

**To Snitch or Not to Snitch? Applying the Concept of  
Neutralization Techniques to the Enforcement of Occupational Misconduct**

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*My father and mother have taught me these  
two immutable principles– never to lie, never to tattle.*

-General Douglas MacArthur (Rose 1973:178)

Douglas MacArthur, one of the U.S. Military's most decorated generals, made this statement after disobeying orders to disclose the names of cadets guilty of hazing him at West Point.<sup>1</sup> And although he graduated in 1903, the dilemma of whether to tattle remains an issue in both military institutions and other organizational settings that expect members to regulate their own behavior as well as the behavior of their peers (Chambliss 1988; Vaughan 1983).

Systems of self-regulation, or self-policing, assume that organizational members' loyalty towards the institution overrides their loyalty towards peers (Akerstrom 1991). Therefore, when occupational misconduct occurs, individuals should be willing to betray peers to uphold organizational norms.<sup>2</sup> Prior sociological research, however, has also demonstrated that trust and loyalty are particularly significant in places of work: "In our society loyalty, or devoted allegiance to colleagues, has been regarded as an attribute of utmost importance" (Heck 1992:254). Since loyalty and trust often arise out of daily interaction (Akerstrom 1991; Heck 1992; Sztompka 1999), it is quite possible that loyalty toward peers will override loyalty toward an organization or institution. Therefore, deciding how to react to occupational misconduct may be conceptualized as choosing between two conflicting loyalties: loyalty toward the institution of which one is a member and loyalty toward organizational peers (Akerstrom 1991; Pershing 2002). In this situation, betrayal is inevitable. If one chooses to officially react to occupational misconduct, then peer loyalty is betrayed. However, if one decides to remain loyal toward peers,

then organizational loyalty is betrayed.

Aside from current sociological research establishing that self-regulation inevitably involves the act of betrayal, few studies explain how organizational members justify and rationalize their decisions to snitch or not to snitch<sup>3</sup> (Akerstrom 1991; Friedrichs 1996; Heck 1992). And while the concept of neutralization techniques has been traditionally applied in studies of rule-breakers (Sykes and Matza 1957), I suggest that the concept also serves as a useful analytic tool for examining rule-enforcers--specifically, how organizational members respond to the occupational misconduct of their peers in an elite military institution: the United States Naval Academy.

The Naval Academy is the U.S. Department of Defense's service academy for training future Naval and Marine Corps officers. Midshipmen (students) attending the Academy are formally trained and required to monitor both their own behavior as well as the behavior of their peers through a system of self-regulation called the Honor Concept. Because the Naval Academy is an organization that requires peers to monitor one another's behavior and because systems of social control that rely on self-regulation create the ethical dilemma of whether to betray the organization or to betray one's peers, I examine the extent to which organizational members employ techniques of neutralization in explaining their decisions to snitch or not to snitch. Depending on how individuals choose to respond to the misconduct of peers, excuses and justifications may be necessary to preserve either their status within the organization or their relationships with colleagues.

Although the Naval Academy is clearly not representative of other organizations, it affords a rare opportunity to examine a unique case of self-regulation in an environment where

organizational members should be willing to report peers for occupational misconduct. First, unlike the majority of organizations that rely on self-regulation, the Naval Academy mandates that midshipmen enforce the Honor Concept. In other words, organizational members are officially reprimanded when they do not monitor one another's behavior, thereby providing an incentive for midshipmen to snitch on peers. (Refer to the "Research Setting" for more detail about the Naval Academy's Honor Concept).

Second, the Naval Academy is a total institution (Goffman 1961), which means that midshipmen are relatively isolated from the civilian community for four years. From a research standpoint, the benefit of studying a total institution is that it closely approximates a social experiment which allows one to study behavior within a relatively controlled environment. Therefore, the Academy serves as a unique setting in which to examine organizational members' decisions to regulate one another's behavior. In comparison, one of the greatest challenges in studying the regulation of occupational misconduct in other organizational settings is that it is difficult to isolate case studies from the social structure, community, and culture in which they exist (Vaughan 1983).

The primary line of inquiry in the present study is to examine the use of neutralization techniques by rule-enforcers in a system of mandatory self-regulation. In sum, if Naval Academy members are able to neutralize the effects of not responding to peer misconduct, members of other organizational settings are likely to do the same, therefore, calling into question the efficacy of systems of social control that rely on self-regulation. These implications are addressed following a discussion of the findings of my analysis. First, however, prior research on snitches and whistle-blowers, as well as studies that examine the use of accounts and neutralization

techniques, are briefly reviewed.

### **Prior Research on Whistle-Blowers, Informants, and Snitches**

In 1940, Edwin Sutherland introduced the concept of white-collar crime<sup>4</sup> in his presidential address to the American Sociological Society. Since that time, the number of sociological studies devoted to examining what Sutherland referred to as “crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation” (1983:7) has increased. Although the majority of research has examined rule-breakers (Shapiro 1990), increasing emphasis has been given to the enforcement of occupational misconduct since the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, American researchers and media began referring to individuals who reported alleged abuses of power in corporate America as “whistle-blowers” (Glazer and Glazer 1989; Gummer 1985-86).

Subsequently, sociological research has examined the characteristics and motivations of whistle-blowers (Miceli and Near 1991). In some organizations, personal characteristics (e.g. satisfaction with salary, job performance) are related to one’s decision to blow the whistle (Miceli et al. 1991), while research in other settings finds no significant differences between the sociodemographic characteristics of whistle-blowers and “silent-observers” (Rothschild and Miethe 1999: 107). One consistent finding is that the perceived severity of wrongdoing increases the likelihood of an organizational member blowing the whistle (Miceli and Near 1992; Miethe and Rothschild 1994). In these instances, observers are motivated by moral outrage at illegal and potentially dangerous governmental and corporate practices, particularly those that cause bodily harm to either workers or consumers (Miceli et al. 1991). In contrast to “ethical resisters,” other whistle-blowers may be motivated by self-interest rather than principled reasons (Glazer and

Glazer 1989). For example, a whistle-blower may be settling a personal dispute with a colleague or may be attempting to divert attention from their own corporate misconduct (Glazer and Glazer 1989). Motivations for reporting misconduct may, in turn, impact how other organizational members react to the whistle-blower (Friedrichs 1996). For example, whistle-blowers who are motivated by greed and self-interest are more likely to receive negative reactions than those who are motivated by moral or ethical concerns (Miethe and Rothschild 1994).

Prior research has also examined whether organizational conditions are related to whistle-blowing (Miceli and Near 1991). In some cases, organizational conditions increase the likelihood of whistle-blowing. Specifically, reporting corporate misconduct is most likely to occur when potential whistle-blowers work in environments characterized by open access to information and organizational activities, relative autonomy of employees from direct supervision, and organizational norms that support professional expertise and decision-making (Miethe and Rothschild 1994; Perrucci et al. 1980). Organizational conditions may, however, create an atmosphere where the repercussions of blowing the whistle outweigh the motivations for doing so (Miethe and Rothschild 1994; Perrucci et al. 1980). Depending on whether wrongdoing is reported internally (e.g. to supervisors) or externally (e.g. to media), those who choose to blow the whistle may be seen as betraying either peers or the organization. Other factors that may deter potential whistle-blowers include belief in the rationales of the wrongdoer, denial that one either knows enough about the misconduct or has a responsibility to officially react to it, and in some cases fear for one's physical safety (Friedrich 1996).

Regarding the consequences of disclosing wrongdoing, studies show that the degree of

retaliation varies across organizations (Miceli and Near 1992; Miethe 1999). In some organizations, whistle-blowers may be either completely ignored (Miceli and Near 1992) or simply viewed as performing ones job in the case of internal auditors<sup>5</sup> (Miceli et al. 1991). Responses may also range from “ceremonies of status elevation” where the whistle-blower’s behavior is reinforced to “degradation ceremonies” where whistle-blowers are punished and alienated (Glazer 2002: 230). In the latter instances, it is generally not in the best interest of an individual to report corporate misconduct. Repercussions can include social ostracism by co-workers as well as retaliation from management in the form of blacklisting, demotion, and sometimes dismissal (Friedrichs 1996, Glazer and Glazer 1989; MacNamara 1991). Even federal legislation enacted to encourage the reporting of corporate misconduct has met with limited success in protecting whistle-blowers from possible retaliation (Miceli et al. 1999; Miethe and Rothschild 1994; Rothschild and Miethe 1999).

