in a Bachelor of Science Nursing degree program at an Ontario university. However, only 11 students came forward to volunteer for the study. Two were in first year, two in second, three in third and four in fourth year. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 50, with an average age of 25. One student was male and the rest female. It was anticipated that the students would be as diverse as possible, i.e. different genders, ages, and ethnicities, to better reflect the nursing student population at the university. As such, certain aspects of demographic data were collected before the interviews were conducted. More details concerning the participants can be read in Chapter 4.
Recruitment

Volunteers were sought through a university email directed to all nursing students originating from the health sciences program office (Appendix B). The email explained the research and the role of the participant. The student was to contact me directly to volunteer to participate. Once a student responded to the email offering assistance, a short questionnaire was sent to students requesting basic demographic data, such as: year of schooling, age, sex, and cultural background (see Appendix A). The plan was to number and categorize these surveys in an effort to randomly select the participants. However, because only 11 students came forward to participate in the study, no random selection was done.

Protection of Human Rights

An Ethics Review Protocol Submission for this study was submitted to the Education Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto (Appendix C) and at the participating university. Risks to the individuals interviewed in this study were minimal. The focus of the study was to determine the meaning of academic dishonesty as experienced by the participants in relation to their lifeworlds. Students were informed that they could refuse to answer any question posed, but not one student refused to answer any question. Every effort was made to ensure that the identities of the participants were kept confidential. Participants were given pseudonyms and those pseudonyms were associated with the interview recordings and transcriptions. The student names and pseudonyms were stored separately in a locked filing cabinet. The students’ names did not appear together with their associated data.

Students did not receive any monetary compensation for their participation in the study. It was felt that financial reimbursement may have influenced the results as some prior research
revealed that a possible goal for obtaining a postsecondary education is monetary gain (Callahan, 2004). Paying participants might have, unintentionally, reinforced this message.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews**

The method for data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 11 postsecondary nursing students from the same program and university. Interviews are not just exchanges of words between researcher and interviewee, “but a form of discourse where the research and the participants engage in co-constructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). I digitally recorded the perceptions of academic dishonesty from nursing students as experienced in their lifeworlds. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to interviewing requires active listening as the researcher attempts to gain an insight into the phenomenon (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Through listening I was able to evoke perceptions and stories from the participants and probe further to gain as full a description of the experience as possible.

The method for collecting data was face-to-face semi-structured interviews in a quiet room within the university setting. Brockopp and Hastings-Tolsma (1995) recommended the interview setting be conducted in a place that will elicit the participants’ feelings around the phenomenon. As such, the interviews took place at the university and ran from 1.5 to 2 hours in length. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by me. A semi-structured interview requires the researcher to have a certain set of questions to guide the conversation, but allows for other questions as well that may arise as a result of the interview. “Interviewees often have information or knowledge that may not have been thought of in advance by the researcher” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).
The interviews began with a general discussion in order to build a rapport between the participant and me. Then, more directed questions surrounding the phenomenon were asked. Creswell (2007) recommended two broad, general questions be asked to begin the interviews. The first questions should provide enough data to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. For this study they were:

1) Tell me what your life is like as a nursing student at your university.
2) Tell me about academic dishonesty as you have experienced it.

Such open-ended questions led to further discussions regarding the lifeworld of the nursing student, for example:

- Tell me what your definition of academic dishonesty is.
- What are the ramifications or implications of academic dishonesty?
- Do your fellow students care if another student cheats?
- If you witnessed another student cheating, would you report it? Why or why not?
- How do nursing students justify their acts of cheating?
- Do you see any connection between technology use and academic dishonesty?
- Does being a nursing student mean living in an environment that tolerates academic dishonesty?
- What are your reasons for attending university?
- Do you see dishonesty in your life? If so, where?

The semi-structured nature of this study led to other questions being asked depending on the conversation with the participant. Overall, I was able to guide the conversation to ensure that similar topics were covered in each interview.
A pre-interview test was conducted with a nursing student volunteer to ensure the
questions evoked the responses that would provide sufficient data for the study and to determine
if the time allotted was appropriate. After conducting the pre-interview, adjustments to the
several questions were made and others added.

Each interview was recorded on my laptop. I then transcribed each recording into a
Microsoft Word document. Once the transcript was written, the digital recordings were removed
from my laptop, saved to a disc and stored in a locked filing cabinet. The transcript was sent to
each participant to ensure its accuracy and to make adjustments if the participant felt it was
necessary. No adjustments were required.

**Data Analysis**

Once the interview data were validated by the participants, the process of reduction
began. In analyzing the data, the hermeneutic phenomenologist is searching for the hidden
meaning behind the text (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). The transcripts were uploaded into the
qualitative data analysis program QSR Nvivo 8. I went line by line to highlight significant
passages such as quotations, sentences and words. The data were then manipulated as statements
and passages were clustered into themes or units of meaning. Eventually, 32 nodes or units of
meaning were collected from the 11 transcripts.

The process of interpretation of the data required that I move from the smaller aspects of
the experience and back to the whole experience numerous times to gain greater understanding
of the texts. This process of moving back and forth is known as the hermeneutic circle because
interpreting data is seen as a circular process rather than a linear one (Laverty, 2003). I then
wrote a “composite description” or “essence” that represented the common structures of the
phenomenon, one that would be understood by both “insiders and outsiders” (Laverty, 2003, p.
23). By reducing data from all the participants to their basic structures, hermeneutic phenomenology enabled me to identify commonalities and provide an interpretation of those commonalities. This reductive analysis technique provided the data to develop an interpreted thick description and as such, enable greater understanding of academic dishonesty as experienced by participating nursing students.

The Researcher

By the end of this study, I am 48 years old. I work at a university as an instructional designer. As such, my job necessitates that I interact closely with university and college faculty members. It was during these interactions that I became aware of the problems of academic dishonesty as described by faculty members. However, it was the extent and the types of academic dishonesty experienced in the nursing program that I found intriguing.

Part of my role at the university is to be a member of the Academic Appeals Committee which overviews student appeals of decisions made by their programs regarding everything from academic dishonesty to reduced grades due to illness. I have been a member of this committee for four years.

I began this study with the conviction that academic dishonesty was wrong. However, I had noted that the methods of academic dishonesty used by the nursing students were somewhat different than I had seen in other programs. For example, several incidences were on a large scale involving many students. Many involved the use of technology. While some situations were similar to those found in other programs, such as plagiarism, it was the differences that were intriguing. Nursing is considered an ethical profession and the knowledge that nursing students were cheating was disconcerting. I wanted to know more about the phenomenon and what lay behind it.
My research began with reviewing studies about academic integrity in general. Most were self-reported surveys concerning a student’s behaviour or understanding of academic integrity. I then moved to nursing studies, which in many cases, supported general academic integrity studies. These studies identified the traits of cheating students, as in age, year, gender, etc. However, when I researched situational cheating, it began to broaden my scope. Cultural factors, such as one’s learning environment and society can have significant impact on one’s perception of honesty and dishonesty, which may have an impact on a person’s decision to commit academic dishonesty. As such, I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology to guide this study as it is an examination of the lifeworld. It enabled an interpreted description of the participants’ perceptions of academic dishonesty as they know and experience it. It provided for a detailed interpretation of the participants’ lived experiences and how those experiences may impact the students’ understanding of academic dishonesty.

According to hermeneutic phenomenologist van Manen, the dialogue or interview has two roles – to develop conversational relationships about the experience as well as to gather material that will assist in the understanding of the phenomena (1990). The interviewer and the participant work together to develop an understanding of the phenomenon. As such, the interview process was enlightening to the participating students as well as me. Many times, a student would comment that he or she hadn’t contemplated the issue of academic dishonesty to any great extent and simply having a conversation revealed to them aspects of the issue they hadn’t considered.

When I began interpreting my data, I felt the students used the word “care” in many instances to describe their relationships with each other, in their reasoning for cheating, and in describing those who cheated (as in “they didn’t care”). As such, I began to evaluate what the
word “care” meant for nursing students, where the word came from, and the importance it carries within their lived experiences. As such, “caring” takes on a significant role when analyzing the transcripts and writing an interpreted description of academic dishonesty as experienced by these students. Once “caring” is understood, it leads to greater understanding of the phenomenon of academic dishonesty as described by these students. Caring isn’t cheating; sharing isn’t cheating. I was also intrigued by the unique closeness these students demonstrated towards each other which led me to research the traits of collectivist societies. As such, an interesting paradox was revealed. The characteristics these students were being taught to be a good nurse, may in fact be in conflict with what it means to be a good student.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to provide an interpreted thick description of academic dishonesty within the lifeworlds of participating nursing students. Through the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, 11 BScN students from different years of the program at the same Ontario university were interviewed in an effort to discover the commonalities, underlying themes and overall essence of academic dishonesty as experienced by the participants. Such a qualitative study provides insight into the data collected through quantitative studies as well as identifying some deeper connections in the relationship between the student nursing lifeworld of the participants and academic dishonesty. It should be noted that according to hermeneutic phenomenology, there is no definitive interpretation. Therefore, what is known is always evolving, and as such, this study produced a view of what is known about the phenomenon by these participants at this specific time.
Chapter 4 - The Participants

Introduction

This chapter presents the participants. Brief descriptions are presented in an effort to assist the reader to understand the data collected and the perceptions obtained from participants. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the privacy of the participants.

Demographics

The students that were interviewed for this study range in age, education, cultural background and sex. They are all full-time students in the BScN program at a university in Ontario, Canada. Two were in first year, two in second, three in third and four in fourth year. One of the students interviewed was a male while the other 10 were female. Only three of the 11 interviewed came to the program directly from high school, three had had previous careers and three had attended other universities, gotten a degree, then transferred to this university. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 with six of the students being in their 20s, two were over 40. Six of the students are white Canadians. Three were immigrants to Canada - one was born in eastern Europe, one from eastern Africa and another from south Asia. Four of the students described themselves as students whose first language was not English. None of the students disclosed any type of disability that would impact their learning.

All the participants worked at some time during the year. All worked in the summer. For two of the students, they only worked during the summer and did not work during the school year. One student continued to work full time – 36 hours over a weekend – throughout her studies. The others worked part-time during the school year while attending school full time.
Four of the students were married or living with partners. Two had children at home, one had children who were grown. The rest were single – all of whom lived at home with their parents with the exception of one student who lived near campus while her parents lived in another city.

Four of the participants had university degrees before coming to the nursing program. Three of the degrees were in science and the other in social science. One had a college diploma in a nursing field. This previous education provided interesting comparisons between their studies at other postsecondary institutions and their studies in the BScN program.

The Participants

Isa

Isa is a 19 year-old student coming into the BScN program directly from high school. She was born in eastern Europe and immigrated to Canada with her family. She lives near the university while her parents live in another city. She has a positive attitude and appears to have hit her stride by attending university. She loves university and enjoys the challenge that her nursing studies provide. She appears to be a hard working student and focused on the goal ahead. She feels pressure from her parents to achieve good grades. She gives the impression that her parents don’t feel nursing is appropriate for their daughter – they want her to be a doctor. Isa is concerned that people don’t actually know or understand the nursing profession, the amount of knowledge required to do the work and the extent of the work they do perform. She is also concerned about the media’s portrayal of nurses in skimpy uniforms. She sees this as the exploitation of what she describes as a noble profession.

Rachel

Rachel is perhaps the most stressed student interviewed. At age 20, she feels enormous pressure to achieve good grades as well as work part time, attend to her family responsibilities
and complete all of her school obligations. Rachel and her family originate from south Asia. She lives with her parents and sister in a town close to the university – a 1.5 hour bus ride away. Rachel is unsure that she actually wants to work as a nurse, but is going to use the degree to further her education in another field. She works extremely hard and has very high standards for herself. She surrounds herself with friends who have the same goals and work standards as she does. She spends most of her time on her laptop completing homework and assignments. During the interview, she clutched her laptop on her lap even though a laptop was not going to be used.

**Heather**

Heather is a bubbly, outgoing person with a big smile and big personality. She is a high achiever. This is her second degree. She gives the impression of strong confidence, but still finds meeting all the requirements of the program a problem. She no longer works part time so that she can put more time towards her school work. She talks of sleep deprivation and no time for socializing. She appears to be a natural leader, taking charge of group projects and other situations. She loves nursing, particularly working with children and is thrilled to be doing her fourth year clinical at a children’s hospital.

**Susan**

This is Susan’s second degree. She seems to be coping well with the requirements of the program. She gives the impression of someone who has “been around the block” and is not drawn into the stress that other students may feel about achieving high grades. She describes herself as a “work smart not work hard” kind of student. She works part time in a nursing home where she is able to put some of her nursing skills into practice. She lives with her boyfriend, but admits, there’s not much time to spend on her relationship. Susan was candid about her experiences and opinions. Knowing that there is a shortage of nurses in the province has
provided many employment opportunities and Susan is looking forward to the guaranteed job at graduation.

**Jessica**

Jessica began her studies with a year of college before entering the BScN program. Jessica is a student who has to work hard for her grades. She described doing her school work as “catching up.” Because she doesn’t learn well by reading textbooks, she feels she is always behind in her studies. She found it is her clinical placements where she learns the most about nursing. She’s somewhat resentful of the many benefits available to A students, benefits that she will not have access to even though she works hard. However, she is determined to succeed and as a result, took an extra writing course the summer before entering her fourth year. She wanted to ensure her writing skills were up to standard for she had heard that students have failed fourth year based on their writing skills. For Jessica, this is her second career and she is looking forward to the more challenging and exciting life as a nurse. She has a fiancé and is close to her brothers, sister and father and she tries to see them as often as she can, but it is not easy.

**Joan**

Joan is the veteran of the group. She is 50 years old, is married with grown children. After her children were in school, she went to school to become a personal support worker (PSW). She worked as a PSW for 12 years when she decided to return to school to become a registered practical nurse (RPN). After working as an RPN for a couple of years, she decided to return to school again to become an RN which required a BScN. Her first two years in the program were part time, moving to full time in third year. Joan has found she has fallen in love with learning. She enjoys the program, the faculty and the entire university environment. In fact, she is not sure that the BScN will be her final degree. Joan is free with her opinions and
very willing to share her experiences. She feels much sympathy for her younger colleagues, whom she said, have a rude awakening coming once they finish school and enter the workforce.

**Diane**

Diane is a hard working nursing student. Married with three children, she also works full time while going to school full time. She is proud of the fact that she still achieves As and Bs considering her commitments. This is her second degree, having gotten a degree in social work after finishing high school. She had always wanted to be a nurse, but felt she wasn’t strong enough in the sciences to be successful. Instead, she worked in hospitals, then in emergency services to satisfy that need to assist others. However, as her employer moves to replace her position with a computer, she decided to go back to school to achieve her dream. She loves nursing and the holistic nature of caring for people.

**Mark**

Mark is the only male student interviewed, and one of the few males in the BScN program. This is his second degree. Mark states that when entering the BScN program, he began to know what it is like to be a minority. It took him a few weeks to feel comfortable but found his female colleagues open and willing to accept him into the program, however, he said his teachers were not as accepting. Mark is in second year and lives at home with his parents. He decided to go into nursing after volunteering in a busy emergency room at a city hospital. He found that the nurses were the ones doing most of the work and he decided that this was the kind of career that would provide many rewards and enriching experiences.

**Felicity**

Felicity is 20 years old and has gone into the nursing program directly out of high school. She is on a scholarship which requires her to maintain an A average. She decided to go into nursing because, at the time, she didn’t feel she was smart enough to be a doctor. After
completing her first two years, she knows she has the academic ability to move on but now her direction is more focused on becoming a professor in a nursing program. Perhaps the most soft spoken of the interviewees, Felicity has been given many opportunities in the BScN program, such as working in the simulation lab, assisting with faculty and participating in research projects. Originally from east Africa, Felicity lives at home with her parents.

Tess

Tess is the youngest of the participants. At 18 years old, she entered the BScN program directly from high school. She lives at home and describes herself as being family oriented; she very much appreciates time spent with her family and in particular her younger brother. She finds the adjustment to the nursing program somewhat difficult. She is unable to keep up with the readings, but is coping by focusing on the classroom activities and the assignments. She’s an interesting person. When trying to decide what to do after high school, she seriously considered becoming an electrician. Tess appears to be focused and determined with the end goal in sight.

Serina

Serina is 22 years old, lives with her boyfriend and their two year-old child. She is in her first year of the nursing program. She had attended another university previously but did not finish. Her ability and love of looking after people made her decide to go back to school in the nursing program. She finds juggling her young son and her school work difficult, but has support at home from family members. She also finds the financial burden of going to school a strain. As a result, she drives to a local shopping mall where she parks her car, then takes the bus for the final few miles in order to avoid paying for parking at the university. She is very much enjoying the nursing program and the intellectual challenges it provides.
Summary

This chapter provides brief descriptions of the participants in an effort for the reader to better understand the data provided and interpreted in this study. No study is free from the influence of the researcher (Mertons, 2005) and as such, it becomes important to understand the context in which the data were acquired. Hermeneutic phenomenology enabled me to engage in a conversation with the participants about their lifeworlds and discover the role of academic dishonesty with those lifeworlds. Through the conversations, a common understanding was developed as I questioned the participants in an effort to best ascertain their perceptions and experiences. Providing the background information enables the reader to better understand the foundation from which the data were collected.
Chapter 5 – Commonalities in Academic Dishonesty

Introduction

The main research question that drove this study was, “what is the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students in an Ontario university.” According to Heidegger (1926), the role of the researcher in hermeneutic phenomenology is to reveal the visible or conscious parts of the phenomenon, as well as its structure and component parts. In this chapter, I provide an interpreted description of academic dishonesty as discussed by the participants. A subsequent question that directed this study was to determine if any commonalities emerged from these descriptions. In this chapter, I examined several commonalities, such as the participants’ first experiences with academic dishonesty, their definitions of academic dishonesty and their knowledge of academic dishonesty policies at their university. The students were fairly consistent in their descriptions of how nursing students were cheating and the reasoning behind it. As well, student reactions to academic dishonesty, including neutralizing statements, have been addressed.

Where did it begin?

All students interviewed said that academic dishonesty did not begin at university, but long before that – in high school and even elementary school. This supports previous quantitative and mixed-method studies of high school students which determined that the high school student who doesn’t cheat is an exception (McCabe, 1999; McCabe 2001). Rachel, who went to elementary school in both her native country in south Asia and in Canada, said she saw the same types of dishonesty in both countries. For example, when a teacher would leave the room, students would begin to talk amongst themselves looking for answers to their questions. “I didn’t spend all my life here, I came from another country. And the same thing, as soon as the
teacher stepped out it was like whisper, whisper.” Serina described an incident when she was in elementary school where a very poor student, “the class clown,” suddenly received a higher mark than she did on a math test. She was convinced this student had cheated. It left her feeling confused and angry.

It was evident from conversing with the participants that academic dishonesty was rampant in high school. Rachel, Susan, Felicity, Mark, Serina and Isa described specific incidences that they had witnessed while attending high school. Felicity said she saw students exchanging answers to tests that were conducted in different periods. As well, students would share assignments from one semester to the next or from one year to the next. Susan described how she, herself, was academically dishonest in high school by writing math and science formulas in pencil on the back of her calculator. “You would erase it half way through. Even I was guilty of that. I didn’t care, if that got me through the exam. And everyone seemed to do it then and the odd one did get caught.” Serina described how girls would pin cheat sheets to the underside of their kilts. During the test or exam, they could flip up the hem of their kilts to access the answers. Rachel recounted an incident where someone pulled the fire alarm during an exam. Once the students were outside, students began to talk about their answers – in the presence of their teachers. When the students returned to class, those students who were talking about the exam were asked to hand in their papers and leave the exam room. This incident made an impression on Rachel as this was the first time she had witnessed student cheating being dealt with in such a public manner.

