

The Impact Of Unethical Reasoning On Different Types Of Academic Dishonesty: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers support that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for committing unethical academic behaviors are more likely to report committing academic dishonesty than those who felt they had weaker reasons for unethical academic behaviors. This relationship held for all four categories of academic dishonesty: cheating (on tests), seeking outside help, plagiarism (on papers), and E-cheating (electronic cheating on tests). This suggests that students are rationalizing their academic dishonest behaviors and those students who feel they have stronger reasons for committing academic dishonesty are more likely to be academically dishonest.

Keywords: Academic Dishonesty, Unethical Reasoning, Cheating, Plagiarism, E-Cheating, Seeking Outside Help

INTRODUCTION

As noted frequently in the literature, many in the educational system are concerned with the problem of academic dishonesty and the rate at which it is increasing (Eastman, Iyer, & Eastman, 2006; Iyer & Eastman, 2006, 2008; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Park, 2003; Pullin, Ortloff, Casey, and Payne, 2000; Williams & Hosek, 2003). In the business literature, Kidwell, Wozniak, and Laurel (2003) and Chapman, Davis, Toy, and Wright (2004) found that 75 percent of students reported cheating; this is similar to the 63 percent found by Nonis and Swift (1998). Swift and Nonis (1998) suggest that those who cheat in college are more likely to cheat on the job. Thus, there is an increased need for academicians to address academic dishonesty, because what students learn as acceptable behavior in the classroom impacts their expectations of what is acceptable professionally (Ameen, Guffey, & McMillan, 1996).

If professors hope to improve the ethical behavior of students as future business people, they need to first address the ethical behavior that occurs in their classroom. “What kind of expectation for ethical behavior is communicated when professors ignore cheating?” (Copeland, 2005, p. 43). What makes this difficult, though, is that cheating is a “complex, psychological, social, and situational phenomenon” (Leming, 1980, p. 86) as academic dishonesty can be viewed as a multidimensional construct (Ferrari, 2005; Rawwas, Al-Khatib, and Vitell, 2004; Rawwas & Isakson, 2000; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995). We suggest that, in order for professors to effectively address the ethical behavior of their students in their classes, they need to fully understand and address their students’ rationale for committing academic dishonesty.

This paper contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between students’ reasons for their unethical behavior and committing academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty takes into account a range of unethical behaviors including cheating (i.e., on tests) (Roig & DeTommaso, 1995; Ferrari, 2005), plagiarism (i.e., on papers) (Roig & DeTommaso, 1995; Ferrari, 2005), the misuse of technology (Scanlon, 2004), as well as additional practices to gain an unfair advantage (Rawwas et al. 2004; Rawwas & Isakson, 2000), such as using outside help. As students’ ethics in the classroom may impact their ethics as professionals, it is vital that professors gain a clearer

understanding of these issues. To do this, the authors will examine the elements of academic dishonesty, the reasons students suggest for their unethical behavior, and the impact of these reasons on students' academic dishonest behavior in a two-university study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, the authors first discuss the elements of academic dishonesty and how they have been measured. Then they describe the measure for the reasons why students do unethical academic behaviors. Finally, they present the impact of academic dishonesty and their hypotheses.

ELEMENTS OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

The literature suggests academic dishonesty is a multidimensional construct (Iyer & Eastman, 2008). Roig & DeTommasso's (1995) Academic Practices Survey is a two factor scale made up of a "plagiarism" of written assignments and "cheating" with tests; the authors report good reliability (above .76 for both scales) and construct validity (Ferrari, 2005). Rawwas et al. (2004), in building on the work of Rawwas and Isakson (2000), came up with four factors for academic dishonesty: "receiving and abetting academic dishonesty" (items universally perceived as unethical and initiated by the student), "obtaining an unfair advantage" (items in which students take advantage of a situation not of their creation), "fabricating information" (items that may not be clearly perceived as unethical) and "ignoring prevalent practices" (items that students may see as permissible and ethical); the coefficient alphas for each factor were over .70 for a United States student sample and .65 for a Chinese student sample.

An additional element to academic dishonesty is the role of technology. While the web is a resource, some are concerned that this generation of students may have a different idea of what is considered 'fair use' (Scanlon, 2004). The web could be increasing the problem of plagiarism; a quarter of college students surveyed have plagiarized from the Internet, but students perceive that significantly more students than that are doing so (Scanlon, 2004). Additionally, while term paper mills have existed for years, the ease of getting papers has increased with various web sites (Born, 2003; Park, 2003). The concern is that, if students perceive that Internet cheating is commonplace, they will be more likely to engage in it (Scanlon, 2004). Thus, consideration of academic dishonesty must include the technological elements that can impact it.