Aside from research on corporate whistle-blowing, other studies that specifically examine betrayals of trust among members within institutional settings have focused on criminal populations (Akerstrom 1991; Mallory 1999). For example, police and prison informants typically exchange information for preferential treatment (e.g., early release from prison, possible immunity from punishment). However, like whistle-blowing, the consequences of informing typically outweigh the benefits (Mallory 1999; Marx 1988). Consequences can range from social isolation to physical danger, including the loss of one’s life (Akerstrom 1991; Huneke 1980-81). Informants, of course, differ from whistle-blowers by virtue of their involvement in illegal activities.

In addition to criminal informants being seen as betrayers, another group within the

criminal justice system deserves mention. Prior research has established that lying, deception, and other forms of occupational misconduct are often an integral part of the work of police officers (Barker and Carter 1990; Skolnick 1982). And, although these behaviors are usually tolerated (Manning 1978), occasionally police officers will officially react to and expose the misconduct of fellow officers. The motives cited for snitching resemble the motivations of corporate whistleblowers and include the following: fearing police administration, retaliating against co-workers, seeking higher esteem through administrative recognition, proving loyalty to the organization, compensating for feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, and responding to pressure from significant others (Heck 1992).

However, rather than being applauded for upholding the law, police who snitch are viewed as deviant because they "knowingly and covertly transmit confidential information from other officers, without their consent, to supervisors" (Heck 1992:254). More importantly, they are regarded as betrayers of peer loyalty because they violate what is referred to as the "Blue Code," or the "code of silence," which not only forbids turning in another officer who is "on the take" but may also include covering up for them (Chambliss 1988; Heck 1992; Manning 1978). With the exception of reporting major illegal activities, however, police do not typically face formal sanctions if they choose not to report the minor transgressions of peers (Heck 1992). This is significantly different than the Naval Academy, which requires organizational members to officially respond to both serious and minor occupational misconduct.

In sum, research on corporate whistle-blowers, criminal informants, and police snitches find that the costs of reporting peers for rule-breaking and occupational misconduct usually outweigh the benefits. Little attention, however, has been given to how whistle-blowers,



informants, and snitches neutralize the effects of either reporting peers for wrongdoing or, conversely, choosing not to report them despite having knowledge of misconduct. In other words, prior research has not applied the concept of neutralization techniques as a tool to examine the explanations of organizational members who are expected to regulate the behavior of their peers.

For the remainder of this article, the term *reporting peers* is used in reference to the process of Academy members turning in other midshipmen for violations of the Honor Concept. The term *snitching* is also used because Naval Academy members typically referred to the act of reporting peers as “snitching.” While reporting peers for honor violations is also clearly a form of *internal whistle-blowing*, it is not used in reference to the findings of the present study because midshipmen did not employ this term. And because the term *informant* has typically been reserved for individuals who are involved, themselves, in illicit activities, it is not applicable to the present study.

### **Prior Research on Accounts and Neutralization Techniques**

In contrast to research on rule-enforcement, considerable attention has been given to the “vocabulary of motive” (Mills 1940) employed by rule-breakers, whereby those who engage in deviant behavior attempt to reinterpret their actions. Numerous sociologists have elaborated upon this concept, beginning with Goffman, who described individuals’ use of “facework” and “impression management” to control the way that others respond to them in social interaction (1959; 1967). He also explained that not only are techniques used to facilitate everyday interaction but are particularly useful in stressful situations, thereby distinguishing between “preventive practices” and “corrective practices” (1971). Following this work, Scott and Lyman

expanded the concept of “accounts” to include both justifications and excuses as ways to neutralize an act or its consequences (1968). Justifications are used when individuals admit responsibility for deviant behavior but deny that it was wrong. In contrast, excuses are used when one admits that the behavior was wrong but denies full responsibility for engaging in it.

In comparison, Sykes and Matza’s version of accounts was formulated in their seminal article on techniques of neutralization employed by juvenile delinquents (1957). They argued that because most delinquents believe that crime is bad and that conventional behavior is good, rationalizations must be used to specify situations where crime is either justified or at least excusable. They outlined five techniques of neutralization that may precede delinquency: (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of the victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. The following phrases, or “slogans”, illustrate each technique and are listed in consecutive order: (1) “I didn’t mean it,” (2) “I didn’t really hurt anybody,” (3) “They had it coming,” (4) “Everybody’s picking on me,” and (5) “I didn’t do it for myself” (Sykes and Matza 1957:669).

In response to Sykes and Matza’s article on delinquency, research today continues to apply the concept to criminal deviance of juveniles (see Bandura 1990; Costello 2000; Minor 1981) and adult perpetrators, including violent offenders (see Eliason and Dodder 1999; Fox 1999; Scully and Marolla 1984). Moreover, contemporary applications have extended the concept of neutralization techniques as a tool for understanding non-criminal deviance, whereby accounts are sometimes used in response to stressful life events and serve as a coping strategy (see Davis 2000; LeBeff et al. 1990). These studies also lend support to Orbuch’s extensive review of the literature on accounts and techniques, where he concludes that the concepts have

been valuable and relevant in examining a variety of sociological issues (1997) while acknowledging that techniques only apply in situations where individuals have moral bonds that require neutralization (Hindelang 1974).

With regard to deviant populations who have moral bonds in need of neutralization, the concept has been particularly useful in understanding how white-collar offenders justify and excuse their behavior. Research has found that, relative to those who engage in street crimes, white-collar offenders are slower to accept responsibility for their crimes and do not typically acknowledge guilt--insisting, for example, that what they did caused no harm (Benson 1985; Jesilow et al. 1992). Cressey's theory of embezzlement demonstrates that because white-collar offenders are conformists in most aspects of their lives, they develop an elaborate set of accounts to explain their criminal behavior both before and after they have engaged in it (1953). Even Sutherland, in his original formulation of white-collar crime, noted that "when they violate the law, they do not conceive of themselves as criminals" (1949:222). Not only, therefore, do accounts serve as an interpretation of their behavior, but more importantly, offenders use them as impression management techniques to exonerate themselves from feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and even anger. In addition, research has also found that the context in which corporate misconduct takes place lends itself to the use of neutralization techniques because, for example, responsibility may be diffused or excused by placing blame on supervisors or others in a position of power (Benson 1985; Denzin 1977).

Although the concept of techniques has been demonstrated to be useful in understanding those who engage in occupational misconduct, it has not been applied to examine those who enforce it, specifically in institutions that rely on self-regulation. This paper explores the use of

neutralization techniques by rule-enforcers, thereby arguing that the “accounts” literature should be expanded to include research on rule-enforcers, not just rule-breakers. The research findings presented here reveal that Sykes and Matza’s original list of neutralization techniques emerges as a conceptual framework for understanding how rule-enforcers explain their decisions to either snitch or not to snitch. Snitching at the Naval Academy involves the betrayal of peers, which may require neutralizing the effects of violating informal norms about peer loyalty. In contrast, not snitching involves the violation of a formal norm, whereby one’s status within the organization could potentially be compromised, which also opens the door for using neutralization techniques.

**Research Setting: The U.S. Naval Academy**

*Leadership is the essence of what we’re about—  
otherwise we’d send everybody to M.I.T. or Stanford.*

-Captain Richard A. Stratton (*U.S. Naval Academy*  
1987:178)

This statement, made by a former Navy Captain, summarizes the dual purpose of the U.S. Naval Academy. The primary purpose is to provide military training. Upon graduation, midshipmen (students attending the Naval Academy) will become either Naval or Marine Corps officers. The Naval Academy also provides a four-year university education and is one of the most selective four-year schools in the United States with only 10% of applicants being admitted into each new class (Ordovensky 1988). While most colleges and universities base admissions solely on scholastic ability, the Naval Academy also takes into consideration physical aptitude

and leadership potential.