Both Felicity and Susan felt that academic dishonesty was prevalent in high school because there was so much at stake. Every course grade carried weight. “You want to get your credits or you want to get your diploma, that kind of thing,” said Felicity. Tess and Serina said
that cheating was rampant in high school because students were not really interested in learning, but had to graduate. Serina said:

I think in high school, it’s [cheating] pretty much mandatory. Like my Mom, made me go to school all the time. Everybody else went to school, and yeah, you can skip classes but if your parents find out that you are not going to school, you are in trouble.

Tess said that cheating was excessive in high school because students were required to take courses that they didn’t like or felt were irrelevant to their lives. As well, although teachers said that penalties for cheating were severe, it wasn’t often enforced.

When you get into the later grades you see the people get away with it. The teachers don’t pick up on it even though the teachers say they will. It sort of demeans plagiarism because they are getting away with it and it makes you think, ‘why am I putting all this effort in? They are completely plagiarizing their paper that they’re handing in and getting away with it because the teachers aren’t paying attention.’

As a result, the participants in this study had wide ranging experiences with academic dishonesty before entering the nursing program. It is interesting to note that the goals for going to high school are vastly different than those reported for attending university. Students in the nursing program are aware that entrance into the program was difficult. They pay almost $8,000 per year in tuition (including laptop and ancillary fees) for the opportunity to attend. There is an ultimate goal in mind, to be a nurse. As such, the experiences with academic dishonesty within the nursing program are different than most of those described in high school.

**Academic dishonesty in the nursing program**

All students interviewed, except for first-year student Tess, had some experience with academic dishonesty while as a nursing student at their university, but in their opinion, at much lower rates than was experienced in high school. Their experiences ranged from participating directly in the act to witnessing another or other students cheating. Some students also assumed other students were cheating although they were not able to prove or disprove it. Most of these
incidences occurred in a classroom setting. Three students described incidences of academic
dishonesty in a clinical setting. In all, academic dishonesty was very much a part of the lived
experience of all but one of these students.

What is academic dishonesty?

The students interviewed were asked to describe their definition of academic dishonesty.
In an earlier studies, students did not know the extent of the misconduct associated with
academic dishonesty (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Burrus, McGoldrick & Schuhmann,
2007) and this was confirmed in this study. Most of the participants provided narrow
descriptions, limiting academic dishonesty to plagiarism. This is not surprising as these students
are required to write many academic papers over the course of the four-year program. Students
in first, second and third year had been required to write a paper on academic dishonesty and the
nursing student when they were in their first year of the program. They are also taught
referencing in APA style. The focus, therefore, for these students was plagiarism. However,
fourth-year students Susan and Heather included cheating on tests, but Heather added, “What
else is there? I’m not sure.” Third-year student and the oldest student interviewed, Joan, stated
academic dishonesty encompassed anything that was completed “that wasn’t above board,”
meaning any level of deceit in preparing an assignment could be considered academic
dishonesty. Second-year student Mark stated that as academic dishonesty was plagiarism, it was
just one aspect of cheating. Cheating encompassed many more violations than academic
dishonesty. Such a limited understanding of academic dishonesty by most students may be one
reason why academic dishonesty appears, not only in papers as plagiarism, but in other aspects
of their studies, including quizzing, group work, clinical and exams.
In quantitative studies, students often report that they know and understand academic integrity policies (McCabe, 1999). However, in this qualitative study, the participants’ understanding of university policies concerning academic dishonesty was limited. Each acknowledged that the policy concerning academic integrity was included in every course syllabus. Most students said that in first year, professors spent some time explaining the syllabus, including assignments and due dates, but “glossed over” the section concerning academic integrity and the university policy. Students were expected to read those sections on their own. After first year, those sections of the syllabus were barely acknowledged. “You get on your syllabus this long spiel about academic dishonesty and plagiarism, but no one ever reads it,” said fourth-year student Diane. Heather supported this statement and added, “In the beginning, the first one or two years, they [faculty members] give a little bit of an explanation or at least in first year because not everyone knew. But after that, they just expect us to know, and they should know.” Rachel, a third-year student, also stated that she didn’t read the policies because it was the same policy on every course outline.

**The Implications and Consequences**

As a result of not knowing or understanding their university’s policies and expectations on academic dishonesty, most were not aware of the extent of the consequences of academic dishonesty. They were unsure as to the role of the faculty member, dean and administration as well as the rights of the student. Four of the students had a general understanding that their university had strong policies on academic dishonesty. One student noted that violation of those policies could result in severe penalties including a notation on a student’s record. Students explained that a student could be expelled from school as a result of academic dishonesty, but only one student knew of a case where this had happened. Not one of the other ten students
interviewed were aware of an incident when cheating students were given more severe penalties such as a course grade of zero, being suspended or removed from the program or expelled from the university (although these penalties have been handed down over the years.)

Students were aware of the disparity between the threat of academic dishonesty and the “real” consequences. They described that the worst penalty of being expelled was the main threat, but did not know how or when this penalty would be implemented i.e., first offence, second, third, fourth? Susan was candid about academic dishonesty in her program. According to her, everyone cheated at some point in their studies, however, most of the cheating occurred on small assignments, not on major exams or papers. The consequences for cheating on small assignments were minimal as compared to a major assignment. Two of the participants reported getting caught plagiarizing on papers, but most had no penalties assigned. For example, Jessica said that in first and second year she had had a couple of papers “flagged” because she had copied too closely from the research or her textbook. Professors took these instances as opportunities to teach her about paraphrasing. “Luckily, they’re nice enough to show me what I have done wrong and to know that I haven’t done it intentionally.” Diane had a paper that went from a grade of B to a D after it was put through the plagiarism detection service, Turnitin.com. Diane learned then she had a problem with paraphrasing:

There was an issue with the paper. She [the professor] never did anything with it but she gave me a very low grade, and it was a good paper. But I emailed her back and said there was no intent here. Obviously I knew it was going through a program, but she docked my mark based on that.

Isa described a situation in a one of her classes where many students handed in an assignment with improper referencing. “What happened was she sort of threw out that assignment and she said that she has basically two choices. She can give everybody who plagiarized a zero or give everybody a chance to redo it.” The students redid the assignment with no penalty.
In discussing the consequences surrounding academic dishonesty, two students referred to an incident in 2008 where a student at another university had been charged with 147 counts of academic dishonesty for sharing chemistry answers on Facebook (Macleans, 2008). The case was followed for weeks in the local media. The student was eventually given a zero for the assignment. For Susan, it demonstrated that academic dishonesty is not taken seriously. “That still didn’t go through, he still wasn’t kicked out. There were no consequences to sharing information. It didn’t even cost him the course,” said Susan.

It became apparent when discussing consequences with students that most associated the consequences of cheating when one is caught. Students described a potential loss of marks, which for some could mean a lost opportunity to advance to medical or graduate school. Felicity stated it could lead to loss of reputation. Susan and Joan described how cheating could cost students additional funds if they are forced to retake a course or the year. As our conversations continued, five of the students, Heather, Isa, Jessica, Mark and Joan, were able to explain the implications of academic dishonesty on a broader scale. Jessica and Isa stated that cheating in nursing studies could lead to difficulty in finding or keeping a job as those who cheated would not be able to perform their nursing duties well. Heather, Joan and Isa were able to see the patient, the person, who might be affected by a student’s lack of knowledge. Heather stated, “In nursing, for me, it is cheating your way out of information you could very well need in the future. And if it is a life and death situation, I wouldn’t want someone who cheats to care for me.” Mark said that students who cheat generally don’t see beyond the assignment or the year. “They don’t see that long term outlook.” He continued, “They are focusing on the now and not the future.” It is evident that the impact on the patient is not foremost in the mind of these
students when discussing academic dishonesty. Most described the consequences of cheating in terms of the impact it might have on their personal lives.

**Academic Dishonesty in its Many Forms**

When asked, students initially said that there was very little cheating in their BScN program, however, all but one student could describe numerous incidences of academic dishonesty in different situations. The only student who said she had not seen one occurrence of cheating was a first-year student who was interviewed mid-way through first semester. She said that she expected to see indications of cheating (like she had in high school) as she moved through the program, but at that point in her studies, she had not seen any. With the other 10 students, it was interesting to note the different attitudes expressed towards the cheating, from disgust and frustration to acceptance and resignation. In most cases, as the conversations continued and we went deeper into the incidences and issues surrounding academic dishonesty, the participants revised their original statement to recognize that they felt cheating was more prevalent than they had previously acknowledged. The following are brief accounts, as described by the participants, of how some students are cheating in the BScN program.

**Paper Swapping**

Students in the BScN program are required to prepare numerous research papers over the course of their studies. Rachel said that in first year that she had at least one paper due per week. According to the fourth-year students interviewed, paper swapping, where students exchange previously marked essays and other materials, is common, usually between friends. Although paper swapping was described as occurring in each of the four years of the program, it was apparent that it occurred most frequently in third year. In third year, students are divided into two groups with one group taking community health and the other mental health. At the end of
the first semester, the two groups switch. Students expressed that these courses were very demanding with large group papers to be researched and written. As such, students were constantly consulting with one another about how papers and assignments were to be completed. They were looking for examples of format and papers that received high marks. However, Jessica said, it was common that in the process of sharing the papers, students may “lift a paragraph or two” and copy the references. Both Diane and Susan described a particular assignment where they had witnessed a large number of students swapping papers. Students were to watch a Hollywood-style movie and write an analysis of it from a mental health perspective. Because the same assignment had been used for a couple of years and students were consistently swapping papers, the same two movies would get watched by most of the students year after year. Susan said:

They got a few papers handed [to us] from other students so our class ended up doing all the same movies. So, for the next round for the second semester they got our papers so they ended up doing the same paper too. That would be ridiculously boring for me as a professor if I was reading all these papers on these two movies, and it’s not terribly beneficial to anyone.

While upper year students stated that paper swapping was rampant, lower year students such as Rachel and Felicity had heard about paper swapping, but it was not something they had witnessed in their first two years in the program. Felicity said she saw more paper swapping in high school than she has seen in university. She felt that her university professors would remember the papers, especially the papers that received high marks. Mark stated that he had not witnessed much paper swapping during his first year, however, Isa’s first year experience was somewhat different. She did have students ask her for her work. She was also approached by a student who was not yet in the program, but was planning to attend the same university the following year. “This person said, ‘Hold on to your assignments and papers, I’ll use them.’ And I
was like, ‘no you won’t.’” It is not uncommon for students to be contacted by other students they don’t know in search of a paper, however, those students’ chances for getting a paper may be limited.

Paper swapping does not just occur on campus, but in clinical settings as well. Heather acknowledged that some groups of friends do more than share papers as guidelines:

I know there have been groups of friends that switch papers like for example, progress notes for clinical. They will switch and hand each other’s in to the teacher or if they have different teachers. So they are using each others’ papers and that kind of thing. That drives me crazy.

**Online Quizzes**

Faculty members take advantage of the laptop learning environment by having students complete online quizzes that test a student’s understanding of the readings. Most of these quizzes are for relatively few marks, usually between .5% to 2% of the final mark. According to the five students, there is confusion about how the quizzes are to be completed. It would appear that some faculty members require their quizzes to be completed individually while others encourage students to work in groups to complete the quizzes. Most of these quizzes are to be completed outside of class. At least one professor conducted his quizzes during class. Mark had no problem distinguishing cheating from non-cheating in first year. When asked if students cheated during the online quizzes, he responded, “Absolutely.” He stated he had seen as few as two and as many as 20 students sitting down completing the quizzes together when they were to be done on an individual basis:

A group of them sitting down, or simply one student, and passing the answers on - or the questions actually because you don’t know if the answers are correct - but the questions on to other students who then review them. And that, I guess, helps with the time limit because you only have 35 minutes but if you see the questions ahead of time, you can open a book and have an unlimited amount of time.
According to Susan, “I’ve never been in a class where somebody didn’t send me a quiz.” Students regularly copy the quizzes and save them to use them as study tools. However, the copied quizzes are also sent to other students who have yet to complete the work. Susan described how students send each other quizzes outside of the university computer network, using personal email rather than the school’s email. “It’s not going through WebCT or [the university’s email system], so there’s really no way to track who’s sending what.” Students also use social networking technology to share answers such as Facebook or instant messaging. As laptops are used in the classroom, Rachel described an online quiz taken in a first-year course where students were sending each other the quiz answers through instant messaging:

Yeah, MSN is a huge factor in delivering up answers, especially during class. … Of course, if the teacher catches you that’s another thing. But of course the teacher is at the front and your laptop is there so a lot of people would MSN each other and say this is the answer, this is the answer. Yes, it does happen.

Diane and Heather described a third-year course where students were to write an online quiz at the beginning of every class. Students had to be in class to write it as the professor had the quiz password protected and the password would only be given out in class. However, once the password was revealed, students would send the password, through MSN or email, to students who were not in class. Those students would then complete the quiz from home. As another strategy, students would copy the quiz and email it to students who were not in class. Heather admitted she had forwarded the password on to her friends, however, “I wouldn’t have done it if I actually knew they were cheating.” According to Diane, sending passwords was easy to accomplish as the professor was the only instructor in a very large classroom. Although the professor addressed these issues in the first class, the cheating problems continued throughout the semester. Susan stated that sharing quizzes and answers is normal practice within the program. “We’re always sharing stuff. Sometimes it feels like more dishonesty than others.”
Like an actual quiz and you are going to get the exact same quiz in two days. Yeah, that’s pretty dishonest, but we do it anyways.”

**Group Work**

Students in the BScN program are required to complete numerous assignments in groups. Some of these groups are comprised of members chosen by the students, in other instances, the groups are organized by the professor. Students expressed frustration when they described working on group projects. According to Heather, “Group work is brutal and I hate it.” The participants discussed students plagiarizing, not participating, or providing substandard work with the expectation that someone else in the group will correct it or improve it. Reconciling the goals of the A student and the C student can lead to major disagreements, ostracizing, overwork and academic dishonesty. Susan explained the frustration with group work on a larger scale:

> I found that all the way through, that group work is hard. It’s one thing to teach us you are going to have to work together as a team when you are out there working. Totally true. But I don’t feel that a paper, a group paper is teaching you that. If anything it’s just frustrating because we all have work and family and paper and other classes and it’s really hard to schedule. If anything, that has been the most difficult thing to manage in this program.

As soon as the group project is assigned, students are in class on MSN trying to put together a group that ensures a good grade. Having the opportunity to choose one’s group members does appear to reduce the stress level of the project. Susan said students try to align themselves, not based on friendship, but on compatible schedules and being able to work together well:

> There is a lot of competition for that, because if you get stuck with So-and-So that everybody knows doesn’t do good work, then that automatically makes you feel like you are not going to get a good mark on this or I’m going to have to do all the work for them.

The group members not only divide the work, but they also negotiate as to how hard they are going to work. The frustration was evident when students put in different amounts of work,
but all get the same grade. Rachel discussed one project where she did the majority of the work but all members got the A. “It was huge, like 40% [of the final grade] and they just took it. They just grabbed it and took it.” Heather expressed annoyance as she described a scenario where she took control of a project, including the editing, and the group received a mark of 90%. However, during the next phase of the project she stepped back and allowed another student to do the final editing. The group mark was 67%. “I was not happy about that, but that’s how things happen with group work and stuff. It’s a very frustrating process.”

Felicity and Rachel have seen dishonesty in group assignments. Because they are straight A students, they feel that there have been instances where other students in the class have taken advantage of their participation in the group. They said that group mates purposely hand in poor work or don’t participate because they know that Felicity and Rachel will redo the work in an effort to obtain a good grade. Susan found it frustrating that a substandard performance in a group activity necessitated that other group members redo that portion of the paper. “So, it’s really frustrating when I have to do my work, plus her work. I put in 17 hours on one paper and she puts in five minutes and she gets the same grade I do.” Joan, too, finds herself doing a majority of the work when she is assigned to a group, but tries to see the positive side of the experience:

Aside from the assignment, did you learn something? I sure did. I did learn much better about controlling myself. Two years ago I probably would have just screamed at them. Trust me, I have evolved. I am not nearly the barbarian I used to be. I used to leave bodies in my wake. ‘Get out of the way, I’ll do it myself!’ That was then. I am much more refined now.

In group situations, it becomes the role of the group members, more specifically the editor, to ensure the materials are not academically dishonest. In group projects, particularly when students have been assigned to groups, students must be vigilant with each other’s
contributions. Heather had one student in a group project hand in her portion of the assignment that had been completely copied off the Internet. “I just took out a random sentence and copied it into Google and I found it. And I was like, ‘what is this?’ I could go down because of her.”

Diane described an incident that occurred while working on a group project. One group member’s work was not up to the expected standards and his work had to be redone. However, during the next phase of the assignment, the work he handed in was of superior quality. Diane and her group discovered after the assignment was handed in that it was the participant’s girlfriend who actually had done the work as she had already taken the course. It was a relief to all in the group that the plagiarized materials went unnoticed by the professor. Joan has had similar experiences. “You meet a student, and we have met students in group situations a couple of times who haven’t got a clue, and yet they turn in an 80% paper. Something doesn’t add up here. So, that’s suspect, but that’s their choice. You can’t prove it or disprove it.”

**Exams**

Susan said that cheating does occur in the BScN program, but rarely on large assignments or exams. She felt that most students would not risk the consequences of cheating on an assessment or assignment that was worth a significant portion of their final marks. The fact that only one student described a cheating incident involving an exam supports her statement. Isa was in a course where a mid-term paper was stolen. A student in the Monday class had taken an extra copy of the exam and then shared it with students in the upcoming two classes on Thursday. Isa was unsure of how the professor learned of the stolen exam, but she does know it was a topic of conversation among the students. According to Isa, the professor was extremely angry, but was not able to determine who or how the mid-term was stolen. The professor was forced to rewrite the mid-term for the following two classes.
Three students also described an incident that had occurred several years previously when a mid-term was photographed by a student using a cell phone and then distributed to students. When the professor learned of this dishonesty, he drastically changed how the mid-term was assigned and distributed. As such, students were no longer able to see the exam after they had written it; they only received a mark. These three students expressed concern as they did not know what they had got right or wrong on the exam. However, they expressed anger towards the professor for how the exam was administered rather than towards the student who cheated.

**Clinical**

Academic dishonesty was reported by some students while they were conducting their clinical placements. In clinical, students either pass or fail. They are marked on their ability to look after their patients, follow instruction and conduct themselves in a manner that does not put the patients or other persons in any danger. Students are assigned their patients the night before clinical and are then required to research the diagnosis and bring that research with them to the hospital the following day. Initially during the interviews, students felt that cheating in clinical practice would be impossible as students are closely monitored by preceptors and co-assigned nurses. Diane explained:

> Up until now, any care that we have given at bedside, our teacher was with us so they knew what we were doing. Any med [medicine] that we draw up or any med we had to administer, the teacher was there when we were doing our checks and everything. So, that decreases the problem.

However, during the conversations about clinical placements, stories began to emerge of some students being dishonest in this practical portion of their learning.

