

THE CHEATING CULTURE

by David Callahan
Harcourt, Inc., 2004

- In America's new winner-take-all society there is infinitely more to gain, and to lose, when it comes to getting into the right college, right job, or otherwise becoming a star achiever.
- Higher inequality has led to more divisions between Americans and weakened the social fabric – undermining the notion that we're all “in it together” and bound by the same rules
- Inequality is also reshaping our politics as wealthier Americans get more adept at turning money into influence – twisting rules to their benefit and escaping punishment when they break the rules
- The dramatic upward movement of wealth to top earners has resulted in less wealth for everyone else. Anxiety about money is rife, even among solidly middle-class Americans.
- The character of Americans has changed. Individualism and self-reliance have morphed into selfishness and self-absorption; competitiveness has become social Darwinism; desire for the good life has turned into materialism, aspiration has become envy.
- We're starting to feel like a corrupt banana republic – one of those places where a rapacious oligarchy sets the moral tone by ripping off the entire country and those below follow suit with corruption of every conceivable kind.
- People place themselves at a disadvantage if they play by official rules rather than the real rules.
- Somehow, we failed to see an obvious downside of lean and mean – that when you put people under pressure and give them a choice of preserving either their integrity or their financial security; many will go for the money.
- In a survey of 198 top athletes conducted in 1995, more than half indicated they would take a drug that would help them win every competition or a five-year period – even if they knew that at the end of five years the drug's side effects would kill them.
- Absolute well-being doesn't matter as much as it should. Most of us would rather earn \$100,000 a year in an organization where nobody makes more than \$90,000 than \$110,000 at a job where all our colleagues are paid \$200,000.
- What is the measure of nationhood when the divisions between neighborhoods require guards and fences to keep out other citizens? Can the nation fulfill its social contract in the absence of social contact?
- Two decades of change in American economic life – and a steady string of victories for laissez-faire ideologues – hasn't just shifted the financial incentives for individuals or the operating strategies of business organizations. It has deeply affected American culture overall, reshaping nearly everyone's values. And not for the better.
- As we go through life, the culture's prevailing values, or social norms, shape our ideas about what constitutes the good life, how hard we should labor and to what end, how we should dress and groom ourselves, and much more. Kohlberg described the most advanced type of ethical reasoning and concluded that the majority of people never get to this stage and tend to have ideas about right and wrong aimed at winning the approval of others and keeping themselves out of trouble.
- Values can be shaped by social movements, religious awakenings, intellectual activism, and celebrity-driven fads. Mass media has made it easier than ever for the values of a society to change quickly.
- I see three changes as especially connected to the rise in cheating: individualism has morphed into a harder-edged selfishness; money has become more important to people; and harsher norms of competition have spread, while compassion for the weaker or less capable has waned.
- The move away from an ethos of sacrifice to one of personal self-interest – to a new society of individuals – triggered a social earthquake in Western nations. It was a psychological reformation as powerful and decisive as the religious reformation of the 16th century.
- In the late 1960s, the most important goal of college freshmen was “developing a meaningful philosophy of life, cited by over 80% of entering students. The centrality of this goal waned steadily over the next twenty years, reaching an all-time low of 39% in 1987.

- Teens and tweens are more vulnerable and more open to a warped relationship that the brands are selling to them. It's an emptied-out relationship where they pour themselves into a brand and see themselves through object, rather than through people or ideas.
- Americans tend to make moral judgments about people based upon their level of economic success.
- Every year, GE ranked its entire labor force and then fired the bottom 10%.
- Making money for the company and yourself was the overriding criteria by which everyone at Enron was judged.
- The IRS suggested that the likely cumulative value of tax avoidance since 1972 was roughly equivalent to 60% of the 1990 federal debt.
- Social science, long a central tool of pragmatic reformers who first objectively studied problems and then developed solutions to them, is increasingly used as a weapon by wealthy elites to get their way. The media, committed to telling both sides of any story, play right into this strategy by placing the views of independent experts and corporate-funded intellectuals on an equal plane.
- People are prone to invent their own morality when the rules don't seem fair to them. This tendency explains a lot of cheating in America today.
- There are roughly four reasons why people obey rules. First, we may toe the line because the risks of breaking the rules outweigh the benefits. Second, we might be sensitive to social norms, or peer pressure – we follow the rules because we don't want to be treated as a pariah. Third, we may obey rules because they agree with our personal morality. And fourth, we may obey rules because they have legitimacy in our eyes – because we feel that the authority making and enforcing the laws is just and ultimately working in our long-term interests.
- The social contract will break down when those who play by the rules feel mistreated, and those who break the rules get rewarded – which has been happening constantly in recent years
- A review of 2.6 million job applications in 2002, by a national firm that conducts background checks, revealed that 44% contained at least some lies.
- A consistent finding of the research on academic cheating is that there are few consequences for those suspected of cheating. In a 1999 survey of 1,000 faculty at twenty-one colleges, a third of professors said they were aware of cheating in their classes but didn't stop it.
- The research of Donald McCabe and others shows clearly that honor codes and/or a serious institutional commitment to academic integrity reduce cheating. Still, many universities haven't enacted honor codes, or made such a commitment.
- While cheating does boil down to choices made by individuals, these choices are heavily shaped by cultural, political, and economic forces. Even people determined to lead a life of integrity may find themselves cheating at different moments – and rationalizing it with surprising ease.
- Cheating thrives where unfairness reigns, along with economic anxiety.
- We are learning once more – as leaders like Teddy Roosevelt learned a century ago – that our noblest aspirations for America cannot be realized when we allow economic competition to grow too harsh.
- We need to make work pay.
- We need to expand access to higher education.
- Other ailments must also be attacked, especially pervasive materialism, extreme individualism, and the social alienation that thrives amid weak communities and broken families. These conditions degrade our collective sense of moral purpose – the sense that we are part of something larger and that fellow citizens are teammates in this quest. Absent such shared moral purpose, it seems rational to look after yourself and forget about everyone else.
- There is the real potential for growing ethnic tensions in the US akin to what has occurred in multiethnic countries abroad. If America heads down this road, nothing else we do to foster shared moral community will matter. Social distrust will deepen as people place narrow ethnic self-interest above all else.
- If the next generations of Americans are to help build a more ethical society and sustain it, they must come of age within institutions that are far less tolerant of cheating than today's high schools and universities. They also must learn early on to commit themselves to principles beyond their own individual self-interests.
- The tipping-point phenomenon can go both ways: cheating can become common enough to be normalized and socially acceptable; but it also can turn uncool, thanks to ordinary people who decide to take an active moral leadership role. Each of us has real power to help influence the climate of social norms that surrounds various kinds of cheating. Use that power.