Undergoing both military and academic training within a four-year time period means that making it through the Naval Academy is challenging and difficult. The average midshipman takes six classes each semester, reports studying an average of 28 hours per week, and is also required to participate daily in military activities such as formations, drills, and extracurricular sports (U.S. General Accounting Office 1993). Moreover, academic standards are stringent. Only 2% of midshipmen maintain grade point averages between 3.6 and 4.0 while attending the Academy. The majority of midshipmen (56%) have grade point averages below 3.0, and 11% are on academic probation (U.S. General Accounting Office 1993). Academic performance is especially important given that grade point averages affect class ranking which, in turn, has an impact on their choice of jobs as Naval and Marine Corps officers.

Academic and physical rigors are exacerbated by the additional stresses of life inside a total institution, a concept originally coined by Goffman (1961). As Goffman indicated, one of the initial goals of a total institution is to strip down the individual's self-concept and replace it with one useful to the organization, resulting in an ultimate loss of individual rights.<sup>6</sup> At the Naval Academy, the process of deindividualization begins when midshipmen are sworn in as active duty junior military officers their first day at the Academy.<sup>7</sup> When midshipmen are sworn in, they take the "Oath of Office for Midshipmen Candidates" and formally express allegiance to the Naval Academy, the U.S. Navy, and the U.S. Government. In fact, the Naval Academy requires that midshipmen's loyalty lie with these institutions above and beyond any other group, including family, friends, and fellow Naval officers.

Loyalty to the Naval Academy is, in part, demonstrated by upholding the rules, which

includes regulating one's own behavior as well as the behavior of other midshipmen. As previously stated, the primary way in which occupational misconduct is controlled at the Naval Academy is through a formal set of guidelines called the Honor Concept. The Honor Concept states that "midshipmen will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will they mislead or deceive anyone as to known facts" (U.S. Naval Academy 1989:37). To ensure that this system of self-regulation is enforced, midshipmen are officially required to "take action" or respond if they know that an individual has lied, cheated, or stolen.<sup>8</sup> Failing to respond is a violation, in and of itself, and can result in formal punishment.<sup>9</sup> Midshipmen have three courses of action from which to choose: reporting the violation, counseling the alleged offender before reporting the violation, or simply counseling and cautioning the alleged offender. Counseling is an informal response and involves talking with the alleged perpetrator in an effort to prevent future misconduct. In contrast, when an alleged honor violation is reported, the case is investigated and formally processed through a series of stages by the Naval Academy's Honor Organization (a group of appointed midshipmen). If a case reaches an Honor Board (a formal hearing) and the offender is found guilty by a jury of peers, there is only one punishment: "separation" from the Academy (permanent expulsion).<sup>10</sup>

Although the Honor Concept is codified in a relatively straightforward and succinct two-page document (U.S. Naval Academy 1990), midshipmen are required to take a series of leadership and ethics courses, where they receive formal training about how to abide by and enforce the Honor Concept. The goal of these courses is to teach midshipmen about what behaviors constitute honor violations as well as what courses of action are available in responding to potential violations. More importantly, however, midshipmen learn that they are

expected to exercise leadership skills in deciding how to appropriately respond to alleged honor violations.<sup>11</sup>

Because midshipmen are also indoctrinated with values of class loyalty, possessing knowledge of an honor violation presents an interesting ethical dilemma. Loyalty towards peers is usually compatible with loyalty towards the Academy. However, since violations of the Honor Concept present occasions where these loyalties conflict, two questions are raised. First, to what extent do Academy members report the misconduct of peers? Second, depending on midshipmen's responses to wrongdoing, what types of neutralization techniques are employed to explain their decisions to report peers or, conversely, not to report them?

### **Data and Methodology**

The case study reported here is based on an analysis of three data sets: official statistics on honor violations from the Naval Academy's Ethics Advising Office, data from a U.S. General Accounting Office Survey of Naval Academy midshipmen, and semi-structured interview data collected from Naval and Marine Corps officers who graduated from the Naval Academy. Data from all three sources were collected either about or from midshipmen attending the Academy within the same general time frame.

#### *Naval Academy Ethics Advising Office Data*

In 1993, the Naval Academy's Ethics Advising Office provided access to statistics compiled on honor violations for the most recent academic year. These statistics represent official reports of honor violations that allegedly occurred between May 27, 1992 and May 26, 1993 and, therefore, contain information on midshipmen from the graduating classes of 1993 to 1996. These data provide a direct measure of the number and corresponding proportion of

midshipmen reported for alleged violations (occupational misconduct).

*U.S. General Accounting Office Survey*

In November and December of 1990, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) administered a survey to a stratified random sample of midshipmen from the classes of 1991 to 1994. The sample consisted of 82% men, 18% women, 64% whites, and 36% racial minorities. In comparison, the Brigade (Naval Academy student population) included 91% men, 9% women, 81% whites, and 19% racial minorities. The percentages for women include both white and minority women. Similarly, the percentages for racial minorities include both men and women. The survey response rate was approximately 85%, resulting in a sample of 527 midshipmen.

This survey was part of a broader review of all U.S. Department of Defense service academies and covered a variety of topics related to midshipmen's experiences. Items relevant to the present study include questions about midshipmen's involvement with the Honor Concept. For example, midshipmen were asked whether they had reported another midshipman for violations, allowing for comparisons between midshipmen who snitched and those who did not. The limitation of this survey item is that the response categories do not distinguish between midshipmen who did not snitch but counseled and those who neither snitched nor counseled. In other words, midshipmen were asked to respond either "yes" or "no" to the following question: "Have you ever brought charges against another midshipman for violation of the Honor Concept?" Despite this limitation, responses are cross-tabulated with responses to four additional survey items that measure midshipmen's attitudes about the Honor Concept, thereby representing four of Sykes and Matza's five neutralization techniques (refer to Table 1).<sup>12</sup> These



findings can be generalized to all Academy midshipmen and also serve as a validity check for comparable data collected from interviews with graduates.<sup>13</sup>

### *Interviews with Naval and Marine Corps Officers*

In 1994, I interviewed forty Naval and Marine Corps officers who had graduated from the Naval Academy in either 1992 or 1993 (hereafter, referred to as “graduates”). Initial access to Academy graduates was gained through snowball sampling techniques that began with three personal contacts and one individual whom I did not personally know. Although snowball sampling techniques clearly do not produce random population samples, the interview sample is varied with regard to background characteristics such as sex, race/ethnicity, academic major, grade point average upon graduation, and current billet or job in the Navy or Marine Corps. Because women and minorities are under-represented at the Naval Academy, I over-sampled both. Women comprised only 10% of the Naval Academy population during the time this study was conducted.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, I interviewed 14 women, which was 35% of my sample. Four of these women were racial minorities, and 10 were white. Approximately 20% of Naval Academy midshipmen were minorities, while 25% of the graduates I interviewed were minorities. As mentioned, 4 were minority females, and 6 were minority males. The remaining 20 graduates were white males, comprising 50% of the interview sample. In contrast, approximately 70% of Naval Academy midshipmen during the time of this study were white men.

Because the focus of my study is on enforcement of the Honor Concept, graduates directly involved with the Brigade Honor Committee were also over-sampled. Twenty percent (8 of 40) of the graduates were formally involved with the Honor Committee at some point during

their midshipmen careers. In comparison, the GAO survey reveals that only 4% of midshipmen served on the Honor Committee during any given academic year. Midshipmen who serve on the Brigade Honor Committee are also typically higher-ranked than their peers, which is measured by the number of stripes one carries. The majority of midshipmen attending the Naval Academy carry one or two stripes, while those who carry three to six are considered more highly ranked. Approximately 28% (11 of 40) of the graduates carried three or more stripes their first-class (senior) year in contrast to only 10 to 15% of all first-classmen attending the Naval Academy.