Diane recalled a time when she forgot to administer a medication to a patient, however, once she realized her mistake she discussed it with her teacher and fellow students. The following day, a student approached her with her own story of how she had missed all her
morning medicines. “She got busy and completely missed all their 10 o’clock meds and she just gave them at 12 and didn’t say a word to anybody.” When asked how this was missed by her teacher and co-assigned nurse, Diane said that they had not checked the medication administration record at the time. Diane continued, “But the problem is that with some of these meds, now the next meds they are going to get was in an hour or two hours – if these patients have reactions because their meds are too close or it drops their blood pressure too low…”

Although students are to be closely monitored on the hospital floor, some errors do happen. In this incident, the student did not report the error, nor was it reported by Diane. As suggested by Baxter and Boblin (2007) unreported errors such as these are usually discovered when there is some impact on the patient, when the patient begins to display symptoms as a result of the mistake.

Isa described a student in her first year who continuously came to clinical without having done the research on his patients the night before. According to Isa, each week he had a different excuse such as his printer not working or that he had come home late the night before. This student would be unprepared to care for his patients during clinical and would turn to his fellow students for assistance. Because there were patients involved, the other students would provide him with the information he needed. “Because they are asking me questions and you feel bad about not giving them the answer to something, so you tell them, and it’s nothing, you know. ‘Oh no, I don’t have to do my work, I’ll just ask this person or that person.’” According to Isa, the teacher was aware of the fact that this student was unprepared, but did nothing about it. “She was a new teacher and this was the first time that she was doing something like this. She didn’t really know how to handle it.”
The research for clinical practice is not only used to understand the patients that are being cared for the next day, but it is also to be incorporated into the reflective progress notes (RPNs), students were to prepare and hand in after their clinical shifts. According to Heather and Susan, some students were sharing RPNs. Susan would share her RPNs with her friends particularly if she had received good feedback. Susan said her friends would use her RPN as a guide to writing their own. Heather saw groups of friends copying RPNs and handing them into different teachers. In addition, if a student had a patient that another student had had in previous clinical rotation, they would share and copy RPNs. When describing how a mature student and her group of friends shared assignments, Heather said, “I know she knows how to do research and that kind of stuff on her own. I know she does, but I know she and her friends switch assignments. And they are the ones handing in the progress notes.”

According to Jessica, students who are caught being academically dishonest in their clinical practice are failed, meaning they are not allowed back on the hospital floor:

In clinical practice you have to know the standards, to know the CNO [Canadian Nurses Organization] standards, you have to know the hospital standards. You have to know the implication, like if you are going to lie about something and you didn’t do it, you can put that patient’s life in critical condition. So, we never, ever do that. When that is done at the hospital, that person is not asked to come back.

Susan witnessed one student who was dishonest in clinical practice. “I saw one person I knew was doing stuff like that [cheating] but she didn’t make it to second year.”

Although Rachel had not seen anyone cheating in clinical, she does recognize that in reality, people are looking for shortcuts, but not in areas that would affect patient care. “For example, something like a bed sheet. I mean they teach you the proper way, but sometimes you just shove it in.” The nurses on the floor share their shortcuts with the students. “Even the nurses teach us loopholes and we kind of go tell the clinical teachers and they go, ‘No!’” There
are times she feels the nurses on the floor are negative. “And I think they are negative because everybody is trying to follow the rules and stuff like that, but in real life, you can’t. There is so much work, you just can’t do it.”

The interviewed students take their clinical practice seriously as they are very much aware of the patients and the potential impacts that mistakes and cheating could have on the well being of those they are supposed to be caring for. However, incidences of cheating do arise although much less frequently than reported in the classroom.

**Who is Cheating and Why**

In conversations with participants about possible reasons behind the cheating, it was apparent that much of this information is supported by previous research discussed in the literature review. Students reported that others in their program were cheating because of stress, heavy workload, the pressure to succeed versus the cost of failing, poor ability, immaturity, or simply because they can. Only two students interviewed, Susan and Mark, admitted to cheating in the program. It is my contention that all but two of the students interviewed had committed some form of academic dishonesty, particularly in regards to the online quizzes. Neutralization, as outlined by Murdoch and Stevens (2007), is evident as the participants justified their own cheating behaviours.

The only students who said they did not complete the online quizzes in a group were Joan, the oldest student, and Tess, the youngest. According to Mark, it’s a matter of choice – most students completed the quizzes in groups, and as such, students have to choose. Doing a quiz as part of group or after they received a printed version of the quiz can reduce the amount of time required to study for the quiz and perhaps ensure a higher mark. Susan said that when one student has gained an advantage, that the cheating spreads like wildfire. This is supported by
McCabe and Trevino (1993) whose study found that students who didn’t cheat felt they were at a disadvantage and began cheating to keep up with their fellow students.

Every student interviewed said the workload in the program was extremely heavy. Classes are content heavy with readings, assignments, essays, quizzes as well as clinical preparation. According to Susan, cheating on the assignments that are a small percentage of the final mark is just a matter of survival:

It’s the more minor stuff, the day-to-day stuff. It’s hard to plan out your semester to stay ahead and stay on top of stuff and actually have time to study for the major assignments and the small stuff too. I think the small stuff falls by the wayside to other things be it they’ve left a big paper to the last minute and don’t have time to study for the little quiz.

Stress as a theme of this study is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

There are students who commit academic dishonesty unintentionally. For example, Isa did not reference properly on her first university paper and received a mark of 60%. Both Jessica and Diane described incidences where they have unintentionally plagiarized and been caught by their professors. Diane said her lack of expertise with APA referencing contributed to her plagiarism. In fact, one professor described her referencing as “atrocious.” Mark worked as a peer tutor in his first year and saw many students plagiarizing by accident. He would bring the passages to the student’s attention in an effort to encourage those students to correct their papers before they were handed in. According Heather, ignorance can lead to students making mistakes:

I think a lot of it, the people I know who have been caught with academic dishonesty a) don’t know what they are doing or b) do know what they are doing and just don’t want to get caught. Part of the problem is that they don’t know what plagiarism is and they don’t realize you can’t cut and paste off websites or copy out of textbooks and that kind of stuff.

Diane stated that many students just don’t know what academic dishonesty is and what isn’t. “I don’t think it’s clear at all. I think people have the attitude that if I’m referencing it, I’m not copying it, I’m not plagiarizing.”
Heather, Joan and Diane stated that immaturity may be a contributor to a student’s decision to commit academic dishonesty. Heather stated, “It could be a maturity thing, not caring. I find a lot of people don’t really care about cheating. Yeah, it’s like, ‘oh, whatever.’” However, she was quick to point out that it was not age-related but maturity-related. She knows of at least one mature student who regularly cheats. “I think it’s your morals a lot of the time. I mean you can be 28 and be like a two-year old, right? It’s morals and maturity and the ability to think and how this affects your practice as a nurse, and how it affects your patients. Some people just don’t care.” Joan stated that personal integrity impacts a person’s decision to cheat.

I can’t think of anybody with mature status that I would expect would cheat, but I’m really not sure. But I wouldn’t have cheated when I was in high school anymore than I would now. I don’t think integrity is not so much a thing that you can teach. You either have it or you don’t have it.

In some cases, students are cheating because they can. Mark felt no guilt about students working in groups to complete the online quizzes. If the faculty member designed the quiz so that it could so easily be completed in this manner, then the faculty member should expect students would cheat. This is a sentiment felt by others as well. Susan stated that students are committing academic dishonesty because they can get away with it. “I think that as long as you are not directly copying something, they figure they can just get away with it no matter what. Because it is not overly policed. It’s not so much that they don’t understand, it’s just that they don’t really care.” Opportunity, it would appear, plays a role in a student’s decision to cheat. This is supported by previous studies (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). Opportunity was discussed in a personal interview with Dr. Chris diCarlo (2007), an ethicist. He stated that humans, like other animals, will take the shortest route to achieve a goal. Like a fish chasing an injured minnow, most people will cheat in order to succeed if they are reasonably sure they won’t get caught.
A consumer mentality towards education was also noted. Vojak (2007) stated that students are regarding their education as a purchased commodity that will lead them to well-paid career. Susan stated she felt that some students held the attitude that as long as they are paying for their education, they couldn’t be expelled from the university for cheating. “I think that’s kind of an attitude - you can’t kick me out because I’m paying for it.” Susan also noted that when students were having difficulty learning a concept, it was the fault of the professor and the school. “A lot of people were still not passing and were like, ‘I paid for this and you didn’t teach me how to do this.’” While paying for one’s education may provide permission to cheat, the cost of that education if one failed is also used as a reason provided for cheating. Both Isa and Susan discussed that the pressure to succeed and the cost of failing that can drive students to cheat. Failing a nursing course, particularly if it is prerequisite for the next year, could mean that a student not only has to repeat the course, but may have to wait a year to retake it. Factor in the cost of tuition and the leased laptop and the cost of missing that year is high.

Neutralization

I was interested to discover how the participants framed academic dishonesty as it concerned themselves or others who had cheated in the BScN program. Was there evidence of neutralization? Neutralization is the process of deflecting blame or rationalizing deceptive behaviour. Neutralization theory can be divided into four categories: 1) denial of the crime; 2) denial of the victim; 3) denial of responsibility and; 4) condemnation of the condemners (Murdock & Stephens, 2007). In this study, I discovered that the participants were neutralizing academic dishonesty.

It is my opinion that all but two of the students who participated in this study had committed some form of academic dishonesty, yet in initial discussions, none of the students said
they had cheated. Even when they described how they had been caught plagiarizing or were completing online quizzes in a group, they did not say they were being academically dishonest. For example, when Diane and Jessica had been “flagged” by their professors for plagiarism, these students denied they were being academically dishonest because it had been done unintentionally. For Diane, she did not learn the same type of referencing that they were using in the nursing program. She was from the era of footnotes and a bibliography rather than APA. As such, her referencing was poorly done. When one of her third-year papers was uploaded into the plagiarism detection service Turnitin.com and returned as having plagiarized passages, Diane made several efforts to contact her professor to explain that her plagiarism was accidental. Diane then shifted her anger to her professor for the way in which she managed the situation.

Students who wrote the quizzes in groups didn’t recognize it as cheating as this is the way students in the program write online quizzes. Mark was the only student who said that writing quizzes in groups was cheating, but that he didn’t consider it being academically dishonest as the professor had designed the assessment in such a way that made it easy to cheat. “I feel it is accepted by the professor as well because they knew it was a fault of the system,” he said. When Heather and Diane were sending the passwords to the in-class quizzes to their friends at home, neither saw this being academically dishonest. They were not able to understand why the professor was so angry about emailing the passwords. Heather said it wasn’t dishonest because the professor had not specifically stated in the course syllabus that emailing passwords to the in-class quizzes was not allowed. He did mention it in class, but it wasn’t written in the syllabus. Isa was unsure if what she was doing was actually cheating. She said doing the quizzes as a group was the only way students complete the online quizzes. Anderman, Freeman and Mueller (2007) discussed the influence of peers on academic dishonesty. Students
who are exposed to cheating behaviours and acceptance of those behaviours begin to believe these behaviours are normal (Anderman, Freeman & Mueller, 2007).

Although the conversations with the participants centred around academic dishonesty in the BScN program, most students, such as Felicity, Rachel, Joan and Isa said that overall, academic dishonesty was not a big problem in the program. Mark felt that the level of cheating was probably average, the same as in other programs. Heather and Jessica stated that a majority of the students in the program are honest and hard working with a few students who consistently cheated. Rachel stated that she didn’t understand why students cheat. “In my view, I think that’s stupid. I don’t know why a lot of people do it. Most likely you are going to get caught so I don’t know why you would take that risk especially when you have gone this far in university.”

Although most of the participants did not see it, the ultimate victim is the patient when nursing students are academically dishonest. Most of the participants did not make the connection between academic dishonesty in the classroom and the patient. They did understand the impact cheating might have on the patient when they were discussing their clinical placements. This disconnect between cheating and the patient could be considered denial of a victim, another form of neutralization. It was interesting to note the contrast between Heather’s attitude toward academically dishonest students with Susan’s. Heather expressed little sympathy for the cheaters. She was firm that students who cheat should not be in the nursing profession. “You need to be honest with your patients, you can’t lie to them, you have to be honest. And if they don’t catch on to that, then poor patients. They shouldn’t be nurses.” However, by contrast, Susan stated academic dishonesty in the BScN program was a normal occurrence, and as such, had no bearing on a person’s integrity or level of nursing professionalism. She stated that the student who cheats is, “an average student. Everybody cheats. Everybody has cheated on
something at one point or another.” Furthermore, she doesn’t see cheating as an issue because most of the academic dishonesty is committed on small assignments and quizzes. “It may be dishonest or annoying to other students if they put more work in than somebody else but I don’t think it’s any kind of reflection of them being an inherently dishonest person.” She continued, “I don’t think it means that they are a bad nurse or anything if they cheated on a little quiz.”

**Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted commonalities found within the interpreted description of academic dishonesty as described by the participants. According to the participants, students are being academically dishonest particularly with online quizzes, sharing papers, in group activities, and less frequently, in clinical. In my opinion, all but two of the participants had committed some form of academic dishonesty. Students neutralized their behaviour by stating that the academic dishonesty was just the way things are done, had been unintentional, of little consequence, or because the faculty member made it so easy. Students exhibited limited knowledge of academic dishonesty and the policies at their university. They were aware of some of the formal consequences of cheating, but were unable to describe an incident when a student was dealt with severely. Most of the students did not make the connection between classroom cheating and the potential impact such activities could have on patients. However, they were aware of the potential harm to a patient when cheating was conducted in a clinical setting. The next three chapters examine several factors which emerged from these data as possibly impacting a nursing student’s decision to commit academic dishonesty. These are: the nursing student learning culture, stress and the use of technology. Further study of these factors deepens in our understanding of the issues affecting academic dishonesty and the nursing student.
Chapter 6 - The Student Nursing Learning Culture

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the theme of culture and its relation to academic dishonesty. Understanding the nursing students’ lived experiences will bring us closer to revealing the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of that lifeworld. The philosophies and theories of Em Olivia Bevis and Jean Watson provide the foundation of the BScN program at the participants’ university. It is argued that these philosophies lay the cultural base for the students within the program and as such, have influenced the way the students interact, support and learn with each other. The students in this program are extremely close. According to the students, they quickly begin to bond with each other within weeks of beginning the program and these bonds grow continuously stronger as students move through the four years of study. Students in the program embrace the founding philosophy of caring. They display characteristics of a collectivist culture where loyalty to the group is evident. Their culture includes the development of academic groups to assist in the management of stressors and other issues that some participants contend are unique to the nursing program. One result is academic dishonesty. As well, students report living in a society that is dishonest and in which dishonesty is accepted by the general population.

Researchers stated that culture evolves through persons’ interactions with each other in a specific place and at a specific time (Triandis, 2001). Culture is further developed and communicated through language. The interaction between students in the BScN program has
some parallels to those attributed to collectivist cultures. The students in the BScN program are members of a larger, individualist culture, that of Canada, and as such their experiences were grounded in that culture. (It should be noted that three participants emigrated to Canada as children.) However, when discussing with the participants their life experiences as nursing students, it became apparent that these students were demonstrating some characteristics of behaviour usually found in collectivist cultures such as the development of interdependence between group members, aligning themselves with the priorities of the group, feeling obligated to assist group members, and demonstrating a concern about relationships within the group.

The Program

The BScN program consists of four years of full-time study designed to teach scientifically and caring-based nursing skills and theory. Subjects include sciences like biochemistry, pathophysiology, psychology, and statistics as well as sociology, managing health care teams and the development of self as nurse. The program, like many others in Ontario, is a “collaborative” program where both a college and university have combined their curricula to produce the requirements of a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing. At this particular university, the program is described as having “a caring curriculum.” The words “collaborative” and “caring” are important language markers in the development of the program and in the communication of its mandate.

The program combines face-to-face classroom settings and labs with e-learning. It is considered a high-tech learning environment where each chair in every classroom has a direct connection to the Internet. Each student is issued a Lenovo laptop to connect to courseware and resources. Fourth-year students are also given a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) which is loaded with software, textbooks and notes to assist students in their clinical study. As well, other
high tech learning environments include a multimillion-dollar Simulation Lab consisting of simulated persons which can be programmed to do everything from run a fever to have a heart attack. These human-like devices can respond to questions, vomit, or have wheezing in their chests. Students are trained in the simulation labs and are encouraged to return to spend as much time as necessary to perfect their nursing skills. Clinical, where students are placed in hospitals or other health care settings, plays a large role in the development of the nursing student. Students begin clinical placements in hospitals in first year. Their responsibilities in clinical settings increase over the course of the four-year program.

Class size

The size of classes ranges from approximately 30 students to a maximum of 250. The electives are commonly where students have the largest classes whereas core nursing courses usually have smaller classes. Many of the participants interviewed liked the smaller class sizes. It gave them an opportunity to get to know their fellow students as well as their professors. Heather stated:

Definitely, having a smaller number in a class is a benefit. Like, if you are one in a thousand people who want to ask a question, you are not going to ask the question….So, I think you do better learning in smaller classes.

The number of first-year students in the BScN program in the fall of 2008 was approximately 110. The nursing students spend most of their academic lives together in specialized courses for a professional program. They have little interaction with students outside of the program, with the exception being their electives. According to some of the participants, the nature of the program and its intense focus have enabled the students to develop close working relationships with each other. Susan said, “It’s a pretty close knit group. I don’t know too many people that are outside of nursing.” She contrasted this with her experience at her previous university. Susan
said she began first year with a large group. Students began to disperse into different programs as their schooling continued. At graduation there were only a few people there that she knew from the beginning of her studies.

When asked why nursing students are so close, Mark suggested that perhaps the small size of the university contributed to that closeness. “Maybe because this university is a small university or just nursing students in general because it is a very specific focus and they have a lot of things in common that they share with one another. We can all relate.” Mark, who was in second year when interviewed, found that he doesn’t know many students outside of his own year. As students move through the program, they come in contact more with students from other years in the program. It was evident from talking with Susan and Heather, both in fourth year, that they knew a broader range of students within the program than those interviewed in the lower years.

**Why nursing?**

For the most part, students described an idealized version of the nurse as one who is selfless, responsible and ethical. Isa described it as an honourable profession and expressed her concern about the portrayal of nurses in a sexual context, i.e. “the naughty nurse.” Susan said that those who go into the nursing program are good people because they want to help others. “People who are really cut throat are not likely to want to be a nurse. They are probably going to be people who want to make a million dollars before you’re thirty. You are not going to be making a million dollars before you’re thirty as a nurse.”

The responses given by the students varied in regards to their reasons for choosing the nursing program. Some of the participants had decided to go into the profession to help others. Mark described this attribute as, “the spirit of nursing”, that quality in a person that wants to care
or assist another in need. According to Mark, the spirit of nursing was evident in many of the students in the BScN program, but not all. For Isa, nursing is a higher calling where the needs of the patient come first. “Yes, there is always new experiences and it’s always different than what they expected it to be, but the fact still remains that you are there to look after other people. It’s never about you, it’s always about them.”

Three of the students were unsure as to why they were becoming nurses – it was just something they decided to do. When asked why she wanted to become a nurse, Isa replied, “I was looking through programs that you could apply to and I thought nursing would be great. Then I could start doing what I want to do instead of waiting like four years to be done my degree to actually help.” Rachel was unsure she wanted to become employed as a nurse and would probably use her degree as a stepping stone to further education. Although Felicity enjoyed the nursing program, she too would probably continue in her studies with the ultimate goal being a nursing professor at a university. Susan had decided on nursing because there was a guaranteed job after graduation. She said:

I went to [previous university] and I have a BA in community health sciences and that was a lot of paper writing and a lot of research. And I decided that wasn’t going to land me a job that I really wanted. But this [nursing] is a lot more career focused and it’s nice that I know that I have a specific job at the end of this and that I’m in demand.

