

## **Students' justifications for academic cheating and empirical explanations of such behavior**

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### **Abstract**

Cheating in academic settings has been going on for thousands of years. An average of 70 percent of students report having cheated at least once, even though most of these students agree that such behavior is wrong. This paper explores students' self-reported reasons for cheating and the explanations for such behavior based on empirical findings. Self-reported reasons for cheating can be categorized as performance concerns, external pressures, supposedly unfair professors, lack of effort, adherence to a higher loyalty and opportunity. Experimental research has shown that cheating is planned behavior and that the main reason for student cheating is a desire to improve their grades. Peer behavior has also been found to be a major influence on academic dishonesty. Three out of five neutralization techniques have been used by students to justify their cheating. These are denial of responsibility, denial of injury and condemnation of the condemners. Reasons not to cheat are peer disapproval and honor codes. This seems to be important information that could be utilized to help create conditions conducive to an honest academic environment.

**Keywords:** college students, academic dishonesty, cheating, justification, neutralization.

### **Introduction**

Cheating among students in academic settings, schools and universities, has existed for thousands of years. Cheating can be traced back to ancient China. When the Chinese administered examinations for jobs in the civil service, tests were given in separate cubicles to prevent examinees from cheating. Examinees were searched for concealed notes and a death penalty applied for examinees that were found guilty, but despite this, cheating still occurred (Jackson, Levine, Furnham & Burr, 2002).

Cheating continues to be common in academic settings, and constitutes a major concern. Cheating decreases the validity of assessment, which results in a decreased interpretability of grades. This may lead to unfair advancing of students who lack required skills and abilities (Garavalia, Olson, Russell & Christensen, 2007). Previous studies have also shown that students who cheat while at university

have a higher probability of later engaging in unethical behavior within the workplace (Nonis & Owens Swift, 2001; Harding, Carpenter, Finelli & Passow, 2004). These are only a few notable examples of why cheating among university students is an important issue.

What is cheating exactly? According to Trost (2009), academic dishonesty is synonymous with cheating. On the other hand, the New Oxford American Dictionary (2005) defines cheating as "(1) to act dishonestly or unfairly in order to gain an advantage, especially in a game or examination; (2) to deceive or trick; (3) to use inferior materials or methods unobtrusively in order to save time or money." Thus, cheating in academic settings could be defined as acting dishonestly (e.g. cheating on an exam) by using inferior methods unobtrusively (e.g. using cheat sheets) in order to gain an advantage (e.g. a better grade).

Researchers tend not to agree on a single definition of academic dishonesty (Arnett Jensen, Jensen Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2002). However, it is generally accepted that there are multiple acts of academic dishonesty that students engage in. Some of the more common types of dishonest academic behavior assessed in research are: using cheat notes on a test, copying from another student during a test, fabricating or falsifying a bibliography (McCabe & Treviño, 1997), turning in a paper written by someone else, knowingly plagiarizing from online sources or printed publications, or inventing or altering data. From the perspective of enablers of such behavior, allowing someone to copy your homework also constitutes dishonest academic behavior (O'Rourke et al., 2010).

As discussed above, different researchers often apply different definitions and methods for assessing academic dishonesty. Thus statistics regarding the prevalence of cheating vary (ArnettJensen et al., 2002). A meta-analysis performed by Whitley (1998), of 107 independent studies identified a mean prevalence of 70%, whereas analysis of single studies on the topic has shown that between 50-60% of university students admit to committing some form of dishonest academic behavior on self-reports (Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff & Clark, 1986; McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2001; Jordan, 2001). There is also evidence that the prevalence of cheating among university students has increased in the last few decades, and this increase may be due to recent technological advances such as the Internet (McCabe, 2005).

Multiple studies have highlighted the fact that male students display a higher frequency of cheating behavior than female students, a greater percentage of male students admit to cheating than their female counterparts on self-reports, and younger students cheat more than older students (Whitley, 1998; McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 1997). Many students agree that dishonest academic behavior is wrong

(Semerci, 2006). However, knowing that cheating is wrong does not keep certain students from cheating.

If students know cheating is wrong, then why do they still do it? And how do they justify this cheating behavior? The present paper will try to answer these questions. First, reasons why students engage in dishonest academic behavior will be explored. Secondly, students' justifications of their cheating behavior will be examined. Finally, reasons cited by students for *not* engaging in academic dishonesty will briefly be reviewed.