These factors are particularly important in terms of addressing a common critique leveled at snowball samples, that relying on informal and personal contacts may produce a sample of peripheral rather than central members of a social group (Weinberg and Williams 1972). Given the disproportionate number of high-ranking graduates as well as a significant number of former Brigade Honor Committee members, there is no reason to assume that the graduates were peripheral members of the Naval Academy. Further, Brigade Honor Committee members should be more willing than other midshipmen to enforce the Honor Concept since appointments to serve on this committee are typically based on military performance grades and rank, both of which serve as indicators of duty and loyalty to the Academy. Women should also be willing to enforce the Honor Concept because they are less likely to be influenced by norms about peer loyalty given their status as a token population in a male-dominated institution where they have not yet been fully integrated (DeFleur 1985; Pershing 2001; Yoder 1983). In sum, the over-sampling of women and Brigade Honor Committee members provides the best case scenario for examining a system of self-regulation, where organizational members should be willing to

respond to occupational misconduct despite the inherent dilemma of betraying peers.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted and all graduates were asked a core set of questions about their personal experiences at the Naval Academy, including detailed questions about the Honor Concept.<sup>15</sup> Depending on their responses, they were asked additional questions that probed for clarity. For example, if a respondent indicated that they had officially reported another midshipman for an honor violation, a detailed account of the experience was requested. Depending on the detail of responses, interviews ranged from 30 to 150 minutes in length, averaging 60 minutes.

Upon reaching data saturation (Adler and Adler 1999),<sup>16</sup> graduates' accounts of how they responded to the occupational misconduct of peers were analyzed. Each of Sykes and Matza's neutralization techniques (1957) emerged,<sup>17</sup> depending on whether graduates snitched, counseled, or did nothing about misconduct. It should be noted that although all graduates contacted agreed to be interviewed, several expressed concern that potential readers would be able to match information and uncover their identities. Therefore, interview data are not referred to by number throughout the remainder of the paper but are, instead, categorized based on how graduates responded to the occupational misconduct of peers.

### **Reactions to Occupational Misconduct**

The interview data indicate that not only had the majority of graduates engaged in honor violations, such as "white lies" and "acceptable forms of cheating like using old papers and test files," but that minor violations are an integral part of Academy life.<sup>18</sup> This means that midshipmen have ample opportunities to respond to the occupational misconduct of peers.

However, both official statistics from the Naval Academy's Ethics Advising Office and the GAO

survey data confirm that reporting peers for occupational misconduct is uncommon. During the 1992/93 academic year, only 3.0% (128 of 4,270) of the Academy population had been officially reported for an honor violation. Likewise, survey data reveal that only 5.1% (27 of 527) of midshipmen had reported another midshipman for an honor violation during their four years at the Academy.

In contrast, the interview data reveal that 8 of 40 graduates (20%) reported at least one peer for occupational misconduct while attending the Academy. Interview data varying from data obtained from the general population of midshipmen is probably due to the sampling of midshipmen who had already graduated. Of the remaining graduates, 20 (50%) counseled and cautioned at least one other midshipman, while 12 graduates (30%) did not respond to the occupational misconduct of other midshipmen. Only one graduate who reported a peer also counseled and cautioned other midshipmen. Neither official statistics nor interview data reveal differences in responses to occupational misconduct based on backgrounds characteristics (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, major). And although it was expected that women and Brigade Honor Committee members would be more likely to report peers, this was not the case.<sup>19</sup>

Graduates may, of course, have responded differently simply because they came into contact with different types of honor violators. In other words, perhaps those who reported peers had contact with the most serious and chronic violators. While this explanation cannot be entirely ruled out, the interviews suggest that other factors may have been more important. Regardless of how graduates responded to misconduct, their explanations were largely couched in terms of neutralization techniques. Graduates who reported occupational misconduct had to neutralize the effects of betraying peers, while those who did nothing had to neutralize the effects

of violating organizational norms that require midshipmen to monitor one another's behavior.

And although graduates who counseled and cautioned peers were enforcing the Naval Academy's Honor Concept, their decision to counsel as opposed to report hinged on the issue of peer loyalty.

### **Counseling Peers**

The GAO survey data indicate that 94.9% (500 of 527) of midshipmen did not report peers for alleged violations of the Honor Concept. However, these data are not able to distinguish those who counseled from those who did nothing about the misconduct of peers. And while the interview data cannot be generalized to all Academy graduates, they reveal that 50% (20 of 40) of graduates chose to respond to occupational misconduct by counseling peers. Moreover, these graduates indicated that they counseled instead of snitched, in part, because the counseling provision was viewed as a way to maintain loyalty to both the Academy and to peers. In fact, during the interviews "friendship or peer loyalty" emerged as the primary consideration in deciding how to respond to occupational misconduct for all 32 graduates who either counseled or chose not to enforce the Honor Concept. Although the interview data cannot explain *why* some graduates counseled while others did not respond to misconduct, they do highlight the centrality of appealing to a higher loyalty (peer loyalty) for graduates who chose not to report peers.

#### *The Appeal to Higher Loyalties*

Sykes and Matza described the appeal to higher loyalties as "sacrificing the demands of the large society for the demands of the smaller group..., or the friendship clique" (1957:669).

They also explained that “deviation from certain norms may occur not because the norms are rejected but because other norms, ... involving a higher loyalty, are accorded precedence” (1957:669). While loyalty toward the Academy and loyalty toward peers are typically seen as compatible, violations of the Honor Concept present occasions where these loyalties conflict. For the 20 graduates who counseled and cautioned peers, the counseling provision was viewed as a way to reconcile this conflict. In other words, peer loyalty was “accorded precedence,” which resulted in counseling rather than reporting.

In response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) survey, 28.4% of midshipmen who did not snitch on peers agreed with the statement, “Loyalty among friends is the highest form of honor,” compared to only 7.4% of midshipmen who snitched on peers (refer to Table 1). And although the majority of midshipmen in both groups disagreed with this statement, as previously mentioned, the GAO survey items can only distinguish between those who snitched and those who did not. In other words, differences between midshipmen who counseled and those who neither snitched nor counseled cannot be assessed. Nevertheless, the survey items provide a context for interpreting the interview data by summarizing the distribution of responses from a general population sample. In contrast, the interviews provide a detailed elaboration of neutralization techniques employed by those who snitched and those who did nothing about the misconduct of peers.

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For example, one graduate described the counseling provision of the Honor Concept as:

CYA– that means cover your ass. You have to be able to prove that you took action if you knew someone committed an honor offense. All you have to say if a buddy does it is, “don’t cheat again; consider yourself counseled and dropped.”

This graduate also compared the Naval Academy’s Honor Concept to the Honor Code at West Point, which has a non-toleration clause requiring that all honor violations be reported: “The Honor Code is called FYB– the fuck your buddy system. You sell your buddy out so that you don’t risk being kicked out.” Loyalty towards peers is, therefore, likely to result in midshipmen counseling and cautioning rather than reporting. These graduates also used the counseling provision as a way to prevent friends from getting into trouble. The following example summarizes a case where a graduate prevented an honor violation by counseling her roommate who had copied a homework assignment:

One of my roommates--we were both in the same major--we had a big [computer] program that was due. The day before it was due, I knew she hadn’t gotten very far on it. I had finished mine early. Later that day she said she was finished. She left the room, so I went and looked at it. It was mine. It was formatted exactly like mine, and it had my comments. I deleted it off her computer and told her she wasn’t going to turn it in. I didn’t have to officially tell her that I was counseling her. She understood.

When I asked the graduate how her roommate responded, she said that “she was shocked but also relieved because if she had turned it in it would have turned into a big cheating incident and been placed in the hands of someone else [the professor].”

In addition to “teaching friends a lesson,” the counseling provision was commonly used

for plebes (freshmen) who were viewed as being “under a great deal of stress” and “in need of guidance.” One graduate described plebes as follows:

I think people make mistakes and can learn from those mistakes. If you make one mistake coming into a new environment, a whole new way of life– we all come from different backgrounds, different family lives, have different morals and beliefs--some people are going to make mistakes and they can learn from them to become a better person.

The following case illustrates a situation where a graduate saw himself as teaching a plebe about the potential consequences of his actions:

A plebe came to my room one day really upset. He told me that he saw his roommate cheat on a chemistry exam..... We went to their room and told him that we both knew he cheated on his exam. His eyes got kind of big. I also told him that his roommate was obligated to do something to make him a more honorable midshipman. I asked the person who cheated what he thought that meant. His eyes got all watery. He said that he had failed 3 quizzes in chemistry. When he was taking the exam, he noticed that he could see some of his notes in his notebook that was on the floor. He said he couldn't help but look at them. He said that he couldn't resist because he didn't want to flunk chemistry. I asked him to think about what it would be like to be kicked out of the Academy. Did he want to let everyone down? He said “no.” He was crying at this point.