According to Mark, the guarantee of a job is an incentive for many students to take nursing in the BScN program. Heather stated a similar sentiment and she felt the lure of a guaranteed income may have an effect on why people have chosen nursing. “They just want to get by, but for me being a nurse, you should want to be able to know these things and do these things in order to help your patients better and provide good care. But some people just want to get by and want to make the money.”
Cliquies

According to the participants, within the first few weeks of the program, students begin aligning themselves into groups, often described as cliques. Membership in these groups can range from four to 10 students, and can get larger depending on the task. Students align themselves with others who have similar goals and work habits. Serina described her search for a group in her first semester. At first she aligned herself with a group of quieter students but found she wasn’t getting the support she needed:

So, I looked at everybody else in the classroom and it was like, ‘Who do I know? Who can I get to help me? Who can I trust to help me academically if I have any questions if I need to be in a group?’, and I found those people. And I found them fairly quickly and it was great.

In general, membership in these groups remains constant throughout the four years of the program. With workload demands of the program being high, students look to each other within the group for assistance and support to ensure successful completion of the assignments and other tasks. Rachel described members of her group, “But the friends that I have are good team members. So if something comes up in your life that you just can’t do it, they will do it for you. And they won’t be so mad about it. They understand.” Participants reported that members within these groups work closely with one another. Students divide workload amongst themselves, for example, readings. Each student will be responsible for a chapter. That person will take notes and distribute the notes to the rest of the group. Students in these groups share assignments, read over each other’s work, complete online quizzes together, share and compare clinical experiences. According to Mark, “we share different strengths within our group, we kind of consult with one another. We’re a strong group. Our group would probably be six people who regularly meet before or after classes or by email or MSN to discuss different things.”

According to Heather, there are differing levels of expectations with regards to groups. “So, a lot
of them within their own groups will help each other out, or whatever, but I’m the kind of person who wants to do it on my own. Unless I really need help, I’ll ask my friends for advice or help in certain things.”

Loyalty to one’s group runs deep. There is a high level of trust amongst group members as they are all dependent on one another for assistance in completing the program workload. Felicity said, “The group that we have is very strong so that I have, over the years, come to trust their work. Even when I have gone back in the beginning, it is all there. I trust it now.” At times, loyalty to the group can extend to the entire class. For example, Susan stated, “Once one person gets a quiz ahead of time then everybody’s going to get it. We all see it, whether you want to use it or not is entirely up to you. Everybody has it.” Felicity agreed that there is an expectation that those who have finished the quiz first send it to others in the class. “Whether you do it or not is a personal thing,” she said. Jessica described how members of her group share papers and references. Swapping papers between students is common, as long as students know one another. Susan described an incident where students from first year asked for her papers. “I have had people in first year that I don’t even know ask me for papers through MSN because they got my name from someone. It’s like, who are you? No, you can’t have my paper. Are you kidding me? But that’s so bizarre.”

Clinical experiences also provide opportunities for students to develop close bonds. Students working in clinical settings are sharing experiences, some of which can be traumatic. Clinical begins in the second semester of first year with 12 clinical days, two days every other week. According to Mark, students don’t actually have a lot to do as they have limited skills. “It’s mainly just to establish a relationship. There’s a lot of that in first year – establishing your relationship with the patient, because without that, anything you do would be out of context and
not very beneficial.” In first year, students are responsible for one patient, in second year it becomes two or two dyads (two mothers and their babies). In third year, students carry out placements in mental health and community health facilities where they may not necessarily be doing hands on nursing care, but research projects. In fourth year, they spend most of their time in health care environments.

Most of the participants stated that it is their clinical practice that bonded them closely together. Although they have a co-assigned nurse and a preceptor close at hand, students often turn to each other for assistance and support. For Susan, peer support is an important aspect of clinical:

You think you might be missing something, it’s pretty nice that you’ve got four or five other students there that you can ask. So you are not bothering staff; you don’t have to go right to your professor and say, ‘I don’t know this.’ It is nice to have that resource. We can just sort of lean on each other. If you have a question, go to one of the other students first.

Mark affirmed that sharing their experiences brings them closer. “We love discussing our clinical with one another. You know, ‘what did you do, what did she do?’ It’s nice to come together and talk to someone who knows what you are going through.” Researchers state that emotional events are often shared by one person with another person, and then another, and that pattern continues (Liu & Laslo, 2007). In this way, one person’s emotional event can have an impact felt throughout one’s community (Liu & Laslo, 2007). As such, a narrative which is shared through language, is a powerful tool for generating empathy and strengthening bonds within the group.

**The 60 Percenters**

It was interesting to note that overall, the participants divided the nursing students into two basic groups – the students that worked hard for an A, and the ones satisfied with achieving
60%. This caused considerable frustration with the students as a significant amount of their learning was conducted through group activities and projects. Aligning the goals of the group members, particularly when groups are assigned by the teacher, was difficult, and according to some participants, led to academic dishonesty. When students were allowed to choose their own groups, it became a totally different experience.

Felicity, a high achiever, stated, “there are groups that work really hard – they want that A – and then there’s some that say, ‘well, I’ll get the same degree at the end so I don’t have to work that hard.’” According to Mark, that job guarantee at graduation has an effect on motivation for some students – they’ll have a job regardless of how they perform. “I know there are a few students in the class who want to be nurses and nothing else. They just want to be a nurse and you can be a nurse with 100% or at that 60% cutoff. So, that’s what they aim for is that 60%.” According to Joan, she thinks a 60% requirement to pass is not high enough. “What if I’m the 40% they don’t know? I never quite agreed with that.” Isa has witnessed the “just get by” attitude right in first year:

A lot of students, I find, if they are just looking to get their nursing degree, they just do the minimum they need to pass. And a lot of people, what they find is that after, because they do the bare minimum and haven’t applied themselves, even the bare minimum is hard to do. They don’t end up passing.

Susan is a nursing student not interested in being first in her class. She described herself as a “work smart, not a work hard” kind of student. The BScN would be her second degree and she feels her background has enabled her to put her studies in perspective:

I’m not worried if I get the odd C because does it really affect you five years from now? No. Will it even affect you next semester? No. You passed, who cares? But I think if they’ve got that competitive attitude towards school and grades, and maybe they still live with their parents who are trying to control that, then there would be more pressure. They’re not seeing that five years later, it’s not going to matter. By the time they’re my age, it won’t even matter. They’ll already be out there working for three years. So, maybe it’s an age and maturity thing.
When members of these two groups were assigned together to complete a project, the frustration levels escalated dramatically. Rachel says she tries to compromise in that she will work for the A and hopes her other group mates will upgrade their work to a B. “Usually they do say, ‘Oh, come on,’” but when I need those marks I come on strong and they usually step back. I don’t know what they say behind my back, but as long as I get my grade.” According to Isa, if negotiating doesn’t work, there are other options. “Well, I could do it [the project] myself. I wouldn’t be happy with it but I would do it. It’s my mark. I mean if the person isn’t doing anything then I would talk to the other group members and see if they agree. And if they do, we’d exile the person out of the group.”

For the most part, students understand the emphasis on group work, but that doesn’t reduce the frustration levels. It is an accepted part of the process – if there are group projects then one or two people are not going to contribute.

**What does it mean to care?**

Jean Watson's philosophy and science of caring is a major component of the theoretical base on which the BScN program is built. In her book (1985), Watson discussed how in many nursing curricula, nursing was founded on procedures and rules rather than on understanding and empathizing with the ill patient. According to Watson, caring is fundamental to nursing and as important, if not more important, to the treatment of patients as curing. As such, students in the nursing program are taught to care. First year student, Serina, said a caring nurse is the best kind of nurse:

I guess as a nurse you have to care. You have to make your patients as comfortable as possible. You can be a nurse and you can make a patient as comfortable as possible and not care, but it is the nurses that care, that care about their patients, that care when their patients are comfortable and happy. Those kind of nurses are going to be the best kind of nurses out there.
Following the philosophy of Watson (1985), being able to care means being able to love oneself and others. In order to love others, a person must tolerate differences and make efforts to understand the other person, both the positive and negative, from that person’s point of view rather than one’s own. Even when that person is engaging in an activity that the nurse may perceive as wrong, the nurse is to set aside judgment, and try to empathize with the situation in an effort to understand it. These aspects of caring were prevalent within the conversations with the participating nursing students. It occurred in their tolerance of cheating students, in their language, their emotions and their reactions. By relating these traits with the components of the Watson philosophy of caring, I was better able to understand the students and the relationship to academic dishonesty.

When the students witnessed acts of academic dishonesty, the phrases, “it’s none of my business” and “it’s their decision” were commonly used. From many of the participants’ points of view the decision to cheat was a personal one. Susan’s comment is a reflection of the other participants when she said, “I definitely have a see no evil, hear no evil attitude towards it. You do what you are going to do, whatever. I don’t really care. It’s their business.” The attitude to remain non-judgmental about the cheating may be, in fact, showing that she does care. She is not letting her emotions or her perceptions influence her opinion of the student or the situation. This tolerance of cheating students and behaviours underlined much of the conversations with the participants. Heather described it as, “passive acceptance,” in that as long as the cheating behaviours did not affect her or others, they were tolerated.

According to Watson, “empathy refers to the nurse’s ability to experience the other person’s private world and feelings to communicate to the other person some significant degree of that understanding,” (1985, p. 28). While their fellow students are not “ill” as in hospital,
many of the students exhibit symptoms of stress. Rachel found that often both she and her fellow students were stressed. “I’ve seen pretty much, even in myself, people with tears in their eyes. They couldn’t do it.” Students cope with stress differently and while only one of the participants (Susan – who felt that cheating on the small stuff was acceptable) stated that cheating was an acceptable means to deal with stress, the participants did not condemn the cheating students. Some expressed sympathy as they tried to understand the cheating student and the situation. Both Jessica and Joan expressed compassion for the cheating students. Joan said, “I’m sad for them that they feel they have to do that once in a while.” In an effort to explain or rationalize why students were cheating, students often mentioned the heavy workload. In some cases, students were pushed to their limits. The theme of stress is looked at in more detail in the following chapter.

When asked why students were cheating in the program, another common response was, “because they don’t care.” It was an interesting phrase considering the importance the program puts on caring and its many components. According to Susan, some students are cheating, not because they don’t understand what they are doing and its consequences, but because they just don’t care about themselves, the program or nursing. For Serina, the BScN program has given her greater insight into herself, for example how she communicates with her 2 year old son, and as such, has increased her capacity to care. For most of these students, being able to provide good care means being a good nurse. For Heather, caring is linked to honesty. “I try to be an optimal nurse and part of that is being honest and providing the best care I can and part of that, providing best care, is being honest.”

Susan separated the cheating incidents from nursing. She saw the cheating on small assignments like quizzes as coping mechanisms for stress resulting from a heavy workload.
When described as such, cheating does not reflect on a person’s integrity or on his or her ability to be a good nurse. Debbie also made a similar comment when discussing her friend who forgot to administer medicine to her patients during a clinical placement. Her friend did not mention her error to her teacher or co-assigned nurse. Even with such a major error, Debbie’s response was, “You know what, I think she’s a good nurse but I just thought she just didn’t want to get in shit. But you have to take responsibility.” In this case, Debbie saw the responsibility as her friend’s to mention the error, not her own.

Also students report that they are unwilling to report another cheating student as it could affect the relationship they have with those cheaters. “I think there is an unwritten code between students that you don’t tell on anybody,” said Isa. All students said that they would “keep quiet” about it. Felicity said that it was fear of confrontation that prevented her from disclosing the cheating activities. “I’m scared that I would be involved in the process of confronting that person, particularly if that person is someone that I know.” For example, Debbie said she did not report her friend who missed distributing her morning medicine:

I think the big problem is that she is a friend of mine so I think with her it is hard to go and say what teacher and that she was two hours late in giving her meds. But I thought there is two people supposed to be watching this person and neither of them had found it.

Preservation of relationships is a strong characteristic of collectivist societies which put needs of the group above those of the individual (Triandis, 1995; Chapman & Lupton, 2004).

As students expressed sympathy or tried to reason why students would cheat, acceptance for academic dishonesty was not extended to group work situations. While students felt that it was a personal decision to cheat, when the decision could impact others, cheating was not tolerated. Students were vigilant in reviewing submissions from fellow group mates in an effort to ensure information was properly researched and referenced. A cheating student in this
situation was selfish and uncaring as the decision to cheat could have disastrous consequences on more people than just the cheater. It is interesting to note that the only situation mentioned by the participants, when a student was reported to a professor, occurred during a group project. In the students’ opinion, one student was being deceitful in not contributing materials towards the project, and in turn, jeopardizing the success of the group.

This study revealed that, although the participants were not willing to turn in a cheating student, most felt that the cheater would be caught eventually. It seemed they were putting their faith in some other system to catch the cheater and remove them from school or the health care setting. This sentiment is supported by Watson (1985) who discussed a similar sentiment felt by people who are ill:

Many people believe that when everything else fails to cure an illness something still ‘needs to be done.’ In many instances the something is having faith in a person, or in a health regimen or in a belief system to ‘carry them through’ (Watson, p. 14).

Watson is saying that there are many different roads to reach a destination, that one course may not be successful. As such, people must have an open mind to other alternatives or solutions to a problem. The most obvious solution may not be the one that works. As such, students in the BScN program are aware of the academic dishonesty issue. They are aware, to a limited extent, that there are policies in place to define those issues. They know there are consequences to cheating, even if they cannot describe the specifics. Yet, they tolerate cheating when it is done on an individual basis. They are unwilling to step in and assist in correcting the problem, however, they believe that somehow, somewhere those cheaters will be caught, even if it is not in university.
**Dishonest Society**

The participants in this study were asked to describe their society as to whether they thought it was honest or dishonest. All participants, except Diane, said they were living in a dishonest society. They provided examples from dishonest politicians, police officers and lawyers to their own circle of friends who keep things from each other. According to Joan, “It’s [dishonesty] is a part of life. It always has been; probably always will be.” For the participants, not only is our society dishonest, but that dishonesty is accepted. Said Mark, “I guess if you can be dishonest and get ahead, I think that’s what society has come to know. If you can be dishonest, not to a great extent, somewhat, and you can get ahead by doing that, that’s allowed. That’s accepted.” According to Susan, not only is it accepted but also ignoring it demonstrates a humane quality. “Who would turn somebody in for the minor things out in the real world, so why would you here? It’s just sort of a common decency thing, just mind your own business.” Only Diane said she felt that generally, she was living in an honest society, even though she had had her identity stolen and money removed from her bank account. Overall, participants felt that their society was dishonest where cheating to gain an advantage was an accepted part of life.

**Summary**

The culture of the nursing students is influenced by place and time as well as by language. Students in the program are engaged in similar experiences in stressful academic conditions. For the most part, they are isolated from other students. Within weeks of starting the program they turn to each other to cope with workload issues. They begin assisting each other but it becomes clear that loyalty to the group or to their fellow students can progress to academic dishonesty as students empathize with each other’s experiences and participate in activities, such as paper swapping or emailing quizzes, in an effort to ease the academic burden of their fellow
students. Students stated that they would not report a fellow student for cheating and said that the cheating student would be caught eventually. For the participants, cheating was tolerated in the nursing program just as it is tolerated in society. These students are being taught to care, to empathize with those who are in trouble, and to assist that person in an effort to make things better. It appears to be a contradiction for students to extend caring to patients, whom they don’t usually know, and then not to care for their fellow students, whom they know and understand deeply. For students in this study, helping one another was not considered cheating.
Chapter 7 - Stress as Part of the Nursing Student Experience

Introduction

It becomes apparent after conversing with these students that although they love nursing for the most part, each one described her or his life as being extremely stressful. I have identified stress as one of the key themes emerging from the data in this study. For some students, the workload and other demands of being a student, as well as personal, work and financial obligations contributed to their stress levels. Participants such as Rachel, Felicity, Heather, Jessica and Mark stated that stress was a major factor in a student’s choice to commit academic dishonesty. In several other qualitative studies, students reported that pressure or stress from academic workload was a factor in a student’s decision to cheat (Szabo & Underwood, 2004; McCabe, Trevino & Butterworth, 1999; Devlin & Gray, 2007). In Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne’s descriptive study a student stated that there are times “you just can’t take it and have to cheat” (1997, p. 194). A 2002 study of nursing students in Ireland revealed that students reported stress in specific areas: academic, relationships with faculty and other teaching staff, financial, and clinical or more specifically, dealing with the death of patients (Timmins & Kaliser). Although the students participating in this study discussed similar stress factors, they also described additional stressors such as the transition from high school to university, pressure from parents and the program to succeed and the difficulty in maintaining nursing skills.

Workload

Every participant stated that the workload in the BScN program was extreme. Classes are content heavy with readings, assignments, essays, quizzes as well as clinical preparation. Those students who came into the program with previous degrees all stated that the workload...
associated with the BScN degree was heavier than they had experienced at their respective previous universities. Compared with her first science degree, Heather said the nursing program was much more work. “It’s pretty intense. It’s a lot of work. The research for clinical, the time put in at clinical, I don’t know.” Heather gave up her part-time job in fourth year to enable her to spend more time on her studies.

Felicity and Rachel stated that the high expectations of the BScN program are one reason why students are cheating. “I think it is just because we can’t keep up. We can’t keep up with the workload. We can’t keep up with everything we have to do. I think that’s when it [academic dishonesty] occurs more,” said Felicity. Rachel said that the stress associated with workload can cause students to cheat. “I think it’s kind of a cycle, you know? Too much stress, plagiarism, but then you try and reduce plagiarism and that increases stress quiz wise.”

Devin and Gray (2007) reported that poor academic skills such as difficulties with time management, procrastination, research and writing skills were reasons provided by students for plagiarizing. Errey (2002) stated that poor writing skills increased the amount of time students require to complete assignments and as such, they can fall behind. Jessica, for example, who had been flagged several times for plagiarized papers, described completing her school-work as a constant race to catch up.

For students entering the program directly from high school, the adjustment can prove difficult. In this study, four of the 11 students interviewed had entered the BScN program directly from high school. Students reported that many of their fellow students had difficulty in research and writing, time management, prioritizing, and understanding the demands of a university education. According to Tess, there was no adjustment period. Students began the program at full speed. Mark saw many students having problems adjusting to their first year. “I
see students struggling with the increased workload and not being spoon-fed as they were in high school. It’s hard to balance that and the clinical component.” Rachel described her first year as being extremely heavy with six courses. She said that it felt like she had a paper due every week. Isa reported that in high school, referencing was not emphasized – the result, a poor mark on her first university paper:

Because I didn’t know APA and we didn’t have a lot of time to do it, and I kind of did what we did in high school, I got a 60 on it. The professor took off a lot of marks because of APA. It does make sense to me now, but back then, I didn’t think it was fair because I didn’t really know about it.

Learning APA was just one of the few adjustments a new university student had to make. It was a different way of learning, heavily lecture based, larger classes, a laptop environment, and higher expectations from teachers. Isa described some of the skills necessary to succeed in the nursing program. While some courses required students to simply understand the materials, other courses focused on concepts and situations that required interpretation:

You have to know how to interpret in such a way that it is safe for the patient and that’s safe for you and that promotes good patient/nurse relationship. And to be able to do that, you actually have to focus in class and you have to do all of your readings no matter how ridiculous they might seem, but they make sense later on. A lot of people don’t realize that.

