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# Academic cheating in college students: relations among personal values, self-esteem and mastery

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## Abstract

Academic cheating is one of the most blamed and still frequent and somehow accepted practice presents in the life of college students. In the current study we are interested to look at the relation among this trend and personal values, self-esteem and mastery. Also, the frequency and type of cheating is studied. Self-esteem and mastery feeling is negative associated with cheating. Small, negative correlations were obtained between cheating and values placed on honesty and academic achievement. Students with a more optimistic view on human nature cheat less, but there was no relation between the cynic ones and cheating.

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*Keywords:* academic cheating, self-esteem, values, mastery

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## 1. Introduction

Plagiarism and academic cheating are hot subjects in the field of education, and the echoes attract interest not only from psychologists or teachers but also from media, politicians and general public. Recent data showed that the phenomenon is expanding but not directly by open recognition but indirectly through less willingness to recognize cheating or to report it and greater tolerance of it and greater engagement in it doubled by lesser readiness to acknowledge the harm (Nabi, 2012; Herbst-Bayliss, 2013). Two of the most recent papers on academic cheating (Anderman, & Murdock, 2006; Brent, & Atkinson, 2011) review many of the themes surrounding the subject, from motivation and causes, to individual characteristics and social factors that associate with this behavior. This topic is not a new one, Brownell (1928, cited in Whitley, Jr., 1998) being among the first interested in studying it. Along the years there was more or less awareness in this matter, but the complexity of the phenomena is an agreed fact.

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## 2. Objectives and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Objectives

There are three objectives for the present study: to identify the frequency of academic cheating among students, to check the relation between self-declared academic cheating and the presence of this behavior in classmates and to verify for any relations among academic cheating, moral values, self-concept and his own philosophy on humane nature.

### 2.2. Hypotheses

Keeping in mind the objectives of the research, it is expected that:

- There are significant differences between cheating behavior depending on sex, with males cheating more frequent than females.
- Self-reported cheating is positive associated with cheating in colleagues
- Students with high self-esteem and high mastery feeling will cheat less.
- Students with a cynic vision on human nature will cheat more often in contrast with those who trust people.
- Students who value academic achievement and honesty will cheat less.
- Students perceive that others are cheating more than themselves.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Instruments

All instruments were filled together with the first one asking about cheating behavior, followed by the ones about self concept and ending with personal values and philosophy on human nature.

*Cheating behavior questionnaire* is asking about the frequency of nine types of cheating behavior on a four points scale. Each question requires an estimation of the frequency of the specific behavior for the subject himself and also an estimation of the frequency in subject's colleagues. The alpha Cronbach coefficient for self-reported cheating behavior is .86 and in others is .74.

*Rosenberg self-esteem* scale is well known in measuring overall self-esteem, presenting a strong alpha Cronbach coefficient of .92.

*Mastery scale* (Pearlin et al., 1981, apud Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991) measures how a person considers his/hers life' chances to be under his/her own control in contrast to being fatalistically ruled. It is a seven items, four point answering scale questionnaire, with an internal consistency of .79.

*Revised philosophies on humane nature questionnaire* (Wrightsman, 1974, apud Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991) is a two dimension scale: one positive (10 items) referring to the belief that people are conventionally good, and one negative, named "cinism scale" (also 10 items) that measures the degree a person consider that people don't deserve to be trusted and that mostly everyone acts selfish. Alpha Cronbach = .82 for the positive dimension and alpha Cronbach = .71 for cinism scale.

*Personal value scale* (Scott, 1965, apud Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991) was divided and only two dimension were selected: academic achievement (sixteen items, internal consistency = 0.81) and honesty (seventeen items, internal consistency = .78). High scores describe persons who value academic achievement and honesty.

### 3.2. Participants

Sixty three second year participants from two fields of study – one in engineering and one in economy were enrolled. Mean age for the participants was 21.1 years of age, with a minimum of 20 years and a maximum of 24, balanced by sex (thirty males and thirty three females).

The participants filled in five questionnaires, keeping anonymity except for their age and sex.

**4. Results**

The first objective aimed to collect information about the type of academic cheating that is more frequent, with nine different behaviors being listed. There is some hesitation in placing too much trust in the results giving the nature of the questions, but nonetheless, some interesting facts were assembled (tab.1).

The most frequent cheating behaviors are allowing/helping others to cheat, using leaflet during exams, plagiarism and receiving more help than is acceptable. The least practiced cheating behavior is to buy ready-made papers and to hand in papers entirely made by someone else.

Table 1.The frequencies of cheating behavior in second year students

Cheating behavior	Mean	Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
Hand in a paper entirely made by someone else	1.65	51.7	31.7	16.7	0
Offer someone else my paper	1.87	33.3	46.7	20	0
Received help more than acceptable	<b>2.03</b>	31.7	40	21.7	6.7
Received the subject or the results in advance	1.65	38.3	58.3	3.3	0
Help someone else to cheat	<b>2.05</b>	28.3	41.7	26.7	3.3
Copy from closest seated colleague	1.90	46.7	20	30	3.3
Use plagiarism	<b>2.03</b>	40	25	26.7	8.3
Bought ready-made papers	1.30	70	30	0	0
Use leaflet during exams	<b>2.05</b>	20	58.3	18.3	3

Although the mean points are not that high, more than half of the students reports that they sometimes receive subjects or the results of an exam in advance, probably due to successive time schedules during exam session with not enough variety from a group of students to another.