The next case involved a plebe who lied about being in a class that he had skipped:

A friend and I consulted about the situation, and we decided the best thing to do was counsel. We called him in and said, “hey, we know what happened, and we want to



know why you've done this?" I knew from past experience, from working with this guy

for a year, that he was quality material. He made a mistake. We counseled him and scared him a little bit. I was satisfied that he took it on board, and knew it was wrong and felt bad about it. I didn't have any problems with him after that. As far as I know, he's commissioned and is going to be a good officer.

Not only did graduates who counseled peers describe occupational misconduct as "something someone did because they were stressed out, because they're only human," these graduates described the lessons learned as being invaluable. For example, one graduate said:

I counseled several midshipmen. I always felt like it was a learning experience and that they'd never do it again. I also felt that they were probably better off having made the mistake than the typical person who goes through never having done any of these things and never really has their honor tested.

More importantly, in cases where graduates counseled midshipmen with whom they were not personally acquainted, peer loyalty remained the primary factor in explaining their decision to counsel as opposed to report. The issue of maintaining loyalty to peers was more clearly articulated by a midshipman who responded to an open-ended question in the GAO survey. In explaining why midshipmen may not report peers, he stated:

It [reporting peers] conflicts with other values learned at the Academy. Teamwork and personal loyalty are two such values. It is hard to put someone in jeopardy, when one is taught not to "bilge" [report], or back stab, another midshipman. It is

especially hard for classmates to punish one another, as one often views his or her class as one big team or family. (U.S. GAO 1995:61).

In other words, peer loyalty applied to all midshipmen, not just to friends. Subsequently, while counseling does not directly violate moral bonds to the Naval Academy, these graduates accounted for their decision to counsel as opposed to report by focusing on the issue of peer loyalty.

### **Neither Counseling Nor Reporting Peers**

While graduates who counseled peers saw themselves as maintaining loyalty to both the Naval Academy and to peers, they described midshipmen who did not enforce the Honor Concept as “ambivalent and apathetic,” “not caring,” “lazy,” and “not on board with the program.” In other words, these midshipmen risked being seen by their peers as not exercising important leadership skills, thereby, calling into question their ability to serve as future Naval or Marine Corps officers. Moreover, failing to uphold the Honor Concept is a violation, in and of itself, and may result in formal punishment. Consequently, these graduates had to neutralize the potential effects of betraying loyalty to the institution. They employed a variety of neutralization techniques to explain their decisions to do nothing about the misconduct of peers (see Table 2). Like those who counseled, appealing to a higher loyalty (peer loyalty) was their primary focus. However, these graduates differed from graduates who counseled insofar as employing three additional neutralization techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and condemnation of condemners. Because condemnation of the condemners refers directly to midshipmen who snitched on peers, this set of findings precedes the section titled, “Reporting Peers.”

-insert Table 2 about here-

*The Appeal to Higher Loyalties*

In contrast to graduates who counseled as a way to maintain loyalty to peers while also enforcing the Honor Concept, others graduates employed this neutralization technique in explaining their decision to neither counsel nor report. In choosing not to respond to the misconduct of peers, the 12 graduates appealed to a higher loyalty by focusing on the potential consequences of reporting a peer. One graduate explained that if a midshipman is sent to an Honor Board (hearing), “you don’t have to prove that someone is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, like in the civilian court system. All you have to do is prove that it was more likely than not for the person to be kicked out.” The lenient standard of proof in determining guilt, coupled with the severe sanction (permanent expulsion), meant that these graduates were unwilling to either report peers or even risk counseling them. Peer loyalty also superceded loyalty to the institution, in large part, because of shared experiences inside a total institution. Two graduates said the following:

You’re locked up for your first two years with the same people, even on weekends. Life is stressful there and you need friends to help you make it through it. Misery loves company. I think that suffering brings people together, don’t you? If life hadn’t been so bad there, we wouldn’t have bonded as much.

It’s a pressure-cooker. Even the smartest and most able midshipmen need other people

to make it through. You have no choice but to build teams and learn how to work in a close environment. The people you lived with were also the people you worked with. That made everything real tight.

Similar to graduates who counseled, accounts from two other graduates who neither counseled nor reported specifically address the conflict between organizational loyalty and peer loyalty:

It's human nature to protect your friends. The longer you've been there, the more you've endured and suffered. How can you turn someone in after that? They have a lot to lose.

If you're unduly familiar with the person, you're biased. You can't make the right judgement because you don't want to screw your buddy over.

Because peers are central to survival at the Academy, peer loyalty was the primary reason for not reporting occupational misconduct. Interviews also revealed that the "code of silence" typically extends to all midshipmen, not just to friends. Moreover, the code of silence meant not only not reporting but also not counseling.

### *The Denial of Responsibility*

While appealing to a higher loyalty was the primary neutralization technique employed by those who did nothing about the occupational misconduct of peers, all 12 graduates also denied responsibility by focusing on the social context of Academy life.<sup>20</sup> Sykes and Matza stated that denial of responsibility is used to negate "personal accountability" because deviance is "due to

forces outside the individual and beyond his control” (1957:667). Graduates who denied responsibility pinpointed one force that was beyond their control: time constraints.

In discussing time, graduates described an average day at the Academy. The only differences in daily schedules were whether they got up every morning at 6:00 a.m. or 6:30 a.m. and whether they went to bed at 11:30 p.m. or 1:00 a.m. One graduate said, “we were always busy. We had very little time to even think about who we were. We could never relax because we were always behind. We had to take too many classes. We never had time to learn everything. We only had time to learn what we needed to pass our classes.” This issue was also addressed in the GAO survey. Almost half (49.3%) of midshipmen who did not snitch on peers agreed with the statement, “I do not have sufficient time for my academic studies.” In comparison, 40.7% of midshipmen who snitched on peers also agreed with this statement, which means that time constraints existed for many midshipmen regardless of how they reacted to occupational misconduct. The difference for graduates who did not respond to the misconduct of peers is that they used it as an excuse: “A lot of people don’t want the hassle of reporting an offense because you have to write it up. That takes a lot of time, and we were already busy enough with our own problems.” One graduate recalled a cheating incident that he chose to ignore because of his busy schedule:

A lot of it had to do with you and not the person who committed the violation. For example, if you were taking a final and turned around during an exam and saw someone cheating, which I saw before, you were too busy to report it. You just didn’t want to deal with it. You had other finals to study for. A lot of time goes into reporting an honor offense, more time than you usually have.

Another graduate mentioned the following: “My roommate was an honor offense king, but I never really had any direct proof. If I had wanted to, I could have by investigating it, but it just wasn’t worth my time.”

### *The Denial of Injury*

Sykes and Matza indicated that denial of injury is similar to denial of responsibility in that “the link between the individual and his acts may be broken” (1957:668). Consequently, 8 of the 12 graduates denied injury by focusing on what they perceived to be the relatively minor nature of honor violations in explaining why they did nothing about peer misconduct. Denial of injury, according to Sykes and Matza, “may turn on the question of whether or not anyone has clearly been hurt by his deviance” (1957:667). The deviant “feels that his behavior does not really cause any great harm despite the fact that it runs counter to law” (1957:668). Choosing not to respond to the occupational misconduct of peers clearly runs counter to the Honor Concept. However, one graduate argued that no harm had been done if midshipmen did not enforce it because “honor violations, by the letter, happened all the time. It’s foolish to take an attitude that people don’t lie, cheat, or steal.”

For the 8 graduates who directly employed this neutralization technique in explaining their decision to do nothing about the misconduct of peers, their responses were relatively uniform. They discussed “gouge” (cheating)<sup>21</sup> as an illustration of an honor violation that is commonplace and relatively minor in nature:

We used to have what was called gouge files; they were old tests that were out in the open in filing cabinets. The instructor could pull a problem right off one of those tests. It wasn’t clear whether this was an honor violation. The administration said we weren’t

supposed to do it but everyone did. Sometimes it was the only way to pass a class.”