Mark also said that poor time management may also be a factor in a student’s decision to commit academic dishonesty. “They ran out of time. If they had started two weeks before, or whatever, I think the problem [plagiarism] would have been caught there.” Isa discussed how she had to learn to prioritize, that strategies like “pulling all nighters” was no longer a good method of studying when at university. According to Serina, academic dishonesty was rampant in her high school. As such, she said some students didn’t acquire the skills necessary to learn in university. The result, she said, was that some students reverted back to their cheating ways in an effort to succeed in first year. Mark commented that the heavy workload and poor work habits of his
fellow students could rob them of their spirit of nursing, that aspect of caring that nursing
students convey. “Some students just leave work and so they let it pile up and get really
frustrated around exam time. And you can definitely see the stress level of your fellow students’
spike.”

Susan expressed frustration when she discussed a situation when students, who were
unable to pass a math test, resorted to cheating. In first year, students were required to pass a
medical math test. If they didn’t pass the test, they could not move on in the program. Students
were allowed two attempts at the test, but when there were still students failing, the professor
allowed a third attempt:

It is grade 7 math and we had two shots at passing this quiz and if you didn’t pass, you
weren’t going to the next year. And that’s fair. You should be able to do basic, basic
med math. It’s not hard, you just have to learn how to do it. People were freaking out,
and then they started cheating.

The medical math test was online which gave students easy opportunity to cheat, added Susan.
Her concern was that those same students are now in fourth year where they are required to draw
and administer medicine and they lack simple medical math skills.

While learning to make the adjustment from high school to university can be difficult,
students also experienced stress moving from year to year within the program. Each year brings
increased responsibility, particularly around improving their nursing skills and clinical
placements. While clinical is often described as the most rewarding aspect of the nursing
program, it can also be stressful. Rachel expressed fear about doing her third-year clinical
placement in a mental health facility. Before she begins her clinical, she will have to be trained
in self-defense. While on placement she is never to be on her own and to always be in the
company of a nurse. “I’m scared,” she said. Jessica discussed the paper swapping that frequently
occurred during third year between the two semestered groups of students. When asked why

Students were sharing papers and assignments, Jessica replied, “To take the pressure off. The last couple of semesters we’ve had a couple of teachers that have had 20 page papers. You know, that’s a lot.” She said for some students, stress is hard to manage. “It can drive you crazy, drive you to do things you probably wouldn’t do if you didn’t have that much stress.” Heather agreed that workload can push people to do things they didn’t intent to do. She stated, “Desperate people do desperate things.”

Students in fourth year were vocal in stating that they don’t feel prepared for the amount of clinical that is required in fourth year. While they practiced nursing skills in first and second years, third-year clinical placements were not necessarily in healthcare facilities. As such, they have not used their nursing skills for a year. According to Diane, “They told us the other fourth years felt that way and they encouraged us to talk to the other fourth years. They do a boot camp in August where you can go to the lab, but I work full time and I can’t access it every day that they have it available.”

While completing the academic requirements for the program are difficult, students Diane and Rachel described the difficulty they had in getting to the simulation labs to practice their nursing skills. Both students have demanding work and family lives – Diane is married with three children whereas Rachel has obligations to her parents and siblings. “The simulation lab is open very set hours and a lot of times you can’t make it to those hours; you have classes and stuff,” said Rachel. As a result, students don’t feel confident in their nursing skills adding to the stress of their clinical experiences.

Marks

Rachel, Felicity, Isa, Joan and Heather stated that an important aspect of the university experience was to get good grades. Mark acknowledged a “real craze for marks,” in most of his
fellow students. In the case of Felicity, she is going through school on a scholarship which requires a minimum of a 3.7 GPA. For some, like Heather and Joan, it is personal pressure to achieve high grades. “I am a chronic adult learner overachiever,” said Joan. “If I get an 80, it’s like, what the crap is that?” Heather described herself as a self-driven person. “I compare my results to myself and I’m a high achiever because of myself.” For younger students like Rachel and Isa, that push to get good grades comes from their parents. Isa said her parents, “always say, study, get good grades and that you could have done better.” For these students who naturally do well and get good grades, they said they feel little or no pressure from the nursing program to achieve those grades.

However, for students who must work hard to obtain good marks, they said there is intense pressure from the nursing program to do well. According to Jessica, a 3.0 average has its advantages such as being able to apply for part-time jobs within the faculty, getting the better placements for clinical, and research opportunities. Although she works hard for her grades, Jessica’s average is not above 3.0. “They have studies in extra things that you can go in, but you have to have, your grade point average has to be 3.0 or above. I think they kind of forget about the people who are lower than a 3.0.” In preparation for her fourth year, Jessica took an extra course to improve her research and writing skills. Rachel, too, took summer courses in order to qualify to enter into the accelerated program, a program where students would finish the nursing program a full semester early. Entrance into the program depends on your GPA. “They only take the top 30 [students]”, she said. According to Jessica, those with high marks receive more attention from their professors. “Not that it really shows a lot, but you can tell. They talk to the smarter people more.”
As discussed in Chapter 5, students in the program expressed various levels of anger and frustration when discussing group work and projects, particularly when groups were assigned by the professor. Negotiating between the students about overall goals and requirements of the assignment can be challenging. Some students want and need the grade of A while others are happy with a C. For those students who must achieve high grades to maintain their scholarships or gain entrance to graduate or medical school, they grudgingly accept that they will be responsible for the larger portion of the work. In that way, they can ensure that they receive the grades they need. As such, these students felt increased stress as their course load increased. According to Felicity, “Teamwork and group work is everywhere, it’s going to be in my profession, it is going to be in my school work, so I just have to kind of get used to it and do my best and do whatever I can to get what I want.”

The impact of not doing well in a course can be significant. Isa said that when some of the students didn’t pass a particular course, which was a co-requisite for other courses, they are not able to advance in their studies. They must take the course again, but it is only offered in second semester, which now means they will lose a year of study.

**Perfectionism**

Gaberson (1997) noted that students who enter nursing programs want to perform well or act perfectly. In general, she stated that medical programs, like nursing and pharmacy, have little tolerance for errors as they could have detrimental effects on potential patients (1997). Diane and Felicity said the drive for perfection is a common trait of many of their fellow nursing students. Felicity, Diane and Rachel described themselves as perfectionists. Although Diane knows that being perfect is not achievable:
I think there’s a lot of students in the nursing program that are perfectionists….Well, I don’t believe in perfection, but I am a perfectionist. But I have a thing that if I make a mistake I will be hard on myself. I don’t want to ever do that again.

When talking about the people in her circle of friends, Felicity stated, “We are all perfectionists. We all want to get the highest marks so it’s good to have goals like that …it’s good to have people with the same goals so that you all work at the same level.” Rachel stated that everyone she hangs out with is a perfectionist. “In my year [3rd] I’ve noticed there are girls who are together who are really close and on top of that, a lot of them are professionals. I’ve noticed they are all striving to get into med school or masters or teach.” The pressure they feel to achieve perfection comes from within, however, by associating with others who have the same drive, it becomes an accepted and expected measurement of achievement.

Clinical

Joan, Diana, Isa, and Heather found clinical practice to be the most rewarding experiences of their nursing studies. However, for Felicity and Rachel, it was the most stressful. During clinical, students are trained and monitored by a preceptor, a nurse instructor hired by the university to oversee the students in the hospital. Students are also assigned to a nurse working on the floor. The evening before their clinical placement, the preceptor emails the students with their patients and the associated pertinent information. The students are then to complete research on the ailments or diagnoses of the patients to ensure they are prepared to look after those patients the following day. Heather, Isa and Mark stated that success in clinical can depend on the research the students have done the night before. Isa explained well the importance of doing good research before clinical:

You have to know what is going on with your patient. You can’t just kind of go there and not really know what this disease does or I don’t know about this illness or I don’t know how to treat a person with this illness. There are some special considerations when treating persons with certain illnesses or certain conditions and if you don’t do the
research you could end up endangering a person, your patient. You could end up harming them, you could end up making the condition worse and so if you don’t do the research then you don’t know what is going on.

For many students, like Joan, they found clinical exciting. “Everybody is pretty game. It’s new and you are not bored with it yet. You are only out there for a matter of weeks, a couple of days, and a lot of times the tasks that you are doing are very focused.” For Isa, clinical provided life-changing experiences such as occurred in her first year when she encountered two deceased patients. “I never actually thought that I could have so much respect for a human being or for the body of a human being until I actually came across such an experience. I mean, the sort of rush of emotion that you feel. You can’t really teach that in class.” For these students, clinical provides an opportunity for substantial growth and understanding. Felicity said, “[Clinical] was good. I mean it was challenging but by the end I could really see myself develop more and that I could take on more.”

However, clinical can be stressful. For example, Heather doesn’t sleep the night before clinical:

I go over and I have to remember to do this and this and this. And the pressure. Even though it’s pass or fail, it’s huge pressure to make sure you are providing good care for these patients. It’s not just from a book that you are doing things any more. It’s actually on a person.

Learning to care for another person can cause stress, according to Rachel:

I think I’m more of a book person as opposed to a face-to-face person. And I think it’s my family too. My Dad used to be in the army so we very much grew up like we were soldiers – rough and tough, you know. No feeling, no mushy. … So the whole caring aspect and the lot of sweetness and stuff, it just sometimes gets to me. Other times I’m not good at it. I get kind of awkward, but I’m learning it right? I’m learning about that whole caring aspect.
Students report feeling intense stress resulting from the academic and clinical aspects of the program. Susan said, “I don’t think people want to cheat, but sometimes I think the workload is a little heavy and that’s just the easiest answer.”

**Personal and Faculty Relationships**

Three of the students said they had “no life” as they spent most of their time studying. For some students, it’s a difficult balance between school and other aspects of their lives, like personal relationships. Susan stated, “During school, it’s tough to balance everything. If anything, my relationship comes absolutely last – okay, I’ll meet you at the end of the night in bed.” Diane, a mature student, found that the demands of the program, her family and job prevented her from socializing with students in the program. She has developed a small group of friends that work together on school work, but she keeps her private life and school life distinctly separate. “I don’t get involved with any of the stuff outside of school, but the classroom stuff we kind of all work together.” For Joan, the workload would have been easier if she were 20 years younger. “How can I be so bloody tired, this is ridiculous?” My doctor says, ‘Hello, you’re 50, you’re going to university, you’re working.’”

Students such as Rachel, Mark, Isa and Susan also described stress directly related to family pressures, in particular, parents. Mark could relate well to student pressure from parents. He felt his parents put pressure on him while he was getting his first degree:

At least my parents did. Parents are paying for their son or daughter’s education, they want to see good results, that their investment is paying off. And I guess that’s the only glimpse that they see of the student’s life, if the student is willing to share, if they are willing to share the transcript, and that’s all the parents have to judge the student.

Rachel, who lives at home, said her parents complain about the amount of time she spends at school, on homework, and her late hours coming home on the bus. She works part-time, babysits her little sister and volunteers at a hospital:
When I was growing up my Dad made us get good grades but now he’s more like there’s more to life than grades. You have other responsibilities. You have to learn to run a household, learn how to have family time, learn how to do these things. And I understand that, but what they don’t understand is that I don’t make up my homework. I would love to gladly sit down and watch TV with them. They think I like doing homework.

Susan agreed that parental pressure can be intense as they push students to achieve higher marks. Although Isa doesn’t live at home, she still felt stress from her parents to do well. She stated, “There’s a lot of pressure from my parents and I do realize that. I think I’m going to do okay. They really do want me to become a doctor.”

Although Timmons and Kaliszer (2002) reported that students described increased stress resulting from poor relationships with nursing faculty and staff, the participants in this study expressed respect for their nursing faculty. Heather stated:

It is great to have small classes because you get paid attention to and you know your teachers - you know their name and they know your names. You are not just a number. Like at [previous university] you are just a number. The teachers don’t even make time to talk to you.

However, three students said they had difficulty with clinical instructors or co-assigned nurses. With whom students work during their clinical placement can have a significant impact on their experience. For example, Rachel discussed a difficult situation she experienced with a co-assigned nurse which has impacted her view of clinical practice. “I have a negative image of clinical. I don’t like going there because a lot of times nurses are not so good. And other times, I don’t like clinical because of the stress it has.” Although Felicity normally had good experiences with clinical, she recounted an incident where she felt her co-assigned nurse took advantage of her presence by assigning more nursing duties than she was able to complete and left her unsupervised throughout much the shift. Such experiences can have a negative effect on a student’s perception of the nursing profession. “I always say that I will never be a nurse like
them.” she said. Isa expressed little respect for one of her clinical instructors who took one and a half hour lunch breaks and passed students in their clinical rotations even when they hadn’t completed the required research on their patients.

**Financial pressures**

As reported by Timmins and Kaliszer (2002), students reported increased stress due to financial issues. This was confirmed in this study. For some participants, money pressures can also be a stressor not only on themselves, but also on their families. Only three students interviewed were living on their own outside of the family home. (Three students were married and living with spouses, two lived with partners). The choice to remain at home was a financial decision. Seven of the students worked part-time, one worked full time - a 36-hour weekend - in addition to their full-time studies. Serina described how she drives to a parking lot about three miles from school and takes a bus for the rest way in order to save money on parking (bus passes are included in tuition). Joan worked part-time as a registered practical nurse, yet to attend university full time, it also required that her husband work extra hours to assist paying for it. While tuition is high, the extra fees like books, parking and the laptop add to the financial burden. Her education impacts the entire family. The cost of tuition in the nursing program, including the laptop lease, is approximately $35,000 over four years, but failing can increase that cost dramatically, and as such, can create another impetus toward academic dishonesty. Both Isa and Susan discussed the financial impact of failing. Susan said that the pressure to succeed and the cost of failing can drive students to cheat. “I think it’s because there is that pressure to make sure you pass everything. That it is so expensive that if you get behind because you don’t want to fail a course, because it more money, more time.” Failing one course can force a student to wait a full-year to take the course again. “So, now they are a year behind everybody else.
Considering we pay $1,500 a year for our laptop, it’s not just wasted money on that course, it’s also money wasted on your laptop,” said Isa.

While failing a course may lead students to repeat a course or year, it may also cause an end their university career and therefore, their future nursing career. Linking an education to one’s financial future has been correlated to academic dishonesty (Vojack, 2007; Callahan, 2004). Five students in this study reported taking the nursing program to assist them achieving some of their life goals like travel, a better lifestyle or further education. The other six students named caring for others as the main reason for becoming a nurse. However, several students stated that they would not report another student’s cheating as they didn’t want to be responsible for preventing that student from becoming a nurse.

**Summary**

In this chapter, stress has been identified as a theme relating to the students’ descriptions of academic dishonesty. All the participants reported feeling extreme stress as a result of academic responsibilities such as group work, readings and assignments as well as in clinical practice. Transitioning from high school to university can be difficult. Several students expressed that they felt pressure from parents and from the nursing program to achieve high marks. The cost of failing is significant. Failing a course can force a student to repeat a year or leave the program. The financial impact of failing can affect a student’s bank account as well as put extra pressure on the family. It can also reduce a student’s potential earning power. In previous qualitative and quantitative studies (Szabo & Underwood, 2004; McCabe, Trevino & Butterworth, 1999; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997) stress had been identified as a factor in a student’s decision to cheat. Nursing students feel specific pressures resulting from the nursing curricula particularly around experiences in clinical placements.
(Timmins & Kaliszer, 2002). Most of the students in this study reported that the stress of the program has led students to commit academic dishonesty.
Chapter 8 - Technology as a Learning Tool

Introduction

A third theme of this study is the use of technology in the learning process at this university and its use in academic dishonesty. All students lease a laptop from the university on a yearly basis with a new laptop issued every two years. Course materials, assignments, assessments, in-class activities are provided through the use of technologically-enhanced learning environments. Each course is to have its materials housed in the learning management system, WebCT. Fourth-year students are issued PDAs to assist in their clinical placements. As well, all students have classes and after-class access to the simulation lab, a multi-million dollar lab with simulated patients. The use of technology is interwoven in what and how they learn. In a quantitative study of 1,300 students at two universities, researchers found no significant difference between students using conventional methods of plagiarizing (i.e. copying off a friend’s paper) as compared to digital methods (Stephens, Young & Calbrese, 2007). However, research has found that the more sophisticated the task, that is the more technology is required to learn the task or concept, the more likely it is that technology will be associated with academic dishonesty (Garavalia, Olsen, Russel & Christensen, 2007). As such, it is not surprising that the participants in this study reported little academic dishonesty using conventional methods. The majority of academically dishonest acts were conducted through technology. Cheating is cheating and students in this study did not make the distinction between cheating conventionally and cheating with technology.

Use of Technology

Research studies from the last 10 years have shown student use of technology to commit academic dishonesty is increasing. As students become more technologically savvy, the amount
of academic dishonesty using technology increases (Hinmen, 2002; Underwood & Szabo, 2003; Garavalia, et al., 2007). A 2003 study found that 94% of students were sufficiently experienced with the Internet to use it for cutting and pasting resources (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). Most students coming into the BScN program are comfortable using technology, particularly as the use of technology is a requirement of their studies. According to Heather, “I don’t think people are rookies when they first come in with laptops, unless they are mature students. Pretty much everyone is pretty handy with, not necessarily laptops, but with computers in general.” To ensure they are appropriately skilled in technology to be successful in the program, students are required to take a course in first year in information and communications technology.

Mark stated he didn’t think technology had an impact on the levels of cheating at his university. He pointed out that the only difference between his university and others in the province was the ability to use the laptop in the classroom, and even then, many universities allow their students to bring their own laptops to class. He stated that it was access to technology in general that could lead to cheating, not the level of technology. “Technology itself has [an impact] but the access or the more technology itself at [his university] has no impact.” In general, the students in this study would concur. Incidences of cheating were far lower at university than what they had witnessed in high school where the level of technology was significantly lower.

In Chapter 5, students said that they used technology to send instant messages to each other in and out of class, shared passwords to quizzes, copied and emailed quizzes, copied and pasted text, shared essays, collaborated on Facebook, and more. Most of the students interviewed agreed that the Internet and use of the laptop made it easier to commit academic dishonesty. Communicating through the laptops and sharing information becomes simple. “Everything is at your fingertips,” said Felicity. Diane stated that she found her fellow students were surprised
when faculty members expressed their concerns about the amount of communicating students were doing through the laptops. “Well, they gave us laptops, we should be able to communicate.” Diane stated that she had to take specific steps not to communicate with her fellow classmates. She doesn’t have an MSN account and doesn’t want one. “I remember saying to one person, ‘you know what, I’m trying to get a bachelor of science in nursing. It’s not a group effort, it’s my effort. I want to do this on my own.’” Connecting with each other through the laptops is how students expect to communicate. According to Mark, it is all students his age know. “Texting answers, MSNing quizzes and stuff. I’ve really experienced nothing else.”

According to Heather, Diane and Felicity, access to the Internet through the laptop makes research an easier task, but also a riskier task. “You just have more access to things and it’s easier to cut and paste things because you have access to it on the Internet.” Mark described how students use the laptop for research and writing. Students gather materials from the library databases and from websites and save them to their laptops. They have all the documents open on their laptop desktops and begin assembling the paper from there. Once they have gathered the materials required for the paper, they begin putting the work into their own words. Using this method, it would be easy to plagiarize. Beginning a paper by cutting and pasting resources becomes a task in un plagiarizing a paper, rather that writing one. “As for writing, I found, some students didn’t know they were cheating. That was the main culprit there, they didn’t know they were cheating.” However, not all plagiarism is unintentional. Several students reported sharing papers with each other where students would copy entire papers, paragraphs or the reference pages.
Students used their laptops to cheat on the online quizzes that were delivered after class. Some students reported confusion regarding the online quizzes as some faculty members allowed them to be completed as a group, while other professors stated they should be done individually. The result was that most students completed all their online quizzes in a group; they would open the quiz together on their laptops and complete the quiz online together. Felicity and Rachel didn’t perceive this as cheating because the students needed to work together to get the answers. In their opinion, they are learning as they completed the quiz. Cheating would occur if they were to assist one student to complete the quiz or just shared the answers. As students divide the readings between them, completing the quiz as a group enabled them to save time and share their knowledge. It became one method of coping with workload issues. As a matter of routine, the students copy and save the quiz on their laptops and use them for studying for midterms and exams. However, once they are saved, they become easy to share with others who have not yet written the quiz. For Jessica, sending the quiz around to one’s friends is more efficient as her mind goes blank after writing a test. If someone had asked her to recall the questions on a test, she wouldn’t remember. According to Mark, cheating on the online quizzes is deliberate. “They want to get a better mark, everyone does. Maybe they want to offset their poor exam marks or whatever with a higher quiz mark and that’s an easy opportunity to get an A or B+ on the quizzes with minimal effort.”