With measuring academic dishonesty, McCabe and Trevino (1993; 1997) developed a scale that asked students about 12 types of self-reported academic dishonesty on a one (never) to five (many times) scale; Cronbach alpha was reported to be .83 but the factor structure was not reported (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Others have used similar measures based on either a subset of these original items (McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield, 2001; Chapman, et al., 2004) or included additional items (Bolin, 2004; Brown, 1995; Brown, 1996; Brown, 2000; Iyer & Eastman, 2008; Kidwell et al., 2003). When reported, the Cronbach alphas ranged from .75 (McCabe et al., 2001) to .90 (Bolin, 2004). Iyer and Eastman (2008) found academic dishonesty to reflect four dimensions: (i) Cheating (made up of five items), (ii) Seeking Outside Help (made up of five items), (iii) Plagiarism (made up of five items), and (iv) Electronic Cheating (made up of two items) with coefficient alpha values ranging from .70 to .85. Finally, Allen, Fuller, and Luckett (1998) Perceived Cheating Index included 12 specific forms of cheating. Many of the items were similar in concept to that utilized by McCabe & Trevino (1993; 1997) and Brown (1995; 1996; & 2000). For the Perceived Cheating Index, "the Kuder-Richardson formulation (KR-20 = .77) was used to assess reliability" (Allen et al., 1998, p. 44).

The importance of asking questions about specific instances of academic dishonesty, as opposed to general ones, is noted by Chapman, et al (2004). Swift and Nonis (1998) found that, when students were asked about cheating in general terms, 60 percent of the students admitted to having cheated at least once, but when the summated score for all specific forms of cheating behavior are totaled, 87 percent of the students admitted to having cheated at least once. Thus, identifying specific cheating behaviors may uncover cheating better than a general question (Nonis & Swift, 1998); however, some feel that direct, self-report, measures of cheating may underestimate cheating (Allen et al. 1998).

REASONS STUDENTS ENGAGE IN ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

In looking at why students cheat, Williams and Hosek (2003) stress that students, even dishonest ones, are rational and that the decision to cheat is a conscious decision and that the benefits of cheating outweigh the risks. In measuring the reasons for students' unethical academic behavior, Brown (1995; 1996; 2000) selected 11 reasons, based on previous studies, why students might engage in these practices and asked respondents to rate, on a one (not at all likely) to five (very likely) scale, the likelihood that each of the reasons would account for why they participated in these practices. Similar measures were also used by Brown and Choong (2005). While neither Brown (1995; 1996; 2000) nor Brown and Choong (2005) reported the reliability or factor structure of these measures, Iyer and Eastman (2008) found their Unethical Reasoning Scale to be unidimensional with a coefficient alpha of .72.

In looking specifically at these items, they address a variety of reasons why students would behave unethically, including to gain something (such as to get a high grade and it was a challenge or thrill), lack of motivation (such as has the time but does not want to study and feels the work is irrelevant), a situation justifying unethical behavior (such as does not have the time to study, difficulty of material, instructor is poor or indifferent, and peer pressure to do it), or seeing unethical behavior as having a low negative impact (such as feels no one is hurt by the behavior, low risk of getting caught, and everyone does it). Finally, Iyer and Eastman (2006), similar to earlier findings (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Park, 2003; Straw, 2002), found that those most likely to commit academic dishonesty were male, undergraduates, non-business students, members of Greek social organizations, and those who had low self-esteem.

IMPACT OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

There is concern that, if students see academic dishonesty as a normative behavior, they will also view unethical business behavior as a normative behavior (Mangan, 2006). If they think everyone else is cheating, they will be more likely to cheat (McCabe, 1999; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; 1997) and when they get into the business world, if they feel cheating is commonplace and acceptable, they may also engage in unethical business practices (Cole & Smith, 1996; Mangan, 2006). Cole & Smith (1996, p. 892) found that students had both weaker ethical values than experienced business people as well as "an unrealistically negative view of the ethics of business people." Karassavidou and Glaveli (2006) found that academic dishonesty is positively related to students' attitudes towards unethical managers' business behavior. This suggests that the impact of academic dishonesty extends beyond that of the classroom.