In a related case, one graduate witnessed an acquaintance cheating but decided to ignore the situation because no harm was done:

We had a history class together. We were always given the essay questions beforehand so we could work on them, but we weren't allowed to take any notes into the exam.

Well, I saw \_\_\_\_\_ take in her written essay and copy it word-for-word during the exam. Technically that was cheating, but I blew it off. It didn't seem like that big of a deal to me because we already had the questions. I wrote mine out right before the exam, so it was just a matter of remembering it once I got into the exam. So, what \_\_\_\_\_ did didn't seem like blatant cheating.

Although midshipmen are taught that “the chain is only as strong as the weakest link” and that systems of social control, such as the Honor Concept, are designed to strengthen the chain, graduates indicated that choosing to do nothing about occupational misconduct does not weaken the chain because honor violations are an integral part of the system. In essence, denying injury for not enforcing the rules is directly related to denying injury on behalf of peers who engage in occupational misconduct.

#### *The Condemnation of the Condemners*

As discussed previously, those who enforced the Honor Concept disapproved of midshipmen who chose to do nothing about the misconduct of peers. Not surprisingly, all 12 graduates who failed to uphold the Honor Concept shifted emphasis away from their own lack of action to the actions of those who snitched on peers. Moreover, attention was also diverted away

from both the perpetrator and their alleged misconduct. According to Sykes and Matza, condemnation of the condemners occurs when “the delinquent shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the ... behavior of those who disapprove of his violations. His condemners, he may claim, are hypocrites... .” (1957:668).

Placing emphasis on those who reported peers took the form of labeling them as “honor Nazis.... people who were connivers and people who were solely looking out for their own interests.” In addition to being viewed as self-interested, two other graduates described honor Nazis as follows:

There is also a minority of mids [midshipmen] who really believe in honor, loyalty, and integrity towards the institution. They would report honor violations for pride reasons. They would be interested in upholding the standards of the Academy.

They [honor Nazis] were hypocritical and detrimental to the way the system should work, like trust. They turned people in for anything. These guys would actually write-up a conduct offense for someone wearing a shoulder strap with their book bag or walking with their hands in their pockets, which aren't technically legal.

More importantly, midshipmen who snitched were described as betraying peers and as not to be trusted. Several graduates indicated that honor Nazis used the Honor Concept as “a weapon against people. If people don't like someone, they can wait to find something to jump on the guy for. It's used as a tool to separate, to get people kicked out.” Likewise, when asked to respond to a related issue in the GAO survey, 21.2% of midshipmen who did not snitch on peers



agreed with the statement, “The Honor System is an easy way to get a midshipman out of the Academy.” In contrast, only 11.1% of midshipmen who snitched on peers agreed with the statement.

### **Reporting Peers**

Although midshipmen who report wrongdoing are upholding organizational norms and maintaining loyalty towards the Academy, they risk being seen by others as disloyal and untrustworthy. In other words, the process of upholding formal norms involves violating informal norms about the “code of silence” for friends and peers, particularly since the Honor Concept has a counseling provision. The ultimate consequence of what others may perceive as indiscriminate and excessive rule-enforcement is that they may be viewed by their peers in much the same light as corporate whistle-blowers and criminal informants--that is, they may be socially ostracized and seen as outsiders.

The following case represents the potential consequences for those who snitched on peers. In this situation, a graduate reported a fellow varsity teammate who falsified a written report to cover-up skipping practices during Spring Break: “Even with direct evidence, I started losing faith in the honor system my plebe year because I put someone up for an honor offense and ended up looking like a dirt-bag instead of the person who did it.” The incident “set the tone for the remainder of my career as a midshipman. I was labeled a snitch not to be trusted. I didn’t really have any friends after that.”

Not only does this case illustrate that loyalty towards the Academy and towards peers does, in fact, conflict in situations where occupational misconduct must be directly dealt with, it suggests that peer loyalty typically prevents midshipmen from reporting peers. The majority of

graduates (32 of 40) either counseled peers or did nothing about occupational misconduct. As a consequence, the 8 graduates who reported peers found themselves neutralizing the effects of violating informal norms about peer loyalty, thereby attempting to protect themselves from being socially ostracized and labeled as outsiders, snitches, or honor Nazis.

Regarding the social costs of snitching, one graduate described other midshipmen's loyalty as being misplaced. He said:

A lot of people say that you gotta be loyal to your friends, that they come first. That's a misplaced loyalty. Your loyalty is not to your friends. Your loyalty is with the institution, and your loyalty and duty are to defend the Constitution as an officer of the military. Some midshipmen lose sight of that.

Likewise, another graduate stated:

I think the most important part of the Honor Concept is the first line. Most people probably say the Honor Concept is a list of shalt nots: lying, cheating, and stealing.

But the most important part is that midshipmen are persons of integrity.

This quotation represents the perspectives of graduates who snitched on peers. The issue was not whether someone engaged in occupational misconduct, particularly given that these behaviors were relatively commonplace. The central question, instead, became whether the person made an "honest mistake and could learn from it" as opposed to someone "who has an inherent ethical flaw and will continue to not be trustworthy."

#### *The Denial of the Victim*

Sykes and Matza described denial of the victim as interpreting one's actions as "a form of rightful retaliation or punishment" because "they had it coming" (1957:668). For midshipmen

who are snitched on, the potential punishment is separation (permanent expulsion) from the Academy. Moreover, the accused is reported and potentially punished for a behavior that most midshipmen allegedly engage in (Pershing 2002). Recognizing that the majority of midshipmen engage in occupational misconduct, combined with the severe sanction if found guilty, means that graduates who snitched had to neutralize the effects of betraying a peer.

In terms of behavior, there is often little to distinguish those who make “honest mistakes” from those who are reported for occupational misconduct. Instead, the character of the individual becomes the primary consideration. Consistent with this line of reasoning, only half (51.8%) of midshipmen who snitched on peers agreed with the GAO survey item, “Anyone found to have committed an honor violation should be expelled from the Naval Academy.” In contrast, 30.8% of midshipmen who did not report peers agreed with this statement. Rather, graduates who reported peers for occupational misconduct described the alleged perpetrators as “sub-performers in need of being weeded out for their own good as well as the good of the Brigade.” They argued that “the chain is only as strong as the weakest link.” Enforcing the Honor Concept was seen as one way to remove sub-performers in an effort to make the chain stronger. When I asked graduates to explain who sub-performers were, some responses indicated that they were individuals struggling with either the academic demands or the physical rigors imposed by the Academy. However, in many instances sub-performers were simply described as being qualitatively different than other midshipmen, or as “people who just don’t have what it takes to be an officer.”

The interviews reveal that graduates who snitched focused almost exclusively on the character of the midshipman rather than on their behavior, expressing a need to detect and

remove sub-performers from the Academy. Applying the concept of denial of the victim to the act of snitching is inarguably unconventional given that the victim is not a “crime victim” but is, instead, someone who has engaged in occupational misconduct. The victim is clearly not a victim in a traditional sense but is rather a victim from the standpoint of being reported for a behavior that is considered commonplace.

The following case illustrates the emphasis placed on the characteristics of the midshipman rather than their behavior. It involved a midshipman who had allegedly lied about the time it took her to run the mile-and-a-half during a physical readiness test. The graduate who witnessed the lie consulted with several other midshipmen, and they concluded that the situation merited reporting the violation rather than counseling and cautioning her:

We really wanted her out. She was a fish out of water. She couldn't even do a push-up. We thought it was for her own good that she be kicked out. She was actually known throughout the Brigade as the worst plebe [freshman] ever. She was tagged with a bad reputation early on.

The following graduate indicated that he typically counseled plebes to teach them a lesson.

However, in one instance he reported an individual who he saw as a sub-performer:

I counseled plebes a lot of times, but for minor things like lying about shining their shoes.

There was one time when I was a 3<sup>rd</sup> classman (sophomore) and a plebe failed to relieve me on watch on time, which made me late for a test. When I questioned him about it, he lied to me. I brought it to the attention of the company officer because he was also a sub-performer. It was recognized that this person wasn't fit to be there. He was

eventually separated.