A number of students pointed out that laptops were not used during exams as exams are paper-based. These students stated that if the WebCT quizzes were administered on paper rather than online, the amount of cheating would be drastically reduced. Diane stated, “Especially if you are doing online quizzes, you have more [academic dishonesty] with everyone connected. You can exchange that information.” Heather recounted a story of students writing an in-class
test on their laptops. Before handing in the test, one student sent her test to other students in the class asking for help with editing:

Through MSN or email, just sending it, even though you are not supposed to be on MSN, you are not supposed to be on email. But it was in class and there were 300 students and one teacher, so how is he supposed to watch everything? So, she sent it to her friend to get edited and she sent it to her friends and they sent it to their friends and everyone is using all the answers. So email - emailing your tests and assignments - that kind of thing. They do it.

She added, the students involved in that incident were eventually caught – she is unsure how.

Rachel found the laptop to both assist and detract from her learning. She said there are times when students using the laptop in class for other activities than course work can be a significant distraction. The lure of the Internet can be difficult to resist, even for this straight A student. “Sometimes I can’t even see the teacher, I see flashes and conversations going on everywhere and I see Facebook open all the time. And actually, it distracts me and I want to go on Facebook and I don’t listen to the professor.” The advantage, she stated, is in the ability to consolidate all her course notes and class notes into one unit. She said it is an awkward balance, but on the whole she believes her learning has been positively affected by the use of technology.

Jessica stated that the laptop in the classroom made it easier for students to not pay attention in class. Susan described students who instant message during class as “obnoxious.” “There’s always stuff flying up on screens and it shouldn’t matter, but it does. You can’t help be distracted by it. And they are giggling away and they’re talking and it’s like, why are you here?” Susan also noted that the number of students in the class has a significant impact on the amount of distractions on the laptops. She said in classes of 200 or more students, there’s little interaction, and as such, students are surfing on their laptops when they are bored. “It’s really hard to pay attention in those classes.” She continued. “There’s no interaction between the professor and
you. That’s where we’ve had the online stuff like the quizzes and people cheating because there’s only one person at the front of the room to keep things in check.”

However, the use of technology has also been positively associated with increased learning. While most postsecondary students have a computer or access to a computer either at home or on campus, each student at this university is issued an identical laptop with applications specifically loaded for his or her particular program. Students are to bring their laptops into the classroom to take notes and participate in collaborative activities. According to Joan, “It [the laptop] has certainly changed the way we learn.” She added there is a significant difference between how her sister (who is now a nurse practitioner) learned the content and how she is learning. “The electronic texts have changed so much. They are so much more visually based. She [Joan’s sister] said, ‘Oh my God, it would have been so much easier to learn that stuff,’ because now you get CDs and interactive materials.”

**Impact of Faculty**

It is apparent in this study that the faculty member can have an impact on academic dishonesty. When students were asked about the amount of academic dishonesty within the BScN program, students responded that it depended on the professor. If the professor appeared unsure, lacking in technological expertise, or was not interested in catching cheating students, students reported seeing more cheating under these circumstances. This is supported by the research which found that teacher characteristics such as failure to punish cheaters could lead students to develop attitudes and dishonest behaviours which soon become the norm (Garavalia, et al., 2007). Rachel expressed frustration that professors were not able to identify many of the academically dishonest assignments and students. “The teacher is trying to be smart and mark
my paper. She should be smart and catch that [copied] paper and not give out such a high mark. That is what really bothers me.”

Students take advantage of faculty members’ inexperience with technology. Rachel stated that, “a lot of students are really good in technology now-a-days. They will find their ways to manipulate it for their own selves.” In reflecting back over her first year of study in the program, Isa described how the quizzes were conducted in the beginning of the semester and the steps taken by faculty members to continually adjust the quiz to prevent students cheating. It had little effect. In one course, the professor gave students three attempts to take the quiz. However, students would just guess at the answers the first time and in doing so, get access to all the questions. Sometimes the quiz itself would provide the correct answers after it was completed. If the answers were provided, students would save and print the quiz and share it with others. If the answers were not provided, they would print the questions and, working in a group, find the correct answers, then they would write the quiz again. The professor then began only allowing students to write the quiz once. At that point, students would meet in a group and write the quiz together. However, again, students would save and print the questions and share those questions with others in the class. The professor then began restricting access to the quiz – students weren’t able to print and save the questions. The result, students would just tell others from memory the questions that were on the quiz. Isa stated, “If somebody did the quiz beforehand and somebody else was doing it later on and they asked you questions, you told them.” The professor’s lack of expertise with technology provided easy opportunity for students to take advantage. As he manipulated the test environment to reduce cheating, students were able to quickly adapt to each change. Once technology was not an option, more traditional methods were used such as telling another person the questions on the test.
Researchers report that the faculty members play an important role in creating an environment for academic integrity. “Cheating increases when teachers are not knowledgeable, not prepared, not able to make personal contact with students and not well organized” (Schraw, et al., 2007, p. 71.) The participants in the study said they respected the faculty member who was more strict and vigilant in catching cheating students. Isa recalled a mid-term she took on the laptop in one class where it was difficult for the students to cheat. She felt the measures the professor took enabled a more secure test environment. The professor used software that prevented students from opening any document other than the test. “All the questions came up one at a time and they were randomized so that even if you do happen to look over to somebody else’s laptop it doesn’t matter much because everybody is moving at their own pace,” she said.

**Turnitin.com**

The fourth-year students each discussed the use of the plagiarism detection service Turnitin.com. Turnitin.com is a database that holds copies of billions of online resources such as web pages, materials from several library databases, some books, and previously submitted student papers. It works by matching the text from the student’s paper to the text stored in its database under the premise that few writers use exactly the same terms and language. At this university, faculty members submit student papers to the database after the papers have been handed in. It is used as a deterrent and as a method of catching plagiarists.

For students in the lower years, they had not been exposed to Turnitin.com as part of their university career, however, Tess, a first-year student, had been required to upload papers into Turnitin.com when she was in her final year of high school. The students expressed different reactions to the use of the Turnitin.com. Students were afraid to choose certain topics for their papers; they dropped out of classes that used Turnitin.com or decided not to take that particular
class; they used sources from books rather than online sources as they tried to outwit the program. Jessica expressed frustration with professors who designed assignments where the scope was so narrow that most of the papers would look similar, and as such, the plagiarism levels could be higher. Some students actually expressed fear about writing papers. Joan and Jessica said it was common that they completed their assignments with anxiety in that they may unintentionally plagiarize. Joan is very careful in her citations and referencing. “I’m paranoid when I’m editing,” she said. “I’m actually horrified that I might change it back into what it was in the first place.”

Researchers express little support for plagiarism detection services as their use does not teach the student how to write and cite properly, but rather how to write without getting caught by the program (Warn, 2006). Programs such as Turnitin.com are not adept at finding poorly written citations, references or other sloppy mistakes, it simply matches text (Warn, 2006). Hinmen stated that it wouldn’t be long before programs were designed to rewrite a paper to ensure that it would not appear to be plagiarized in programs such as Turnitin.com (2002).

A professor in a psychology course had submitted papers to Turnitin.com that resulted in numerous students in the class being penalized or given zero for plagiarism. Diane was one student who was caught and penalized due to the results returned from Turnitin.com. “It was successful from the teacher’s point of view, but it wasn’t from ours. There were a lot of students in the class that were caught and some of them never got their papers back.” Diane knew that the teacher would be using Turnitin.com for this assignment and as such, was cautious about the topic she chose. “There was one [topic] where you had to do infants between the ages of newborn and 2.5 months and the different things they have to go through, the developmental stages. I thought there’s no way.” She felt the information was standard, and as such, those who
chose to do this topic would have similar papers. She chose hospitalization instead, but it was her paraphrasing that was flagged by Turnitin.com.

What I wasn’t aware of is what it looks for - you can’t just change synonyms - not that I did a whole sentence and just changed one word, it wasn’t like that. I would take a paragraph and try to paraphrase it and certain words I would try to find synonyms for and apparently that still gets highlighted on this program, which I wasn’t aware of.

For Jessica, the potential use of Turnitin.com means she won’t be taking that course, particularly when there were only three topics on which to write a paper. “Honestly, I think it’s unfair because you are putting all of it into a computer and it’s going to tell you what’s the same and what’s different, but it’s the same topic. So, if everybody had a different topic, maybe it would be okay.” One student in the course, according to Diane, dropped out to take the same course online from another university because of the use of Turnitin.com. Diane also noted that Turnitin.com is only effective if students are using online resources from which to write their papers. “I know someone from our program who basically copied and pasted from a book and they got an A on their paper.”

Heather understood the professor’s reasoning behind the use of the Turnitin.com program and stated she would like to see it used in a wider context. “It’s too hard for faculty. When you have like 100 different papers how can you keep every term comparing them to the previous term and the term before that and the term before that? That’s just crazy. You can’t do it.” Joan expressed little sympathy for students who were caught plagiarizing by Turnitin.com. She said students should know that if they can access materials online, then so too can the professors. “If you can get them, they can check them,” she said.

Summary

Most of the academic dishonesty reported by the participants occurred with the use of technology. Because of the wide-spread use of technology in this program, it would be difficult
to conclude that without the use of technology, academic dishonesty would be reduced. It was evident from Isa’s example that students were going to cheat with or without the use of technology and when technology was no longer an option, the conventional method of simply telling someone what was on the test became the alternative. The use of the plagiarism detection service Turnitin.com caused concern for most of the students. Even though they were aware that the faculty member was going to use the service, many papers were still flagged as being plagiarized. This could indicate that students do not have a strong background in proper writing and referencing. Mark’s description of writing an academic paper was actually an act of unplagiarizing rather than a demonstration of academic writing. The faculty member is key to providing an environment where academic dishonesty is not tolerated. Students were quick to take advantage of a professor who lacked sophisticated knowledge of technology, and as such, provided easy opportunity for cheating.
Chapter 9 – Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the meaning of academic integrity as part of the lived experience of the participating nursing students. The data revealed these students’ perceptions regarding academic dishonesty, how students were committing academic dishonesty and a description of their lifeworlds. These students felt that certain types of academic dishonesty were wrong, such as cheating for one’s own benefit, however most were participating in some form of academic dishonesty and were tolerant of others who were cheating in the program. For the most part, students attributed the academic dishonesty to their high stress levels. In discussing their lifeworlds, it became apparent that caring played an important role in their curriculum. As such, the principles of caring were being transferred from the classroom to other aspects of their learning environment. For example, students weren’t being academically dishonest, but were helping a friend or colleague by sharing assignments and quizzes. Learning in a technologically-enhanced environment resulted in most of the cheating being conducted with the use of technology. Students were manipulating their learning environment through technology. After analyzing the transcripts and reducing the data to their most essential elements, I have narrowed that meaning of academic dishonesty for these nursing students to four words: caring, sharing, coping and control.

Commonalities

One of the questions to be addressed in this study was to determine if there were commonalities between student descriptions of academic dishonesty. This study demonstrated that there were commonalities between the descriptions provided by the participants as well as
with current research. Much of the basic data provided by the participants supported previous research, in that nursing students were committing academic dishonesty; that cheating did not begin at university, but in high school or earlier; the participants did not have a full understanding of what academic dishonesty was and that their knowledge of their school’s policies regarding academic dishonesty was limited. As well, these students reported that they were under high levels of stress. Technology was fully incorporated into their learning environment, so it is of little surprise that students used technology as the means through which most of the academic dishonesty was committed. Students did use neutralizing statements to nullify the cheating behaviours and their impact. However, the qualitative methods of this study enabled me to discover further details surrounding academic dishonesty and these nursing students. For example, the language the students used revealed they were attuned to “caring” in that caring was important to these students and that those whom they described as cheating “didn’t care.” They also referred to much of what I would describe as academic dishonesty as “sharing” rather than cheating. The data also revealed that aspects of their learning culture were similar to those found in collectivist cultures where loyalty to the group was a priority.

Other studies

Previous research on nursing students (McCabe, in press; Brown, 2002; Gaberson, 1997; Patterson, et al., 2003) confirmed that nursing students were cheating at rates similar to students in other disciplines. Most researchers found this disconcerting as nursing is considered an ethical profession where graduates will have direct interaction with ill patients. Researchers had anticipated that nursing students would cheat at a rate lower than students in other disciplines (McCabe, in press; Gaberson, 1997). However, this was not the case. Nursing students, like
other university students, reported being academic dishonesty at rates similar to other disciplines, however, the types of cheating they reported were significantly different (McCabe, in press).

For these participants, their experiences with academic dishonesty did not begin at university. All could recall incidences of cheating in high school or, in some cases, elementary school. However, several students pointed out that cheating in high school was different than at university. It would appear that the goal of learning in high school was to graduate and advance to postsecondary. For students like Serina and Tess, high school was a time of difficulty in that students didn’t know what they wanted to do with their futures, felt the courses were not relative to their lives, that they were attending only because they had to. They reported levels of cheating at much higher levels than witnessed at university. They found the high school environment to be apathetic in that although talk of penalties for cheating was prevalent, very few students were caught and penalized. The result, cheating was “pretty much mandatory” in high school to the point where, according to the students, it was an accepted method for obtaining success. These attitudes were supported by research data which found (Strom & Strom, 2007) that students cheat in high school to get into college and university. Parents are also being blamed for their children’s cheating behaviours as some demand their children be successful in school, no matter how it is accomplished (Strom & Strom, 2007). However, students in this study reported that the goals for obtaining an education in nursing were different than high school. They have chosen to attend this program to become a nurse. They are interested in the courses they are taking and are more motivated to learn than in high school. They reported that they are more wary of being caught cheating and were conscious that cheating may impact their future career. Perhaps this is why these students reported seeing reduced levels of cheating than they witnessed in high school.
This would support Davis’s statement that cheating in high school is for grades and that cheating in university is for one’s career (2001).

In nursing programs, researchers expected to find a higher level of integrity than found among other disciplines, however, this was not the case (McCabe, in press; Gaberson, 1997). McCabe found that nursing students cheat as often as others. In many nursing programs, like the one used in this study, students are required to take a course in ethics and they taught how to be a “good nurse.” With such a background, educators expected nursing students to have a higher ethical standard than other students (McCabe, in press). Yet, according to Begley (2006) learning ethics is the process of acquiring theory essential for understanding ethical issues and concepts. Learning virtue is acquiring the skill to implement ethical judgments. According to Begley, in general, students are taught ethics, but not virtue. They do not acquire the practical knowledge and wisdom of virtue that comes from practice and experience. She said this can be accomplished through mentoring, modeling, and inferred in every course, not just one course (2006). As such, students described themselves as nursing students being taught how to be good nurses. They were not taught to be good students.

According to the participants, the emphasis is placed on dishonesty in that they are warned about plagiarism or other cheating behaviours, but are not taught what it means to be an honest student. The assumption is that students at this point in their educational career should know what it means to be an honest student. However, it has been reported that students witnessed a high level of cheating in high school. Among their peers, there was an expectation of dishonesty in high school. To a certain extent, students understood that academic dishonesty in high school was wrong and confirmed that the nursing program at university was a new educational experience with different expectations and goals. For these nursing students,
academic dishonesty takes on a different role. Much of the academic dishonesty was conducted with the understanding that students were helping each other. Cheating to assist only the individual was not reported at the same level as cheating to assist the group.

**Academic dishonesty – definition and policies**

A limited understanding of the definition of academic dishonesty has been positively correlated to increased levels of cheating (Burrus, McGoldrick & Schuhmann, 2007). The participants in this study did describe academic dishonesty, but mainly in terms of plagiarism. They were very aware of the problem of plagiarism but several participants were not as competent in some areas of academic writing such as paraphrasing or summarizing. Perhaps part of the reason for their limited knowledge is that academic dishonesty is not addressed consistently and comprehensively throughout the program. After first year, students were expected to know the policy as it is included in each course outline. But what this research revealed was that students’ knowledge of the policy was extremely limited and that they did not read the policy that was part of every syllabus. Because their knowledge of academic dishonesty and its associated policy were limited, they were not aware of the penalties. They understood that there is the possibility of suspension from the program, but only one student was cognizant of this happening in the past. Students received mixed messages from faculty when an incident of cheating was discovered. Some faculty members did nothing, others used the incident to teach the student about paraphrasing, another faculty member had the entire class redo an assignment, and another lowered grades on plagiarized papers. Some students said they recalled a time when a cheating student received a zero on an assignment. According to Susan, academic dishonesty in the nursing program was prevalent, but mainly on small assignments. She said students were unwilling to risk being expelled from the program by cheating on large assignments or exams.
The relatively low penalties associated with academic dishonesty on minor assignments were attributed to the higher prevalence of cheating on these assignments. Although the participants were aware that penalties existed for academic dishonesty, 10 of the students were not aware of anyone being penalized more than receiving a zero on an assignment. Students expressed frustration when copied papers went unnoticed by professors. The reaction to academic dishonesty was inconsistent both in the perceived seriousness of academic dishonesty and how incidences were dealt with. As far as these students were concerned, academic dishonesty was not something dealt with harshly by the nursing program or the university.

**Culture**

One research question to be addressed in this study was, “how do the students’ lifeworlds influence the meaning of academic dishonesty?” Social constructivism states that one’s culture impacts a person’s perception of reality, and therefore, how one learns and understands (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, et al., 1998). According to Triandis (2001) language, place and time are the foundations of culture. People’s experiences at a particular place and time and the accompanying interaction lead to the creation of customs. These customs and their associated meanings are communicated through language. Therefore, situation is important in the development of culture. I argue that situational factors found within the learning culture of the nursing students have led to some forms of academic dishonesty. For example, the high levels of stress, the “caring curriculum,” the loss of control, have lead to various coping mechanisms, some of which would be considered academic dishonesty by university standards.

Students in the program described being under extreme stress. The four students who had previous degrees all state that the workload in the nursing program was heavier than what they had experienced at their previous universities. Timmons and Kaliszer (2002) stated that nursing
students were stressed academically, financially, with relationships with faculty, and when dealing with the death of patients in clinical settings. For the most part, this was confirmed with this study, however, students reported that there were other aspects in their lives that caused stress such as making the transition from high school, pressure from parents and the program for marks, clinical as well as in maintaining nursing skills. Because all students were stressed, some students expressed sympathy for others who were being academically dishonest as a result of stress. Others had “passive acceptance” or a “see no evil, hear no evil” attitude where students who were cheating were making their own decisions based on their own circumstances. As long as the cheating did not affect them personally, it was tolerated. As is required in the philosophy of caring, they remained non-judgmental.