This concern that unethical students could become unethical business leaders is increased as there is evidence that there are significant differences in the ethical levels of students versus practitioners. Glenn and Van Loo (1993) found that students consistently make less ethical choices than practitioners and that the ethical levels of students may even be declining. DeConinck and Good (1989), in looking at sales issues, found that managers indicated a greater concern for ethical behavior than students and that students indicated a stronger desire for success, despite ethical constraints being violated. Sparks and Hunt (1998) noted the need for ethical sensitivity as people must first recognize that an ethical issue exists, but that ethical sensitivity can be learned as practitioners were more able to identify violations of professional ethics than students (Sparks & Hunt, 1998). Wimalasiri (2000) however, found that students and practitioners demonstrated similar levels of sensitivity to ethical issues. Singhapakdi and Marta (2005) found mixed results in comparing marketing students with practitioners. They found students to be more relativistic as well as more idealistic than practitioners (Singhapakdi & Marta, 2005). Additionally, students were less likely to perceive the moral intensity of issues and have less ethical intentions than practitioners; but there was no significant difference regarding the students' and practitioners' perceived importance of ethics (Singhapakdi & Marta, 2005). These results suggest concern over the ethical levels of students.

Faculty and administrators trying to deal with academic dishonesty need to understand several different issues. First, is the idea that academic dishonesty is made up of multiple factors. Second, is the idea that plagiarism and cheating are similar, but unique concepts. Third, is the idea that students see some academically dishonest behaviors as more unethical than others. "The ethics of cheating is very situational for many students" and

universities have the responsibility to not just deter and punish cheating, but to also educate students to understand the ethical consequences of their actions (McCabe, 2005, p. 26). Fourth, is the concern that the use of technology is impacting unethical behaviors. Thus, we created four hypotheses to test regarding the relationship between the reasons students offer for their unethical behavior and the different elements of academic dishonesty.

- H1:** Those students who feel they have stronger reasons for unethical behavior are more likely to cheat than those students who feel they have weaker reasons to cheat.
- H2:** Those students who feel they have stronger reasons for unethical behavior are more likely to seek outside help than those students who feel they have weaker reasons to seek outside help.
- H3:** Those students who feel they have stronger reasons for unethical behavior are more likely to plagiarize than those students who feel they have weaker reasons to plagiarize.
- H4:** Those students who feel they have stronger reasons for unethical behavior are more likely to use electronic methods to cheat than those students who feel they have weaker reasons to cheat.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample And Procedure

We focused on two state universities in the southern region of the United States using convenience samples of different classes for different majors. A letter requesting faculty cooperation was sent before the start of the semester in which we planned to collect the data so that faculty had time to plan how to incorporate our request into their syllabi. The lead time also gave us the opportunity to try to attain adequate student representation from the different majors offered on the two state university campuses. A total of 421 students completed the survey.

An instruction sheet was given to each faculty member who agreed to participate in the study. All instructors read the same introductory script to their students, which included: (i) the purpose of the study, (ii) the amount of time it would take for the students to complete the survey instrument, and (iii) the reassurance as to the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Additionally, the beginning of the survey contained a brief paragraph noting that the survey instrument had been reviewed by the University's Institutional Review Board, that the students were permitted to stop at any time without penalty, that the results would be kept confidential (there were no items on the survey in which the students would be disclosing identification data), and a contact person for questions about the survey. All students present in the classes when the survey was handed out completed the survey, i.e., the only students who did not complete the survey were those who were absent that day for class. Thus, the researchers did not perceive an issue with non-response bias.

Survey Instrument

Academic Dishonesty was measured with the four factor, seventeen items utilized by Iyer and Eastman (2008) scaled on a five point scale (never, once, few times, several times, and many times). To measure the reasons for unethical behavior, we used the unidimensional, eleven items noted in Iyer and Eastman (2008) from Brown's (1995; 1996; 2000) "Reasons For Unethical Behavior," scaled on a five-point scale (not at all likely, somewhat likely, neutral, likely, to very likely, similar to Brown (1995; 1996; 2000). The survey items are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Scales Used