In the next account, a graduate was assigned the responsibility of investigating a case that was reported by another midshipman. He agreed with the assessment of the person who reported her, which was that this individual was a sub-performer in need of being weeded out of the system. When I asked the graduate to describe the violation, he mentioned that it involved lying but focused primarily on describing the characteristics of the perpetrator:

She lied, but the bigger issue was that this girl was a real fragile soul. She had a lot of emotional problems; she didn't have a very steady home life. She was knock-kneed, and she didn't have a lot of friends. She was clingy; if you showed her attention, she gobbled it right up and came back for more.

In sum, the majority of midshipmen commit several "technical" honor violations during their time at the Academy (Pershing 2002). The issue is not that midshipmen commit violations but is, instead, whether midshipmen are defined as legitimate members of the Academy or as sub-performers. Graduates who snitched reported that they had a duty to weed out misfits, or individuals who do not "have the right stuff" to become an officer. More importantly, explaining the act of snitching as weeding out misfits also serves the purpose of neutralizing the effects of betraying peers and preventing becoming an outsider oneself. In other words, this population did not see themselves as violating norms about peer loyalty but, instead, justified their behavior by claiming that they were strengthening the Brigade. Graduates argued that some midshipmen deserved to be reported not for what they had done, but rather, for who they were.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Three trends emerge from an analysis of official Academy statistics, a survey of Academy midshipmen, and semi-structured interviews with graduates. First, where systems of social control rely on peers to monitor one another's behavior, the basic assumption is that organizational members' loyalty towards an institution overrides their loyalty towards peers. Therefore, when misconduct occurs, individuals should be willing to betray their loyalty towards peers to uphold organizational norms. However, official statistics indicate that only 3.0% of the Academy population had been reported for an honor violation, while survey data reveal that only 5.1% of a random sample of midshipmen had reported another midshipmen at some point during their Academy career. Moreover, during interviews, the 8 graduates who snitched on peers reported pressure to neutralize the effects of violating informal norms about peer loyalty. Similar to corporate whistle-blowers and informants, snitches risked being labeled and socially ostracized as outsiders (Akerstrom 1991; Friedrichs 1996; Glazer 2002; Heck 1992; MacNamara 1991). Because the majority of midshipmen allegedly engage in occupational misconduct, snitches instead focused on the characteristics of the midshipmen on whom they snitched. Blaming the victim, or justifying snitching as weeding out misfits, was an attempt to neutralize the effects of betraying peers to prevent becoming an outsider oneself.

Second, the most consistent and recurrent pattern in both the survey and interview data for graduates who either counseled or did nothing about occupational misconduct was appealing to a higher loyalty: peer loyalty. For the 20 graduates who counseled peers, the counseling provision was viewed as a way to reconcile the conflict between organizational and peer loyalty. And while counseling does not directly violate moral bonds to the Naval Academy, these graduates accounted for their decision to counsel as opposed to report by focusing on the issue of

loyalty to peers. Even in cases where graduates counseled midshipmen with whom they were not personally acquainted, peer loyalty remained the primary factor in explaining their decision.

Finally, interviews found that 12 of 40 graduates did not respond to the occupational misconduct of peers despite having opportunities to do so. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that the interview sample included a disproportionate number of women and Brigade Honor Committee members, who should have been more likely than other organizational members to snitch on peers. However, not only did loyalty toward peers override loyalty toward the institution, these graduates employed three other neutralization techniques to explain their decisions: denial of responsibility because of time constraints, denial of injury because violations are relatively commonplace, and condemnation of the condemners (or, those who snitch). These findings are consistent with prior research which finds that white-collar offenders develop an elaborate set of accounts to explain their behavior and are, therefore, slow to accept responsibility for their behaviors (Benson 1985; Cressey 1953; Sutherland 1949). Compared to rule-breakers in elite institutions, rule-enforcers at the Naval Academy also develop an elaborate set of excuses to explain why they are not responsible for controlling the occupational misconduct of peers.

Although this article demonstrates that neutralization techniques are employed regardless of how midshipmen respond to occupational misconduct, in part because of the inherent conflict between organizational and peer loyalty in systems of self-regulation, the results of this study must be weighed against its limitations. The data explain *how* midshipmen neutralize their decisions, but they cannot explain *why* they chose to snitch or not to snitch. Specifically, this study cannot explain why only 20 graduates counseled peers, particularly since the counseling

provision appears to be the most logical course of action— that is, a way to respond to misconduct while “appealing to peer loyalty.” Nor can it explain why some graduates chose to snitch or, conversely, why others decided to do nothing about the occupational misconduct of peers beyond identifying the use of various neutralization techniques. And because the snowball sample was selected with purposive criteria in mind, the findings are also limited in that the interview data cannot be generalized to all Academy graduates. In contrast, the findings from the General Accounting Office survey may be generalized to all midshipmen. However, these data only allow for comparisons between those who reported peers and those who did not. For the latter group, the survey items do not distinguish between midshipmen who counseled and those who neither reported nor counseled. Furthermore, only four of Sykes and Matza’s five neutralization techniques were represented in the questionnaire.

Despite these limitations, this study presents a compelling case for establishing what appears to be the relative ineffectiveness of a mandatory system of self-regulation. What is most notable about the current research is that graduates routinely employed neutralization techniques to explain their decisions not to snitch on peers despite living in a total institution and despite risking official reprimands for failing to enforce the Honor Concept. To this extent, the findings provide a foundation for explaining what prior research has not, which is that systems of self-regulation are often ineffective because organizational members are likely to employ an elaborate set of neutralization techniques in deciding not to snitch on peers. And although the counseling provision suggests that the Naval Academy’s system of self-regulation is partially successful, the majority of organizations do not have this type of provision.

And while the findings from this case study cannot be generalized to other organizations,



they do have significant implications for future research on the control of occupational misconduct in other settings. As previously discussed, prior research reveals that the majority of organizations rely on self-regulation (Chambliss 1988; Vaughan 1983). However, the enforcement of systems of self-regulation is typically superficial (Friedrichs 1996). Unlike the Naval Academy, the majority of organizations do not actively train members to respond to occupational misconduct nor do they reprimand or punish members who have knowledge of misconduct but who choose not to respond. In organizations that do not require formal reactions to occupational misconduct, regardless of whether peer loyalty is strong, members are not likely to snitch on peers because there are no clear organizational incentives in the form of either rewards or punishments. Further, because research also finds that peer loyalty usually arises out of daily human interaction, it is plausible to assume that peer loyalty will typically override organizational loyalty (Akerstrom 1991; Heck 1992; Sztompka 1999). In these instances, organizational members are likely to employ neutralization techniques to explain their decisions not to snitch. In contrast, those who snitch on peers are also likely to use neutralization techniques in an effort to preserve their relationships with colleagues.

While prior studies have not specifically examined the use of neutralization techniques by rule-enforcers, they have examined the personal characteristics, motivations, and organizational conditions related to both whistle-blowing and silently observing (Glazer and Glazer 1989; Miceli and Near 1991; Rothschild and Miethe 1999). It stands to reason that some of these factors may either directly impact the use of neutralization techniques or be conceptualized as neutralization techniques. For example, factors that deter potential whistle-blowers in other organizational settings include denial that one has a responsibility to officially react to

misconduct and fear of potential negative consequences like social ostracism by workers for betraying peers (Friedrichs 1996; Glazer 2002; Miethe and Rothschild 1994; Perrucci et al. 1980). Both factors closely resemble the neutralization techniques employed by graduates who do not report peers for violations of the Naval Academy's Honor Concept (e.g. denial of responsibility, appeal to a higher loyalty). This article, therefore, suggests that research on whistleblowing be expanded to include an analysis of the types of neutralization techniques employed in various organizational settings.

In closing, while the concept of neutralization techniques has been applied extensively in research on rule-breakers, this study demonstrates that the concept also provides a conceptual framework for understanding the dilemma of individuals who are required to regulate the behavior of their peers. And though the conflict between peer loyalty and organizational loyalty is clearly magnified in institutions such as the Naval Academy, self-regulation is likely to involve the act of betrayal in a variety of organizational settings (Akerstrom 1991; Pershing 2002). The question of whom to betray, in turn, opens the door for the use of neutralization techniques by both those who snitch and those who do not. Subsequently, in addition to calling for the expansion of neutralization techniques research to include rule-enforcers, the implications of this study suggest that the concept be refined to examine the impact of conflicting loyalties (organizational versus peer loyalty) on the types of neutralization techniques employed in systems of self-regulation.