### **Why do students cheat?**

If students believe cheating is wrong, then why do certain students still do it? Students self-reported reasons for cheating can be divided into several categories: performance concerns (including fear of failure and test anxiety), external pressures (e.g., too much course work, no time to study because of job, pressure from parents, needing good grades to secure future jobs), unfair professors (e.g., harsh grading, unreasonably difficult exam), loyalty to friends, opportunity (instructor wasn't watching, other student did not cover their paper) and, simply, lack of effort (did not attend class, did not study) (Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; ArnettJensen et al., 2002; Brent & Atkisson, 2011).

According to Simkin and McLeod (2010) cheating is: "not a random, accidental, or impulsive act, but rather a premeditated, intentional, deliberate one that requires forethought and planning." (Simkin & McLeod, 2010, p. 444). This would mean that *opportunity* is not one of the (main) reasons why students cheat. With this in mind, Simkin and McLeod (2010) conducted research on why students cheat within the theoretical framework of the theory of reasoned action. The theory of reasoned action holds that both subjective norms (i.e., beliefs about how people they care about would view the behavior in question) and specific attitudes

toward the behavior are determinants of behavioral intentions, and that intentions lead to actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Simkin and McLeod (2010) constructed a theoretical model of reasoned action using determinants of cheating identified in previous research. These determinants included: availability (opportunity to cheat), gaming, getting ahead, time demands, culture (i.e., cultural acceptance of cheating), morals and risk. These attitudes toward cheating determinants were categorized (negatively or positively) under the label 'motivation'. A second category, called 'referent' (subjective norms determinant), included family, friends and professors. Simkin and McLeod (2010) found, as expected, that both subjective norms and attitude were significant predictors of cheating. Of the 'motivators', only 'getting ahead' was significant. Neither availability nor time demand seemed to influence students' cheating behavior. This suggests that cheating behavior is indeed motivational and planned, rather than situational and opportunistic. Contrary to what was expected, neither culture nor the risks involved in cheating were significant predictors; they do not deter students from cheating. This could mean that students do not worry about getting caught, and that maybe penalties for cheating are too liberal.

Another predictor of academic dishonesty is peer behavior (McCabe & Treviño, 1993; Whitley 1998; Jordan, 2001). According to social learning theory, humans learn social behaviors and their consequences by observing others and imitating them (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2010). This would mean that students who see other people cheat successfully learn that cheating is 'normal', and this will increase the likelihood of cheating (McCabe & Treviño, 1993; O'Rourke et al., 2010). Jordan (2010) also conducted research on dishonest academic behavior and found, in line with this theory, that significantly more cheaters reported having

seen someone cheat than did non-cheaters. In addition, cheaters' estimation of the percentage of students that engage in dishonest academic behavior was significantly higher than the estimation of non-cheaters (Jordan, 2001). This can be seen as a vicious circle, where cheaters see more peers cheat, resulting in their believing that more people around them cheat, and thus come to perceive cheating as the norm. This in turn leads the cheaters to cheat even more (Jordan, 2001). Another reason why peer cheating could lead to academic dishonesty is that, in a climate where cheating often occurs, non-cheaters will feel that they are at a disadvantage, and consequently start cheating as well (McCabe & Treviño, 1993).

### **How do students justify their cheating?**

Human beings have the need to see themselves as reasonable, moral and smart. When this self-image is damaged by performing an action that deviates from one's typical positive self-image, this will lead to a feeling of discomfort. One way of reducing this feeling of discomfort is by attempting to justify the behavior through changing the dissonant cognition (Aronson et al., 2010). So how do students justify their dishonest academic behavior?

In 1957, Sykes and Matza proposed a theory called 'techniques of neutralization' to explain deviant behavior. By using these neutralization techniques, people can engage in deviant behavior without damaging their self-image. The five techniques of neutralization as proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957) are:

(1) Denial of Responsibility: The act happened "due to forces outside the individual and was beyond his control" (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p.667), (2) Denial of Injury: The act does not cause great harm to anyone (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p.667), (3) Denial of the Victim: The injury is not actually an injury but "a rightful retaliation or punishment" (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p.668), (4) Condemnation

of the Condemners: "The delinquent shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his violations .... by attacking others, the wrongfulness of his own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view." (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p.668), (5) Appeal to Higher Loyalties: "Sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of smaller social groups. Norms may be violated not because they are wrong, but because "other norms, held to be more pressing or involving a higher loyalty, are accorded precedence" (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p.669)