Academic Dishonesty	
Cheating	
	Used crib notes on a test. (C1)
	Copied from another student on the test. (C2)
	Helped someone cheat on a test. (C3)
	Cheated on a test in any other way. (C4)
	Manually passed answers in an exam. (C5)
Outside Help	
	Have someone check over a paper before turning it in. (OH1)
	Asked someone about the content of an exam from someone who has taken it. (OH2)
	Give information about the content of an exam to someone who has not yet taken it. (OH3)
	Worked with others on an individual project. (OH4)
	Visited a professor to influence a grade. (OH5)
Plagiarism	
	Taken credit for full participation in a group project without doing a fair share of the work.(P1)
	Received substantial, unprecedented help on an assignment. (P2)
	Copied a few sentences of material from a published source without footnoting it. (P3)
	Fabricated or falsified a bibliography.(P4)
	Purchased or found a paper off the Internet to submit as your own work(P5)
Electronic Cheating	
	Used a cell phone to text message for help during an exam. (EC1)
	Used a cell phone or another device to photograph an exam. (EC2)
UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR	
According to you, you would involve in unethical behavior:	
UB1	When you want a get a high grade.
UB2	When you have the time but do not want to study.
UB3	When you do not have time to study.
UB4	When nobody is hurt by my behavior.
UB5	When the material is difficult to understand.
UB6	When there is a low risk of getting caught.
UB7	When the work is irrelevant to my major coursework.
UB8	When the instructor is poor or indifferent.
UB9	When everyone else does it.
UB10	When doing it is a challenge or thrill.
UB11	When Peer pressure makes me do it.

There were 421 completed and usable questionnaires. Approximately 51 percent of respondents were females, 25 percent belonged to some fraternity or sorority, and 46 percent worked more than 20 hours per week. Sixty-five percent were upperclassmen (i.e. junior or senior in college), with ten percent being graduate students. The mean GPA was 3.05 with a standard deviation of 0.44.

HYPOTHESES RESULTS

To test the four hypotheses, we did a median split of the sample in terms of their responses to the reasoning for unethical behavior to obtain two subgroups reflecting high (strong) and low (weak) responses to the reasons for unethical behavior. We then compared the means for these two groups (via independent t-tests) on the four categories of academic dishonesty in the hypotheses to test if there were significant differences in the levels of academic dishonesty for those students who felt that they had stronger reasons for their unethical behavior versus

those students who felt they had weaker reasons for their unethical behavior. We found support for all four of our hypotheses as shown in Table 2.

Hypothesis One measured if there would be more cheating (such on as tests) for those students with stronger reasons for their unethical behavior versus those students with weaker reasons. The result of the independent t-test was significant ($t = 10.921, p < .000$). This suggests that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for committing unethical academic behavior are more likely to state that they have cheated on tests than those who felt they had weaker reasons. Hypothesis Two measured if students would seek more outside help if they felt they had stronger reasons for unethical behavior than those students with weaker reasons. The results of the independent t-test was significant ($t = 5.196, p < .000$), suggesting that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for their unethical behavior more likely to report seeking unauthorized outside academic help than those who felt they had weaker reasons.

Hypothesis Three measured if those students who felt they had stronger reasons to plagiarize (such as on papers) would be more likely to plagiarize than those with weaker reasons for their unethical behavior. The results of the independent t-test was significant ($t = 9.826, p < .000$), suggesting that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for their unethical behavior are more likely to commit acts of plagiarism than those who felt they had weaker reasons. Finally, Hypothesis Four measured if those students who felt they had stronger reasons for unethical behavior would report higher levels of e-cheating than those who felt they had weaker reasons for unethical academic behavior. The results of the independent t-test was significant ($t = 2.743, p < .007$) suggesting that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for committing unethical academic behaviors are more likely to have cheated utilizing electronic methods than those who felt they had weaker reasons.

Table 2
Independent T-Test Results Comparing Strong/Weak Reasons for Unethical Behavior and Academic Dishonesty

Academic Dishonesty Factor	n	M	SD	t	df	p (two tailed)
H1: Cheating						
Strong Reasons	190	10.184	4.328			
Weak Reasons	187	6.369	2.094			
Equal Variances				10.921	274	.000
Not Assumed						
H2: Outside Help						
Strong Reasons	201	15.776	3.697			
Weak Reasons	192	13.766	3.961			
Equal Variances				5.196	386	.000
Not Assumed						
H3: Plagiarism						
Strong Reasons	199	9.724	3.284			
Weak Reasons	191	6.979	2.132			
Equal Variances				9.826	341	.000
Not Assumed						
H4: E-Cheating						
Strong Reasons	202	2.188	.843			
Weak Reasons	194	2.021	.202			
Equal Variances				2.743	225	.007
Not Assumed						

DISCUSSION

We found support for all four of our hypotheses, suggesting that those students who felt they had stronger reasons for committing unethical academic behaviors are more likely to commit academic dishonesty than those who felt they had weaker reasons for unethical academic behaviors. We found this relationship held for all four categories of academic dishonesty: cheating (on tests), seeking outside help, plagiarism (on papers), and E-cheating (electronic cheating on tests).