Checking for sex differences in cheating behavior, the results showed no significant difference ( $t=.2, p=.83$ ), meaning that males and females don't differ in the frequencies of using cheating behavior. A positive association is found between self-reported cheating and estimation of cheating in others ( $r=.73, p<.001$ ), meaning that in groups where cheating is a practice it is more common to find this behavior at an individual level too as a result of group pressure, or modeling, or lack of supervision from the teaching staff (Whitley Jr., 1998).

A negative, medium correlation was obtained between self-concept variables and cheating behavior (tab. 2)

Table 2. Correlation between cheating behavior and self-concept

Variables	Self-esteem	Mastery
"I cheat"	-.65***	-.67***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Students with a high self-esteem and a high mastery feeling cheat less, meaning that those who value themselves and have a feeling of control and anticipation, think that a results of an action depends more on their own actions, so they reduce the amount of incorrect behavior.

Similarly, a negative and medium correlation was found between academic fraud and the belief that people can be trusted and are fundamentally good ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ). No significant correlation was revealed between cynicism and cheating, denoting that students who consider that each person is acting for his own good, not necessary are those who use cheating as a way to get along with academic chores. Trusting in others may generate a more open and respectful behavior based on reciprocity and kindness, but the lack of trust does not engender dishonest activities, nor does associate with ones.

Moral values like honesty and academic achievement seem to associate at low values with shortage of cheating, as presented in table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between cheating behavior and moral values

Variables	Academic achievement	Honesty
“I cheat”	-.40	-.31
p <.001	p <.05	

A bit surprising, honesty correlates lower than academic achievement, one possible explanation being that fraud in universities may take a lot of forms and some of them are more acceptable than others, less blameworthy and rather common.

Comparing someone's own cheating behavior and that of his/her colleagues, students tend to consider that others are more dishonest than themselves, six out of nine academic frauds reaching statistical significance (tab.4).

Table 4. Differences in cheating behavior between self-reported fraud and perceived fraud in others

Cheating behavior	Chi squares	p
Hand in a paper entirely made by someone else	18.85	.004
Offer someone else my paper	36.71	< .001
Received help more than acceptable	21.65	< .001
Received the subject or the results in advance	11.12	.08
Help someone else to cheat	29.77	< .001
Copy from closest seated colleague	29.28	< .001
Use plagiarism	17.08	.04
Bought ready-made papers	2.40	.30
Use leaflet during exams	16.25	.01

Examining the previous results it might be said that situations of buying ready-made papers or receiving the subjects or the results in advance in mostly rare for both type of subjects while using leaflets is equally common for students.

Using linear regression, only mastery feeling and the presence of cheating behavior in others are significant in predicting cheating in individual students, with an adjusted R square = .67 ( $F_{(2,62)} = 62, 95, p < .001$ , Beta coefficient for mastery level = -.42, and Beta coefficient for cheating in others = .53).

## 5. Discussion

In the current study we are interested to look at the relation among plagiarism and academic cheating and personal values, self-esteem and mastery. Also, the frequency and type of cheating is studied. The results showed no significant differences in cheating by gender, but there is a positive correlation between self-reported cheating and the frequencies of this behavior in mates. Similar reports were found in the literature (Thorkildsen, Golant, & Richensin, 2006; Teodorescu, & Andrei, 2008). Chapman and Lupton (2004) found no sex difference in academic cheating in Hong-Kong students' population and more males cheating than females in United States students, with both categories stating that their mates use fraud more often than themselves.

Self-esteem and mastery feeling is negative associated with cheating. Murdock and Stephens (2006) explain that relation between doing something that is wrong and self-value is more complex and, in order to preserve self-esteem a person incline to make more external and unstable attribution for the causes of his own behavior. In this way self-esteem will not be diminish. In a review of reasons to cheat offered by students in pharmacology, out of twenty-two themes only two were internal attribution, the rest were all external (Murdock, & Stephens, 2006). Feeling of mastery, on the other hand is more unique and direct related with internal motivation, with self-involvement in the task and with the need of understanding. Consequently, students with high mastery level are incongruent with cheating (Stephens, & Gehlbach, 2006).

Small, negative correlations were obtained between cheating and values placed on honesty and academic achievement. Morality and responsibility are seen ones again as complex factors that are determined not only internal but also external. The presence of strong moral codes inside the rules of a university may increase responsibility and moral engagement in its students. The lack of it or the perception that integrity is not highly

valued in the institution will lower someone's proneness to comply and follow regulation. Once again, if achievement is internal oriented, that person will be involved in knowing and understanding, if it means social comparison, grades and performance, sometimes individuals will cross regulation to get to the results (McCabe, Feghali, & Abdallah, 2007; Brent, Atkisson, 2011).

Students with a more optimistic view on human nature cheat less, but there was no relation between the cynic ones and cheating. Plagiarism, taking answers from a colleague, helping somebody else to cheat and getting help more than acceptable from somebody else are the most frequent ways to cheat.

The findings of the current study support the idea that cheating relates to some internal characteristics but also that there are external factors that if controlled can reduce this practice. No information regarding other moral issues except honesty and values on achievement was collected, even though moral judgment is directly involved in rules breaking. Also other studies showed an important effect of the how a person is explaining the need for cheating and what kind of cheating are considered justified, but we didn't collect data of these nature. A last limit of the study is represented by the topic itself, desirability in answers being suspected.

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