

The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead

David Callahan, 2004, Harcourt, Inc., 353 pages.

reviewed by Debra Comer

In *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong To Get Ahead*, David Callahan, co-founder and research director of Manhattan-based public policy think-tank Demos, demonstrates how cheating has infested American life. Callahan draws from recent newspaper articles, industry reports, and nationwide surveys to document professional athletes' use of performance-enhancing steroids, reporters' disguise of fiction as journalism, physicians' promotion of drugs of questionable efficacy in exchange for payments from pharmaceutical companies, students' cheating on exams and submitting plagiarized work, and music fans' piracy of CDs on the internet, as well as theft by employees and high-stakes corporate crime.

Callahan characterizes this pervasive cheating across occupations and institutions as a "profound moral crisis that reflects deep economic and social problems in American society" (p. 13). He asserts that: "Americans are not only cheating more in many areas but are also feeling less guilty about it. When 'everybody does it,' or imagines that everybody does it, a cheating culture has emerged" (p. 13). He attributes the cheating culture to a confluence of developments over the past quarter-century: a misguided conservative agenda, focused myopically on restoring traditional values threatened by sex, drugs, and rock and roll lyrics while ignoring the evils of "greed, envy, materialism, and inequality" (p. 14); unabashed materialism, ever aggravated by media depictions of extreme wealth; increased competitiveness and job insecurity that pressure companies and employees to do whatever they can (get away with) to succeed, coupled with huge payoffs for the few victors; lower risks of being caught and punished for wrongdoing, resulting from weakened governmental agencies; and individualism to the point of coldhearted selfishness.

Moreover, Callahan argues, cheating amplifies discrepancies between the richest and poorest Americans. The former wield their money to influence regulators and policy-makers and to dodge prosecution, thereby cheating with immunity and impunity. Meanwhile, the latter are more apt to be penalized for smaller-scale cheating, such as cable theft or auto insurance fraud, which they may commit to reduce the inequity and disenfranchisement they experience while comparing themselves to those economically better off. Callahan reports, for example, that the IRS wastes little of its energy on the tax scams of the wealthy, who can afford to pay for the advice and protection of clever accountants and tax attorneys to get them off the hook. Instead, the agency pursues the tax evasion of those in lower socioeconomic groups.

To explain the cheating culture, Callahan brings in research findings from such disciplines as economics, political science, and sociology. His incorporation of the relevant social science literature is commendably comprehensive, but there are two notable omissions. First, because Callahan emphasizes the problems of unrestrained markets and materialism, it is surprising that he does not draw from the budding field of consumer psychology. Empirical evidence of the negative impact of acquisitiveness on psychological wellbeing would have augmented his arguments about cheating in the culture where having the largest SUV and the smallest cellphone confers status.¹ Second, given his attention to corporate fraud (he discusses how companies misrepresent their earnings, accountants sign off on deceptive numbers, and analysts inflate stock ratings to curry favor with investing banking clients), his consideration of the business ethics scholarship is insubstantial. He includes McCabe and Treviño's research on academic dishonesty, but not their equally relevant work on the effect of organizational factors on employees' (un)ethical behavior.² Ashforth and Anand's (2003) exhaustive review of the normalization of organizational corruption would also have strengthened Callahan's position.³

Having delivered a coherent treatise on cheating as a consequence of socioeconomic and political factors, Callahan concludes with a chapter of recommendations for diffusing the cheating culture. His preceding chapters painstakingly present fact-filled arguments to mount a cogent case about the relationships among all manners of cheating. In contrast, this final chapter is an unpersuasive assortment of less developed ideas. The broad-stroked prescriptions offered to remedy America's cheating culture seem particularly idealistic and ineffectual in light of Callahan's earlier arguments about the weakness of government to curb cheating. For instance, he suggests governmental spending "to help ensure affordable health care, child care, and housing" (p. 268) and to bolster regulatory agencies, and luxury taxes to curb excessive consumerism. But one wonders how these economic modifications will come to pass if, as he asserts repeatedly, the government is in the back pocket of the wealthiest Americans. Likewise, it seems doubtful that

another of his proposals, making higher education more accessible (albeit a laudable goal), would erode cheating – after reading his accounts of high school students’ cheating to gain access to elite colleges and of college students’ cheating to secure top jobs or spots in prestigious graduate programs. Recognizing the difficulties of effecting change at the societal level, Callahan advises the reader to make a personal dent in the cheating culture by refraining from dishonesty and encouraging friends and family to follow suit. Yet, because the macro-level conditions his book illuminates make it disadvantageous to play fair, his individually-oriented instructions to “go ahead and be a chump” (p. 293) are unlikely to have a meaningful impact. After eight chapters raise the reader’s consciousness about the cheating culture, the ninth is discouraging and frustrating.

Nonetheless, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong To Get Ahead* cannot be discarded simply because Callahan is unable to deliver a ready solution to the cultural woes he identifies and documents so ably. His data and arguments are compelling, and the very lack of a quick fix provides further evidence of the formidable, entrenched nature of the problem. The book is solid enough for a class in social stratification, yet the accessible writing style makes it suitable for a broader readership. Callahan provides much food for thought for social scientists, policy makers, and citizens

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¹ Kasser, T. (2002). *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; and Kasser, T., & Kanner, A.D. (Eds.). (2004). *Psychology and consumer culture: The struggle for a good life in a materialistic world*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

² See, for example, Treviño, L.K., Butterfield, K.D., & McCabe, D.L. (1998). The ethical context in organizations: Influences on employee attitudes and behaviors. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 8 (3), 447-476.

³ Ashforth, B.E., & Anand, V. (2003). The normalization of corruption in organizations. *Research in organizational behavior*, 25, 1-52.

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