Initially, this theory was meant to explain delinquency, but researchers have recently applied this theory to the justification of cheating, as this, too, is a form of deviant behavior (Brent & Atkisson, 2011). Brent and Atkisson (2011) conducted research on the justification students give for cheating within the neutralization technique framework. They asked 401 students under what circumstances, if any, cheating could be justified. The responses to the question were analyzed and placed into the five categories of techniques of neutralization. They found that most of the responses could be categorized under the label of 'denial of responsibility' ('the test/work was too hard, too little time'), denial of wrongdoing ('working together should not be considered cheating') and condemnation of the condemners ('the instructor is unfair'). 'Appeal to higher loyalties' and 'denial' on the part of the victim were less common responses to the question.

Other research on cheating and neutralization has shown that cheaters show higher levels of neutralization than non-cheaters (LaBeff et al., 1986). According to LaBeff and colleagues (1986), this finding can also be related to the fact that cheaters see more people cheat than non-cheaters. LaBeff and colleagues (1986) state that this is exactly one of the neutralization techniques that cheaters use:

"Those around me are cheating, and therefore it is fair for me to cheat in order to compete effectively." Before they can use this argument to justify their dishonest academic behavior, cheaters need to perceive higher levels of cheating, either accurately, by being attentive to cheating around them, or inaccurately, by projecting their own motives and actions onto others (LaBeff et al., 1986, p.351).

### **Reasons not to cheat**

Peer behavior can be a major influence on cheating but, as it turns out, not only in a negative way. Peer disapproval is found to be negatively correlated with cheating, which means that students cheat less when their peers disapprove (McCabe & Treviño, 1997).

Another deterrent to cheating is honor codes, which refer to the institutional policies that clearly state what academic dishonesty is and the risks of getting caught, and which typically warn students that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. The prevalence of (self-reported) cheating is significantly lower at universities where honor codes are strictly enforced than at universities where there is no honor code, or where such a code is weakly enforced (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). Honor codes seem to be most effective when students have an active understanding of them. Such an understanding can be achieved through programs that publicize and explain them, and that succeed in gaining student and faculty acceptance of academic integrity policies (through, for example, signing honor pledges and providing reminders about the consequences of cheating (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). By adopting honor codes, universities will convey a message that cheating is not the norm.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the reasons why students cheat, and how they justify their cheating. Reasons for cheating as reported by students were identified as:

performance concerns, external pressures, unfair professors, lack of effort, loyalty to friends, and opportunity. However, research has shown that cheating is planned behavior, and that most students cheat deliberately and not as a result of opportunity. The main motivation for cheating identified in experimental research is the desire to improve one's grades. Students are not deterred by the risk of getting caught. Peer behavior is a major influence on cheating, both for students who already cheat and for non-cheaters. The more cheaters see other people cheat, the more they perceive cheating as the norm, while non-cheaters may feel themselves to be at a disadvantage when everyone else cheats. Most students do believe cheating is wrong, but they do it anyway. This discrepancy between thought and action harms their positive self-image and leads to a feeling of discomfort. To reduce this feeling of discomfort, these acts need to be justified. Students justify their cheating by using three of the five neutralization techniques proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957): denial of responsibility, denial of injury and condemnation of the condemners. Cheaters also show higher levels of neutralization than non-cheaters,

and feel less guilty when they have cheated. Peer cheating is also used as a justification (i.e., based on the idea that 'everyone else is doing it').

Peers were found to exercise an influence on the prevention of cheating behavior. They can also act as a deterrent, through their expression of disapproval. Students cheat less when their peers disapprove of cheating. Another deterrent to academic dishonesty are honor codes. At universities where honor codes are strongly enforced, students' self-reported cheating is significantly lower than at universities where there is no such honor code in place. These institutional policies are most effective when students have an active understanding of them. Honor codes and peer disapproval also work hand in hand; the more effective the honor code, the more peers will disapprove of cheating, and the less cheating behavior will occur. This will also convey the message that cheating is *not* the norm.

Further research into honor codes can build upon this literature review by further exploring the effectiveness of honor codes and the way they work. This information could provide valuable insight in helping to create conditions conducive to an honest academic environment.

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