Students in this program developed close bonds due to circumstances. For the most part, they were isolated from students in other disciplines taking courses specifically designed for nursing students. The transition from high school to university was often described as difficult for many students. They were now in a learning environment where they were no longer “spoon fed.” Participants reported that many of their colleagues had poor academic skills including academic writing, time management, study skills, and difficulty prioritizing. Rampant cheating in high school may have contributed to the lack of academic skills. As well, students reported feeling stress in clinical placements where students were responsible for assisting real people. Some students reported financial strain as they were required to quit jobs due to the time demands of the program or had family members working overtime to assist in paying for the program. As such, the cost of failing a course was considered substantial as it may require students to lose a year of schooling. Some students felt pressured to achieve high marks as there were opportunities available to students within the program who had a high GPA. In previous
studies, high stress levels have been correlated to academic dishonesty (Szabo & Underwood, 2004; McCabe, Trevino & Butterworth, 1999; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorn, 1997). Indeed, two participants in this study were sympathetic to their colleagues as they were all experiencing stress. As such, students were neutralizing their academic dishonesty by attributing it to helping others rather than cheating.

Although the participants live in an individualistic society (Canada), these students had developed customs and loyalties similar to those found within collectivist societies. For example, trust and loyalty were high when students discussed the associations and interactions within their academic groups. In collectivist cultures, group goals are more important than individual goals. And, although students were working for individual marks, it was evident they were willing to assist each other to achieve better grades. Academic dishonesty was being committed but much of it was done to assist others. A student who cheated for personal gain was not looked on favourably by the students.

The BScN program involved in this study was only six years old at the time this dissertation was written, and yet there were some fairly strong conventions developed, such as the development of academic groups, sharing papers and quizzes. Their experiences, for example those in clinical, have contributed to the close bonds these students have developed between one another. Students have established their own culture in reaction to their situation - one in which they are powerless to control – one they are simply reacting to in an effort to be successful. They are going through a process of transformation, from student to nurse. As such, they are not necessarily incorporating the values of what is required as a student, but those of what it is to be a nurse and I suggest that some of those goals are in conflict with each other.
Caring

The language of the program contributes to this learning culture. It is a “collaborative” program with a “caring” curriculum. As discussed in Chapter 6, caring is a central concept in the development of the nurse in the BScN program. According to Watson, caring is as important as curing (1985). The theme of caring is interwoven throughout the curriculum of the nursing program. Students are taught to empathize with patients, to develop caring relationships, to set aside judgments as they may interfere with one’s ability to care. They are being taught to look after those who are sick, to assist in making an ill person better, to play a role in the recovery of the patient while respecting the autonomy of that person. It requires the development of a relationship, based on caring, with the patient and yet be prepared to dissolve that relationship once the role of the nurse is no longer needed. They put these concepts into practice in their clinical settings, but it is also seen in their academic relationships with their fellow students.

As these students develop into nurses, they are learning new concepts particularly in how they interact with those who are sick. It is a process of enculturation into the community of the nursing profession. But as in all learning, it is not a process that happens overnight, it takes four years. During those four years, students are introduced to the concept of caring in stages. It is a concept that they study, practice and reflect on. One of the goals of learning is having the ability to transfer that knowledge to other situations (National Research Council, 2000). Being able to transfer knowledge demonstrates to the educator and the student that the learning has been absorbed, understood and practiced. As such, it is not surprising that these students transfer the concept of caring from the clinical environment to other situations. For example, Serina described how her communication with her toddler son improved after she learned better communication skills. For example, she ensures that she and her son have eye contact when they
are talk to one another, instead of talking to her son while she was busy with other activities like
cleaning the house. It becomes important to understand that students in this program are going
through a transformational process. As they integrate the concepts of nursing and caring, they
are applying them to their own collectivist community as they share the struggles experienced in
the nursing program.

Watson (1985) stated that the ultimate goal of a nurse is to self-actualize and also assist
their patients to self-actualize. It was evident that the students interviewed could relate to one
another concerning their ultimate goal of becoming a nurse. By sharing papers, etc., it could be
interpreted that these students were assisting each other to self-actualize – to finish the program
and become nurses. However, it is doubtful that Watson would condone cheating to achieve
long-term goals as the preferred method of self-actualization. In effect, the students are creating
situations of dependent care rather than self-care. Students were working together to fulfill short-
term needs, rather than taking a broader perspective of assisting students to truly self-actualize,
or become nurses. However, for most of the participants of this study, they were not able to see
the connection between assisting each other to the point of cheating and the impact the cheating
had on their future as nurses.

Sharing

In reviewing the students’ transcripts line by line, it was apparent that two words revealed
themselves consistently – caring and sharing. When discussing academic dishonesty, it was
evident that the students didn’t feel they were being dishonest, they were sharing. According to
Susan, “we’re always sharing stuff.” They were sharing papers and assignments, sending each
other quizzes or passwords to quizzes, chatting through instant messaging during tests. A
student reported that someone stole a mid-term exam and passed it on to the students in the two
other classes who had yet to write it. Students shared their research and knowledge with each other in clinical settings. I was not told of many incidences of cheating where only one person would have benefitted. Two students admitted they had been caught plagiarizing, but that the plagiarizing had been done unintentionally and not as an attempt to deceive the professor. Assisting one’s friends or asking for assistance was not an act of dishonesty. This is supported by McCabe’s recent study of nursing students (in press) where he found that although the level of cheating self-reported by nursing students was similar to other postsecondary students, there were differences in where the cheating had occurred. Nursing students scored significantly lower than non-nursing students in areas such as using forged notes or crib sheets, yet scored significantly higher in collaborative cheating such as sharing answers with a group (in press). Cheating to improve the performance of the individual is not as common as assisting one’s colleagues through the challenging nursing program. The goals of the group take priority over the goals of the individual.

In group work situations, nursing students expressed high levels of frustration with members who were not participating. There could be a number of reasons for this level of frustration. Firstly, one should take into consideration that all but two of the students interviewed considered themselves high-achieving students who have high expectations of the standards required of group members. For these students, a mark of 60% was not acceptable and as such, felt compelled to contribute a larger portion of the work in order to receive an A grade. For these students, group members who did not work to ensure a good grade were being deceitful. As well, when considering the importance these students place on group goals and the success of the group, when a student violates those unwritten rules, other students express high levels of anger and frustration. However, students resign themselves to the process and
contribute more to the project to ensure its success. Only one participant said her group had reported a student to the professor for not participating in the group work process.

Although opportunity is correlated to academic dishonesty, were students cheating on these low level assignments because of opportunity? On the online quizzes, opportunity was a factor. According to the participants, cheating on the online quizzes was an easy endeavour. In fact, because it was so easy to cheat on the online quizzes, Mark said it wasn’t cheating at all. As such, it was an expectation in the nursing program that quizzes be shared and then completed in a group. When quizzes were taken in more restrictive environments or with passwords, the dishonesty continued as sharing quizzes had become the norm for this group. Efforts to eliminate the cheating were met with strong resistance from students as they manipulated the situation to ensure others gained access to the quiz. In one incident described by two students, when the professor expressed frustration and anger regarding the academic dishonesty, students were not able to comprehend his reasoning behind not sharing the quiz and continued to thwart his efforts for a cheat-free test environment. Triandis (2001) stated that cultures develop conventions or customs as a result of the experiences of members at a particular time and place. Practiced enough, these conventions become ingrained into the social fabric of the group members. It is evident from discussing with the participants that quizzes are to be shared with others and/or completed in a group. It is not considered academic dishonesty, it is just reality; it is how quizzes are completed. Exams were completed on paper rather than on the laptop, and as such, were considered more serious assessments. Only one student reported an incident involving an exam. This perception may also explain Susan’s assertion that cheating on a little quiz does not reflect on a person’s overall integrity or his or her ability to be a nurse.
The Impact of Stress

The participants described their lives almost wholly dedicated to the completion of the nursing program. They had a narrow perspective, almost a tunnel vision, of their lives. They are focused on completing the assignment, course, year, program. They do not spend much time contemplating other things. For those participants with children, much of the care for those children had been relinquished to other family members. Others have sacrificed jobs, personal relationships and socializing with family and friends, for the demands of the program. For the most part, these students are focused on their day-to-day survival in the program. They all described themselves as being under high levels of stress.

In Western society, we are constantly warned about the dangers of stress through the media, from the health care system, and even our employers. Stress can impact the mind and body. It can change one’s perception of reality, can cause physical pain or illness; it can even lead to death. Stress can impact a person’s decision-making process (Rettinger, 2007). Although people state they would like to make decisions rationally, most decisions are influenced by emotion (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Stress can have an impact on a person’s emotions and mood, and therefore, impair his or her ability to make a decision. For example, a person in a negative mood may ignore previous knowledge to focus on the current situation (Rettinger, 2007). A negative mood signals the brain to concentrate on the issue at hand in order to fix it rather than considering the issue from a broader base of knowledge and experience (Rettinger, 2007). This was evident when students described their experiences with other students who had cheated. Most participants said that students were cheating due to high stress levels. They were simply getting through the day and not thinking about tomorrow.
A concern expressed by educators and researchers about academic dishonesty in nursing programs is that the deficit of knowledge as a result of cheating could have an impact on patients (McCabe, in press; Gaberson, 1997). This research has determined that for most of these participants, they do not see the connection between cheating and the patient. Students are able to associate the ramifications of cheating to personal penalties such as losing marks, getting expelled from the program or loss of reputation. Eventually, three students saw the potential impact on the patient that might occur if there was a deficit of knowledge. One reason for this disassociation could be the level of stress these students are experiencing. Seeing the patient while in the midst of plagiarizing an essay or completing a quiz would require looking to the future. Research has shown that under duress, a person’s focus narrows to work through the immediate problem at hand with little consideration of the past or the future (Rettinger, 2007). As such, the potential patient is not in the immediate proximity to the student, who may be trying to complete an assignment with a lack of either the knowledge, academic skills, or the time required to complete the assignment appropriately.

When a person is stressed, his or her ability to assess risk may also be impaired. Risk assessment is also influenced by emotion (Beach & Connolly, 2005). For example, the feeling of dread can be a factor in a person’s process of making a decision that involves risk and as such, the person may choose an alternative without considering all the variables (Beach & Connolly, 2005). There’s little doubt that deciding to commit an act of academic dishonesty (when one admits that it is actually cheating) involves a person’s evaluation of the risks. However, when a person is trying to make that decision under the influence of stress, the ability to evaluate risk and make a competent decision is impaired. As such, the high levels of stress as expressed by the
participants may be an influencing situational factor that impacted a student’s ability to find appropriate alternatives to academic problems.

**Coping**

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.

It was reported by the participants that within the first few weeks of the program, students began to align themselves with others who had similar academic goals. These were groups for support, whose members communicate with each other throughout the school day, who discuss assignments and share ideas. It would appear that these groups remain fairly intact and grow stronger as students move through the four years of the program. As the interdependency between the group members grows, so too does the trust. The participants in this study said they had a deep level of trust for the work produced by the others in their groups, to the point where they did not have to check each other’s work to ensure it is correct or on track. To cope with the workload, students divided the work between them, such as each person taking a chapter of reading and providing notes to others in the group. They would also prepare potential test or exam questions that might arise from the readings. According to Rachel, if one person in the
group was unable to fulfill her or his obligations, others in the group would do the work for her, “and not get mad about it.” Group members shared answers, assignments and proof read each others’ papers. They met to complete online quizzes together. When students were in their clinical environments, they consulted their fellow students first with questions or issues rather than turning to the preceptor or co-assigned nurse. These clinical sessions were stressful, emotional and could be traumatic. They enjoyed discussing their clinical experiences with one another as they share and compare each other’s patients and situations. For the most part, the nursing students have little contact with students from outside of the program. They turn to each other for assistance and support as they move through the program. They have developed their own sub-culture with its own customs and norms.

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 the references wasn’t 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 my 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.
Neutralization

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, sending passwords to quizzes was not mentioned in the course outline, the workload was heavy, the situation was an invitation to cheat, the professor doesn’t care, it’s only 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. This sentiment is confirmed in an earlier study (Murdock & Steven, 2007). 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).
This provides an interesting paradox. There is no argument that students in the BScN program live in an individualistic culture, that of Ontario, Canada. However, upon entering the nursing program students begin to adopt traits similar to those found within collectivist cultures. The curriculum, based on collaboration and caring, influences how these students react and interact. Kohn states that most research into academic dishonesty was focused on the characteristics of students, particularly on individual traits, rather than on determining how one’s social environment influences behaviour (2007). In a recent study of cheating in Middle Eastern countries, which are considered collectivist cultures, McCabe found students’ self-reported cheating levels to be higher than in North American postsecondary institutions, particularly in areas where cheating assisted others, such as collaborating with others to cheat on an exam (2008). In this study of nursing students, there were instances of students describing reasons to nullify cheating behaviours (i.e. the professor didn’t say not to on the syllabus), however in some instances, these students did not believe they were cheating, such as working together on quizzes.

**Control**

Stress can also leave a person feeling powerless. Research has shown that students in postsecondary feel powerless working within a system in which they have no control (Fassett, 2001; Bernardi et al, 2004). In the theory of internal/external locus of control, success or failure can be attributed to people’s ability to control their environment. For example, a person with an internal locus of control feels responsible for his or her own success or failure (Cranton, 1989). One characteristic of collectivist cultures is a lack of control or having to adapt to an existing reality rather than having the ability to determine one’s own reality (Triandis, 1995). Loss of control has also been associated with academic dishonesty (Bernardi et al, 2004). It is evident
when discussing their lifeworlds, the participants in this study felt they have little control over their own lives.

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 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. They send the quizzes to one another, share papers, passwords, and take advantage of faculty who are not as technically proficient as they are. Academic dishonesty can be interpreted as an attempt to regain some control of their learning environment.

Students were quick to take advantage of a professor who was not technically competent. In such cases, their use 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. Again, they were expressing their powerlessness in the situation where poorly developed assignments could lead to unintentionally plagiarized papers.

Technology

There is no argument that technology can make accomplishing tasks easier as well as more complicated. For example, there is little need to travel to the library and look through a limited selection of books and journals for appropriate research materials. Now one can use a computer to search library databases using key words which can return articles from journals that one may not have thought to look in. It can also return hundreds of resources which can actually make the whole process more time consuming because there is so much information from which to select the relevant pieces. According to Chandler (2007) and Arnold and Pierce (2008), it is a fallacy to think that humans control technology. Technology is limited in that it can only do certain things and as such, humans adapt the way they accomplish tasks to accommodate what technology can do. For example, once students understood the way Turnitin.com works, they began writing assignments in such a manner that would go undetected by the system. They are not necessarily writing in order to develop a well-grounded academic argument.

Arnold and Pierce (2008) argued that the interdependence of humans and technology make both responsible for actions – each bears some responsibility in the outcome. Technology holds some responsibility because of the way it is designed, the way it interacts with other...
systems, and the actions it can take. By not holding technology accountable, it becomes evaluated on instrumental terms such as how fast or slow it works hence, the full impact of the use of the technology is not taken into account (Arnold & Pierce, 2008). Bertman (2005) argued that technology can prevent us from effectively analyzing decisions and that is it the human not the technology that should determine needs. Thus Bertram warned that when incorporating technology a full analysis of its impact should be conducted with a realization of the limits of the users. For example, the use of laptops in the classroom is often described as an enhancement to the learning environment as it provides access to almost limitless resources, opportunities to interact with content and learners, and the freedom to learn off campus. However, while making the laptop available to all provides tremendous opportunities, one must consider that many students are immature, distracted by interactive social environments like Facebook, as well as subject to stress and perhaps, faulty decision-making. As such, students should be provided with more comprehensive understanding of the “ethical” impact of technology, the possibilities and the problems that it can provide, rather than just how to effectively use the software. Students need to understand its limitations and its allure, but also understand their own propensities to be lured into the speed, colour, and connectedness of the technology.

As society changes technology, so too does technology change society (Chandler, 2007). However, some faculty members are trying to replicate traditional teaching and assessment methods using technology and in some cases, it is not working. For example, incorporating online quizzes designed to test a person’s recall of weekly reading assignments. There does not appear to be a deep understanding of how the implementation of the laptop and technology has changed the learning environment. These students are all connected and technology is a key means of communication. It appears there is a battle of control where the faculty are trying to
control how students learn and are assessed, whereas students are manipulating their
environment to retain their ability to share and communicate. If the university was to put controls
on technology will the amount of cheating decrease? Participants admit that technology makes it
easier to cheat, but when technology was removed, they still continued to cheat. In fact,
participants in this study reported less cheating at university which, by comparison, has a high
level of technology than at high school where the technology level was significantly lower.
Students did report reduced cheating and respect for the faculty member who used security
software during a test to limit what students could do on their laptops.

It is apparent that the technology, the role of the faculty member and academic
dishonesty are interconnected. For these students, the use of technology is all they know; it is
how they live in their world. Technology, in this case, because of its prevalence, provides both
advantages and disadvantages to faculty members. It can provide interactive, engaging learning
environments but also make it easier to cheat particularly when faculty members use
technological means for traditional methods of assessment, such online quizzes in classrooms of
300 students. Some faculty, who are digital immigrants, are not as comfortable in this
environment. It would appear that some professors have a lower level of comfort and knowledge
regarding the use of technology as a teaching and learning tool. This lack of competency around
the use of technology provides opportunities for students to easily develop systems and methods
to take advantage of the situation. The use of technology may make it easier to cheat, but it
would appear they would cheat anyway, whether technology was present or not. As the teaching
of the content evolves, it would appear that the assessment of the knowledge has not. Faculty
members must understand the limitations of technology and not put unrealistic expectations on
students – that the online quizzes be done individually or in environments that invite cheating.
Because the use of technology is relatively new (six years at this university), there are opportunities to explore new methods of assessing learning instead of struggling with traditional methods in a new technological context.

**Essence**

A final research question to be addressed by this study is, “what is the overall essence of academic dishonesty?” This is a difficult question as academic dishonesty is an issue of inconsistencies. All the participants stated that cheating was wrong, however, the research revealed that all but two of the students were participating in some form of academic dishonesty. 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.

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, et al.,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. Stress can impact a person’s ability to perceive risk, make decisions and foresee beyond the immediate problem at hand. 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.

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.

Most of the cheating was accomplished through the use of technology. Students were quick to take advantage of situations where technology made cheating a simple endeavour. They tried to manipulate their environment to ensure they could 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, particularly within their academic groups. Cheating to benefit the individual was not acceptable, but cheating to assist others in the program was considered
normal. As such, the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lifeworlds of these nursing students was: caring, sharing, coping and control.

Summary

Overall, participants in this study described their experiences of academic dishonesty. For all but one student, academic dishonesty is part of the lived experience of nursing students, whether one participates or witnesses the cheating. Students had a narrow view of what academic dishonesty was, associating it mainly with plagiarism. Some forms of academic dishonesty had become custom within their program such as the collaborative nature of online quizzes. When steps were taken to try and ensure quizzes were completed on an individual basis, students continued to maneuver around these attempts in an effort to continue to communicate and share the questions and answers. For these students, online quizzes were to be completed as a group. 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. 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. 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.
Yet, it is only dishonesty if one understands the full scope of the dishonest behaviour, and then admits that one has cheated. In conclusion, the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students at this Ontario university is represented by these four elements: caring, sharing, coping and control.
Chapter 10 – Conclusion

Academic dishonesty is a complicated issue full of inconsistencies. Academic dishonesty is a growing problem in postsecondary institutions. According to researchers, nursing students are cheating at levels similar to other disciplines. This is disconcerting as nursing is considered an ethical profession and cheating in nursing studies may lead to a deficit of knowledge that could have an impact on patient care. While there have been many quantitative studies conducted on postsecondary students regarding academic dishonesty, by comparison, there were relatively few qualitative studies. This qualitative study of nursing students revealed underlying attitudes and influences that have led to these cheating behaviours.