Future research would likely benefit by examining the accounts of rule-enforcers in an effort to explain the process by which organizational members decide whether to respond to the misconduct of peers. Specifically, two lines of inquiry are suggested: 1) to what extent do

conflicting loyalties emerge as a dilemma in a variety of organizations and institutions that rely on self-regulation, and 2) in response to conflicting loyalties, alongside other competing demands, how do rule-enforcers neutralize their decisions to snitch or not snitch? Finally, the results support the case that a variety of methodological approaches should be considered in an effort to uncover the inherent complexities of systems of self-regulation (Miceli and Near 1992).

While official statistics and survey data often supply estimates of the degree to which misconduct is reported, open-ended interviews typically provide more detailed information about the process by which organizational members employ neutralization techniques and other accounts to explain their decisions.

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### Notes

1. West Point is also known as the U.S. Military Academy, and it is the U.S. Department of Defense's service academy for training future Army officers.
2. The term *betrayal* refers broadly to violating norms of implied trust or, more specifically, to the act of giving valued and secret information about those to whom we are attached to a third party without permission.
3. The term *snitching* also refers to the act of giving valued and secret information about those to whom we are attached to a third party without permission. The term has been applied specifically in studies that examine the enforcement of occupational misconduct (Akerstrom 1991; Heck 1992). Likewise, the term is used in the present study primarily because Naval Academy members described the act of reporting as "snitching" with the exception of those who actually reported peers (or "snitched").
4. In addition to white-collar crime and occupational misconduct, a second broad category of elite crime deserves mention. Organizational or corporate crime refers to offenses committed by an organization as a whole or by individuals with the support and encouragement of the organization. This paper focuses exclusively on occupational misconduct.

5. Research on internal auditors demonstrates that they do not suffer retaliation from reporting peer misconduct (Miceli et al. 1991). It should be noted, however, that internal auditors differ substantially from Academy members in three ways: 1) auditors have the express task of reporting wrongdoing while the Honor Concept at the Academy is part of a broader officer training program; 2) in contrast to Academy midshipmen, internal auditors do not live in a total institution with the coworkers whose misconduct they report; and, 3) midshipmen who report peers are often stigmatized for having violated norms about peer loyalty while internal auditors are not.
6. Coser also describes one of the primary concerns of “greedy institutions” as insuring “that people will be sufficiently motivated to be loyal even in the face of competing appeals from other sources within the wider social structure” (1974:1). For the Naval Academy, this refers to convincing midshipmen to uphold the Honor Concept in the face of other competing demands, particularly peer loyalty.
7. Midshipmen continue to be sworn in by taking the “Oath of Office for Midshipmen Candidates.” However, today, they serve as reserve officers rather than active-duty officers during their four years at the Academy.
8. Faculty, staff, and senior officers at the Academy are also required to take action if they have knowledge of an honor violation. However, the focus of this paper is on midshipmen (peer rule-enforcement) exclusively.
9. Failing to officially respond to an alleged honor violation is a violation of the Conduct Code, which outlines the rules and regulations of daily operation at the Academy. The enforcement of the Conduct Code is not the focus of the present study because it is not a system of self-regulation. Senior officers and faculty enforce the Conduct Code.
10. In 1993, the Naval Academy endured a highly publicized cheating scandal, involving several midshipmen from the graduating class of 1992. As a result of that scandal, some changes were made in an effort to improve the Honor Concept. These changes have no impact on the findings

presented in this paper in that the process of reacting to and reporting honor violations remains the same under the new system.

11. Like other aspects of Naval Academy life, the Honor Concept is part of a broader officer training program that is designed to prepare midshipmen for difficult decisions that they may encounter in their careers as either Naval or Marine Corps officers. However, in contrast to other rules and regulations which are enforced by Academy staff and administrators, the Honor Concept is a system of self-regulation.

12. The GAO survey did not include an item representing the neutralization technique, “denial of injury.”

13. The value of these types of validity checks is addressed by Glaser and Strauss: “in many instances, both forms of data are necessary--not quantitative used to test qualitative, but both used as supplements, as mutual verification and most important for us, as different forms of data on the same subject” (1973:18). In other words, in addition to evaluating intrarespondent consistency, the interview data were also cross-checked with comparable data from the Naval Academy Ethics Advising Office and the GAO survey. For example, all the graduates told me that reporting honor violations was exceedingly rare. This is consistent with GAO survey data, which indicate that only 5.1% of midshipmen had ever reported a violation. Likewise, official statistics reveal that only 3.0% of the Academy population had been officially reported for misconduct.

14. The proportion of women attending the Naval Academy has slowly increased as a result of changes in combat-exclusion rules. For example, women comprised approximately 15% of the student population during the 1999/2000 academic year.

15. The internal validity of the interview data warrants comment. Were graduates telling the truth and remembering facts accurately, particularly given the sensitive nature of some of the questions asked? In discussing studies of practitioners of vice and crime, Becker argues that when a researcher has achieved access to a particular population because of personal contacts and

“since you are known, and known of,... few doubts as to your trustworthiness arise”

(1986:138). Furthermore, the respondents “may cooperate so that the “true story,” which they feel they can trust you to tell, can get to the public through your research report” (Becker 1986:139). These attitudes were conveyed in many of the interviews, especially after I mentioned that a family member had graduated from the Naval Academy in 1993. According to graduates, knowing about my personal contact with the Academy not only sparked interest in the study but allayed concerns that I was an “outsider” with ulterior motives.

16. Each interview respondent was asked a core set of questions, which facilitated the coding process. For example, all graduates were asked whether they had ever reported or counseled another midshipman for an honor violation. Depending on how they responded to peer misconduct, they were asked follow-up questions about the alleged cases as well as the factors that influenced their decisions. For each set of behaviors (reporting, counseling, and not responding to misconduct), personal accounts were evaluated to identify similarities and differences. For example, in the case of graduates who neither reported nor counseled alleged perpetrators, peer loyalty emerged as the primary factor influencing each of their decisions.

17. During the analysis of interview data, Sykes and Matza’s concept of neutralization techniques emerged as the “best fit” after several conceptual typologies from the accounts literature were considered. For recent comprehensive summaries and theoretical critiques of the accounts literature, refer to Davis (2000) and Orbuch (1997).

18. Although the majority of graduates indicated that they had committed minor violations of the Honor Concept, none were officially reported and only two were counseled. Of the two graduates who were counseled, both were white men, and both were counseled for cheating. In examining their responses to occupational misconduct, one of the two graduates counseled another midshipman while the other graduate did not officially respond to the misconduct of other midshipmen. For a detailed discussion of the social context in which “minor” occupational misconduct arises, see Pershing (2002).

19. Although women are not more likely to enforce the Honor Concept, women are more likely to be reported for honor violations. See Pershing (2001) for an analysis of gender and racial disparities in enforcing the Honor Concept.
20. Beyond time constraints (denial of responsibility) and nature of the offense (denial of injury), other situational factors did not arise in the course of examining specific neutralization techniques employed by graduates. For a detailed discussion of the social context of the Academy's system of self-regulation, see Pershing (2002). It should be noted that some of the data presented in the present paper were also used in Pershing (2002).
21. The term "gouge" is listed in the glossary of an issued midshipman handbook and is defined as "the answers or method of accomplishment to a test or any such activity" (U.S. Naval Academy 1989:287). And though several graduates perceived various forms of cheating and lying as relatively minor and commonplace, stealing was considered to be more serious and worthy of reporting. On the other hand, stealing was exceedingly rare at the Academy, as evidenced by official statistics. Of the 57 cases reported by midshipmen during the 1992/93 academic year, only 3 cases (5.3%) allegedly involved stealing. Although characteristics of the wrongdoing are not primary considerations at the Academy, research in other organizational settings demonstrates that severity of the offense is a strong predictor of rule-enforcement (see Miethe and Rothschild 1994).
22. Tests of statistical significance are typically considered reliable only when the expected frequency in each response category is at least five which was not always the case for midshipmen who snitched ( $n = 27$ ) (Norusis 1990:254).