McCabe et al. (2001, p. 36) noted that there were eight types of academic dishonesty that students consider to be serious: “using crib notes on a test; copying from another student during a test; copying from another student during a test without his/her knowledge; helping someone else to cheat on a test; copying material and turning it in as your own work; fabricating or falsifying a bibliography; turning in work done by someone else; and copying a few sentences of material from a published source without footnoting it.” These items are similar to those in our “Cheating” and “Plagiarism” factors. This is also similar to Roig and DeTommaso (1995), who conceptualized academic dishonesty in terms of cheating and plagiarism. Additionally, some of the most unethical practices found by Brown (1996) were copying off another’s exam, passing answers during an exam, and allowing others to see exam answers which were part of our “Cheating” factor. Thus, it makes sense that there would be a significant positive relationship between the reasoning for unethical behavior and these areas of academic dishonesty (H1 “Cheating” and H3 “Plagiarism”) given that these are the issues that students see as most serious (McCabe et al., 2001).

In terms of seeking “Outside Help” (H2), Allen et al. (1998), Chapman et al. (2004), and Rawwas et al. (2004) found that students did not see all behaviors as cheating. Several of our items in the “Outside Help” factor were similar in idea to those in Rawwas et al. (2004) “Ignoring Prevalent Practices” factor, such as visiting a professor and comparing work with classmates before submitting it. Additionally, two of our “Outside Help” items dealt with giving and getting exam content information outside of the exam situation; this was noted by students in Chapman et al. (2004) as not really being seen as cheating. Finally, the least unethical practice found by Brown (1996) was having someone check over a paper before turning it in, which was included in our “Outside Help” factor. Additionally, Brown (1996) found the unethical practices engaged in most frequently by students included the following: having someone check over a paper before turning it in, asking for or giving the content of an exam, and working with others on an individual project, all which were included in “Outside Help” factor. Thus, even those students may not see seeking outside help as really being academically dishonest, those students who felt they had stronger reasons for being unethical, were more likely to seek outside help than those students who felt they had weaker reasons for unethical behavior.

Finally, for H4 (“E-Cheating”), the literature describes the concern academics have with students’ attitudes and use toward the Internet (Born, 2003; Park, 2003; Scanlon, 2004) and its impact on academic dishonesty. As with our other variables, those students who felt they had stronger reasons for unethical academic behavior, were more likely to use their cell phones for cheating on tests, “E-cheating” than those students who had weaker reasons for unethical academic behaviors.

In terms of the implications of our findings, the findings suggest that students are rationalizing their academic dishonest behaviors and those students who feel they have stronger reasons for committing academic dishonesty are more likely to be more academically dishonest. For professors and administrators, we recommend that they discuss these rationalizations with students and how they do not excuse academic dishonesty. If they can get students to see that they cannot justify their reasons for committing academic dishonesty, maybe they can reduce the amount of academic dishonest behaviors occurring at their universities.

Future research can build on the work in this paper to discuss the implications of how academics can address these issues. For example, how can faculty and administrators best change students’ attitudes regarding academic dishonesty and what students consider as unethical behavior? While Iyer and Eastman (2008) note that students’ levels of social desirability may impact what kind of approach to reducing academic dishonesty is more useful and Eastman, Iyer, and Eastman (2006) discuss what the literature suggests can be done on the school,

professor, and student level to reduce academic dishonesty, future empirical research needs to test these different approaches in solving the problem of academic dishonesty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper, through a series of t-tests, found evidence of significant links between those students who feel they have stronger reasons for unethical academic behaviors reporting that they are more academically dishonest in the areas of cheating, seeking outside help, plagiarism, and E-cheating than those students with weaker reasons for unethical academic behaviors. These results suggest that to reduce these different acts of academic dishonesty, faculty and administrators need to directly address the rationalizations that students are using for their behavior, as those students who feel very likely that these rationalizations for engaging in unethical behavior yield more reporting of academically dishonesty acts.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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