The purpose of this study was not to justify students’ cheating behaviours, but to develop an understanding of how and why those behaviours were occurring. This study provided a thick description of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of 11 nursing students at an Ontario university. The descriptions were analyzed to identify the commonalities and themes found within the data. By examining the lifeworlds of the participating nursing students, these data revealed some of the underlying influences, perceptions and attitudes concerning academic dishonesty, and in turn, add to the scholarship in this field.

The methodology used for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology is a human science where the researcher engages in a discourse with the participant to ascertain the description of a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). With hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher interprets the descriptions to discover shared commonalities,
themes and meanings of the phenomenon. In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology enabled an interpreted thick description of academic dishonesty based on the interviews with 11 nursing students.

**Research Questions**

The central guiding question was “What is the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lived experience of nursing students at an Ontario university?” In an effort to describe the meaning, subsequent questions were used to direct the research and analysis.

*What commonalities emerge from these experiences?*

This study determined that nursing students at a particular Ontario university were committing academic dishonesty; however, there were inconsistencies in their attitudes and in their behaviours. Although students said that cheating was wrong, I am of the opinion that all but two of the students were being academically dishonest in some aspect of their studies. Students had a limited knowledge of academic dishonesty and its associated university policies and penalties. They defined academic dishonesty mainly in terms of plagiarism. As such, a student’s decision to cheat can lead to a reduced grade, suspension, or a deficit of knowledge when caring for a patient, yet it would appear that these penalties were not considered when deciding to cheat. According to the nursing students, students are being academically dishonest particularly with online quizzes, sharing papers, in group activities, and less frequently, in clinical. Students neutralized their behaviours with statements such as, this is the way things are done, that it had been unintentional, it only occurred on small assignments, or because the faculty member made it so easy.
What themes emerge from these experiences?

Three themes emerged from the research—culture, stress and technology. Watson’s philosophy of caring (1985) plays an important role in the development of these nursing students. It requires the nurse to make an effort to understand the patient from the patient’s point of view setting aside judgment. Nursing curriculum has evolved from one of self sacrifice to recognizing the autonomy of both the patient and the nurse. Nurses are to acknowledge that patients have the right to determine their own level of cure and care, and the nurse is to respect and honour those decisions. These caring theories emerged as students described their experiences with academic dishonesty. For the most part, students remained non-judgmental in that it was a person’s own decision whether he/she decided to cheat. Some students expressed sympathy for the dishonest students for having chosen cheating as a solution to a problem. In an effort to assist students who were struggling, students regularly “shared” papers and assignments with one another. In some instances, they sent their friends the passwords to in-class quizzes, sent each other quizzes and quiz answers. Loyalty to the group is a trait commonly found in collectivist cultures. Students in this study described aspects of their culture that are similar to those found within collectivist cultures, such as the priority of group goals over individual goals. For example, one student reported that a person in one of her classes potentially risked his or her exam grade and perhaps the course by stealing a mid-term exam that he/she had already written to give it to students in two upcoming classes. By comparison, few incidences of cheating were reported that strictly improved an individual’s situation, but rather cheating was conducted collaboratively to improve the overall results of all in the program. For example, if one person gets access to a quiz, then it is sent to all students. Whether a student chooses to use it or not is an individual decision.
Each student reported being under heavy stress. They reported being stressed due to the workload requirements of the program, financial obligations, pressure from parents and the program to succeed, in clinical placements and in maintaining their nursing skills. They also reported that many students had difficulty in making the transition from high school to the university nursing program. In high school, cheating was rampant and, therefore, students may not have developed all the academic skills required to be successful in the program. The prospect of failing a course and losing a year of study or failing the program may have an impact on a student’s potential earning power. As a result, failing has a significant impact financially on both the student and perhaps his or her family. When students are stressed, their decision-making ability as well as their ability to assess risk becomes hampered. Students in this study reported that stress has led students to commit academic dishonesty as, “desperate people do desperate things.”

As these students were learning a technologically-enhanced environment, it is of no surprise that much of the academic dishonesty reported was conducted through technological means. However, when impediments were placed to restrict the use of technology for cheating, students used traditional methods of cheating, such as telling their friends what was on the test. When faculty members did not have a sophisticated knowledge of the use of technology for learning and assessment, students were quick to manipulate their environment to ensure they were still able to communicate and share information with each other. Technology was not the reason they were cheating, but it made it easier, particularly when faculty engaged in traditional methods of assessment in this high-tech learning environment.
How does the students’ lifeworlds influence the meaning of the academic dishonesty?

The lifeworlds of the nursing students was a result of their experiences at a place and time as well as through language. Students in the program are engaged in similar experiences in stressful academic conditions. For the most part, they are isolated from other students. Within weeks of starting the program they turn to each other to cope with workload issues. They begin assisting each other but it becomes clear that loyalty to the group or to their fellow students can progress to academic dishonesty as students empathize with each other’s experiences and participate in activities, such as paper swapping or emailing quizzes, in an effort to ease the academic burden of their fellow students. These students are being taught to care, to empathize with those who are in trouble, and to assist that person in an effort to make things better. For students in this study, helping one another was not considered cheating.

What is the overall essence of the experience?

This study suggested that situation factors found within their learning culture played 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. Stress can impact a person’s ability to perceive risk, make decisions and foresee beyond the immediate problem at hand. It may be for this reason that students were not able to see the potential impact of their cheating behaviours on patients. The additional stress experienced in clinical practice fostered deep bonds between students as they shared their experiences. 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. In some cases, students
understood that this was academic dishonesty, yet in other situations, they did not perceive their actions as cheating. Most of the cheating was accomplished through the use of technology. Students were quick to take advantage of situations where technology made cheating a simple endeavour. They tried to manipulate, or control, their environment to ensure they could 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, particularly within their academic groups. As such, the meaning of academic dishonesty as part of the lifeworlds of these nursing students was: caring, sharing, coping and control.

**Recommendations**

Much of the literature concerning academic dishonesty and postsecondary students are quantitative studies that focus on traits of students who cheat such as age, gender, and attitudes. Students who cheat are considered morally deficient (Austin & Brown, 1999; Bolkan, 2006; Stergold, 2004; Rabi, et al., 2006). Literature from other disciplines such as social psychology (Kohn, 2007), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1930) recognized the role of situation in a person’s ability to understand and react. Kohn suggests that cheating may be more indicative of a flawed educational system than a student’s character (2007). He made the observation that cheating is pervasive throughout the school system, that acts of cheating are not unique, yet are treated on an individual basis. The purpose of this study was not to justify student academic dishonesty, but to develop an understanding around the students’ perceptions concerning academic dishonesty. I have suggested that academic dishonesty is a reaction to their learning culture. The meaning can be conceived as one where students care for each other and, therefore, share resources. They are coping with a stressful learning environment and are trying to exert
some control over that environment through technology. What is required is a closer examination of the learning environment to reduce the perceived need to cheat.

The university and the nursing program should work at creating a culture that embraces academic integrity. At the moment, students are unsure about what it means to be a student with integrity. This study has demonstrated that nursing students in the BScN program do not have a comprehensive understanding of academic dishonesty. It is an issue many are acquainted with in first year, but after that year, academic dishonesty is not fully addressed. For the most part, students in this study associated academic dishonesty with plagiarism. It is not enough to assume that they have that background in academic integrity coming from high school. As I have noted, high school is rife with cheating and does not provide a good foundation for integrity. The concept of integrity should be interwoven into the curriculum much in the way that caring is now. This may mean providing students with examples and studies of integrity throughout their education. It may also mean examining the impact of dishonesty within the nursing program and beyond of it. If the university requires that students act in a particular way, students must understand the issues and why such behaviour is important. One cannot expect to make decisions without having the background knowledge and experience on which to make the decision. The issue must be consistently communicated and regarded throughout their studies. Reaction to academic dishonesty should be consistent and firm and leave no doubt in the students’ minds as to the importance of honesty and integrity in academic work. As students are being enculturated into the world of nursing, so too do they need to be encultured into the world of academia.

Students need to be more aware of what academic dishonesty is, the university policies and the penalties. It also requires that the university administration, the program, faculty members and staff also to exhibit high levels of integrity. Modeling plays a significant role in
developing understanding. Students mentioned faculty members whose lessons were not complete or used PowerPoint presentations with images copied from the Internet. Co-assigned nurses took advantage of students working in clinical. One student expressed frustration when a preceptor refused to take action regarding a student who consistently did not complete the research required for clinical duties. Students have to reconcile these inconsistencies and it requires interpretation and direction from the program.

Faculty members play a significant role in enabling and preventing academic dishonesty. First, they must recognize their role in academic dishonesty. Many studies report that most faculty members believe that academic dishonesty is a student problem in that it is a result of low moral standards. Other studies would dispute this statement as students with low moral reasoning are cheating as much as those with high moral reasoning. The focus of academic dishonesty should shift from the traits of individual students to the situations which provide the students opportunities for cheating. Students report that faculty reaction to academic dishonesty is inconsistent in that when cases of cheating are discovered, some faculty members do nothing while others may penalize with a reduced grade. Emphasis should be put on honesty, rather than dishonesty. Students need to learn what it means to be an honest student – the how to rather than the don’t do.

I would recommend that faculty members review the outcomes of assignments to determine how they can be achieved or if they are repetitive. For example, there was a very strong reaction from students regarding the amount of group work in this program. One should consider the purpose of the group assignments. Have these outcomes been met in other assignments in the program? Are there alternative methods of evaluation that faculty members could utilize to ensure these outcomes don’t put the burden of work of just a couple of students?
As well, if “sharing” of assignments between semesters and years is an issue, faculty members should change the assignments to ensure they cannot be shared.

Although research into academic dishonesty has been intense for the past two decades, statistics show that self-reported cheating incidences are increasing. The cheating problem has not improved when considering the activities are taking place primarily in traditional, face-to-face classrooms. As classrooms and learning become more technologically sophisticated, the problem appears to be escalating as technology makes it easier for students to plagiarize or share information. Educators have been unable to resolve the problem of cheating in traditional learning environments which makes technological ones even more puzzling and confusing. There’s little doubt that we are living through a revolutionary period in education where technology has changed how students interact with the professor, the content and with each other. As such, using technological means to replicate traditional learning or assessment methods may not be the best way of using the technology.

Students in the BScN program display tendencies similar to those found within collectivist cultures. Members of collectivist cultures put group goals ahead of individual goals. They are concerned about relationships. The students in this study displayed loyalty to the group when they assisted each other in the completion of assignments and quizzes. They refused to go against the “unwritten code” where one does not report a fellow student for dishonesty, both in class and in clinical settings. The nursing program should consider how collectivist cultures solve problems. Students should play a significant role in determining or recognizing the extent of the problem, its implications and be the ones who determine the solutions. It should come from the bottom up rather than the top down. The program needs to begin developing a culture of integrity that fully involves students as well as the program administration and faculty. The
program should develop an academic integrity committee of students, perhaps elected, with a Chair who visits each classroom, holds integrity events, and produces written materials that are front and centre of every piece of communication that students see. Academic dishonesty within the nursing program is not, for the most part, an individual endeavour but a collectivist one. As such the answers may rest with collectivist solutions, one that recognizes the importance of the relationships between students and the importance students place on preserving those relationships.

All students reported being under extreme stress. Stress can impact a person’s ability to make a decision and evaluate risk. Is there something the program can be doing to reduce the stress levels of students? The four students who had university degrees from other universities reported that the requirements for this program were higher than what they had previously experienced. Is there a way of achieving the outcomes of the program in ways that would also reduce stress on students?

Watson outlines two methods of intervention for assisting those under stress - interventions to change perceptions and interventions that change behaviours (1985). To intervene and change perceptions, and therefore lower stress, she recommends developing teaching and learning strategies in combination with other supports as needed, such as counseling or emotional support. Teaching and learning strategies could include, for example, greater emphasis on integrity in academia; what acts or behaviours are considered cheating and what are not; strategies to improve academic skills; strategies to cope in stressful situations. To intervene to change behaviours requires that the person learn “anticipatory coping” (1985, p. 261) strategies where the stress is reduced by preparing for it. This two-pronged approach may be one part of a larger strategy for contending with academic dishonesty.
In preparing a strategy and plan to improve the matter of academic dishonesty within the nursing program, I recommend following what Watson described as the “Nursing Process” (1985, p. 65). The Nursing Process is research focused as it combines scientific problem-solving with caring factors, (for example, understanding the issue from other’s points of view, remaining non-judgmental, development of a helping-trust relationship, etc.) The Nursing Process is a four-stage process involving assessment, development of the plan, intervention and evaluation. Assessing the issue involves qualitative methods such as identification and observation of the issue as well as literature review. It requires the conceptualization of a framework in which to assess the problem. From this framework, a hypothesis is developed and the variables that will be examined are defined. Using the framework, a plan is developed to determine how the variables will be examined including what data will be collected. Intervention is the implementation of the plan. It also includes collection of data as a result of the intervention. Evaluation is the process of analyzing the data including the effects of intervention. The results are interpreted. The evaluation may necessitate additional hypotheses and strategies be developed. With a team that involves representatives of the nursing educational community, the team can use the research provided by this study to begin the process of developing a plan using the methods of Watson’s Nursing Process to begin to resolve issues around academic dishonesty.

Further research

Although much research into academic dishonesty has been conducted, students are reported to be cheating at increasing rates. Honour codes, stiffer penalties, notations on transcripts have not been effective in reducing the levels of academic dishonesty to any significant degree. Much of the research has been on the characteristics of cheating students. Perhaps the emphasis of the research needs to change in that researchers should be determining
the situation in which students find they are driven to or able to cheat. This program has opportunities to experiment with new learning techniques using technology. This is fertile ground for research which can return data on learning, assessment and academic dishonesty.

Another area of interest would entail a qualitative study of business students. Research has shown that business students report a higher level of academic dishonesty than students in other disciplines (Fuller & Luckett, 1998). Furthermore, the statements students use to justify dishonest behaviour in school has been equated to those used in business environments (Nonis & Swift, 2001). Considering the world’s economic situation, and scandals involving large companies such as Enron and WorldCom, an investigation into the attitudes and perceptions of business students and integrity might provide interesting insights.

**Validity of Study**

The purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of academic dishonesty as perceived by the BScN students. The interviews provided rich detailed descriptions of how and why students were cheating as well as details of their lifeworlds. This data were reduced to determine the commonalities, themes and the overall essence of the descriptions. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Each participant received a copy of his or her interview transcript and was given the opportunity to contact me with any concerns. None of the participants reported any concerns. Much of the findings were supported by previous studies, for example, the neutralizing statements students provided for cheating, the types of stress experienced by nursing students, and McCabe’s finding that nursing students cheat more collaboratively than individually when compared to students in other disciplines. This study also revealed other aspects of academic dishonesty by nursing students such as the difficulty many students experience transitioning from high school to university, the pressure parents and the
program put on students for marks, as well as the traits similar to those found within collectivist cultures. It examined how language and curriculum, such as the theories of caring, impact their learning culture. However, as with studies of this type, the data provided cannot be extrapolated beyond the scope of this study. It illuminates the meaning of academic dishonesty for these 11 students at this university. It is a contribution to the scholarship in this field, but more research needs to be completed to determine if the data revealed in this study is consistent within other nursing faculties. It provides the foundation for continuing studies in this field which do not simply focus on characteristics of students, but also of situations in which the cheating occurs.

Summary

In conclusion, academic dishonesty is an issue of concern to educators, one that may never be solved. However, as researchers continue to study the issue from different perspectives it may assist us in our understanding of the issue. As Kohn states, the fact that cheating continues to increase may not be indicative of immoral students but of an educational system that is not effective (2007). This study has determined that nursing students are cheating. Their understanding of academic dishonesty was limited. However, their lifeworlds reveal a culture filled with stress. The students have developed numerous methods to cope such as the development of academic groups, sharing assignments and quizzes. They use technology to communicate and share. Tactics used to limit the interaction through technology compels students to manipulate their learning environment to overcome those restrictions. Students are being taught to empathize and care, and they implement those philosophies with their fellow students as well as with patients. Caring includes helping fellow students with many aspects of the program and as such, caring is not considered cheating. The meaning of academic dishonesty as perceived by nursing students is caring, sharing, coping and control.
References


Appendix A: Demographic Information Survey

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. In an effort to obtain participants who are representative of the diversity of students at your university, we are asking volunteers to complete the short survey below. This information will be kept confidential.

1. Are you a full-time student in the B.Sc.N. program at UOIT? Yes  No

2. What year are you in? First  Second  Third  Fourth

3. How old are you?

4. What sex are you? Female  Male

5. What is your ethnicity?

6. Would you describe yourself as a student whose first language is not English? Yes  No

7. If you wish to disclose - do you have a disability that impacts your learning? Yes  No
Appendix B - Initial Email Requesting Volunteers

Date:

Dear Nursing Students:

This is an invitation to participate in a research study that I am conducting as part of my PhD studies. The purpose of the study is to provide a description of academic dishonesty as it is perceived by students in the B.Sc.N. program. This study is not to determine if you have committed academic dishonesty or if your friends have, but rather it is to determine what your understanding of academic dishonesty is and how that understanding developed.

I am hoping to interview three students from each of the four years in the B.Sc.N. program. The interview should not take any more than two hours of your time and will be conducted in a private room here on campus. Participants will be asked a variety of questions, for example, what is it like to be a nursing student and what is your understanding of academic dishonesty. The purpose of the study is to better understand you, the student, and find out what your beliefs are around the topic of academic dishonesty. Participation is voluntary and all information you provide is considered completely confidential. No information provided will be directly associated with any student.

If you decide that you would like to participate, please reply to this email by …… You will then be sent a short survey asking for demographic data. It is hoped that the participants in this study reflect as much as possible the diversity of students found within this program. I will be the only person who has access to the information collected in this study.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study, if you are uncomfortable with any question or aspect of the process you are free to withdraw at any time. Participants will not be compensated for their participation. This research study has received approval from both the University of Toronto and …… research ethics boards. If you have any concerns, you can contact my research supervisor, Prof. Clare Brett by email at cbrett@oise.utoronto.ca or by phone at 416.978.0132.

Here’s a little information about me. My name is Maureen Wideman and I am working on a PhD in Education from the Ontario Institute in Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I work for …… in the …………… as an instructional designer. I am also a former instructor for the Faculty of Health Sciences.

I hope this study will increase our understanding of academic dishonesty as it is perceived by nursing students and contribute to the scholarship in this field.

I am very much looking forward to conducting this research. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Maureen Wideman
Appendix C – Ethics Approval

University of Toronto
Office of the Vice-President, Research
Office of Research Ethics

PROTOCOL REFERENCE #22550
May 30, 2008

Prof. Clare Brett
Dept. of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

Ms. Maureen Wideman
Dept. of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

Dear Prof. Brett and Ms. Wideman:

Re: Your research protocol entitled “Academic Dishonesty and the Nursing Student: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study”

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We are writing to advise you that a member of the Social Sciences, Humanities & Education Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research study, for a period of one year, under the REB’s expedited review process. Ongoing projects must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

The following consent documents (revised April 21, 2008) have been approved for use in this study; Appendix A: Initial Email Requesting Volunteers, Appendix C: Consent Form and Appendix E: Request to Email UOIT Nursing Students.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]
Research Ethics Coordinator

McMurrich Building, 12 Queen’s Park Cres. W, 3rd Floor Toronto, ON M5S 1S8
TEL: 416-946-3273 FAX: 416-946-5763 EMAIL: ethics.review@utoronto.ca