

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND STUDENT PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between academic dishonesty and student personal responsibility. Also of interest was the professors' estimate of prevalence of academic dishonesty. A sample of 271 traditional age undergraduates from a regional southwestern university was administered a Demographic Questionnaire, the Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire, and the Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10. The Professors' Opinion Questionnaire was administered to 44 professors. Overall, a significant inverse relationship was found between academic dishonesty and personal responsibility. Women with high academic integrity displayed highest sense of personal responsibility while women with high academic dishonesty displayed lowest sense of personal responsibility. However, this link between academic dishonesty and personal responsibility did not hold for men. Most professors were found to underestimate the prevalence of academic dishonesty, while half of the surveyed students admitted to some form of academic dishonesty.*

[E-mail at sangeeta.singg@angelo.edu for a copy of the Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10 (SPRS-10).]

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty has been a concern in higher education for about seven decades (Blankensip & Whitley, 2000; Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992), however, "a concerted research effort" has been made only for the past three decades (Davis et al., 1992, p. 16) with over 100 published studies (Whitley (1998). A wide range of prevalence rates (65% to 100%) has been reported since 1970 (Stearns, 2001). The most commonly used method to assess prevalence rates has been student self-report, which has yielded fairly accurate rates (Cizek, 1999, cited in Finn & Frone, 2004). Davis et al. (1992) traced a history of cheating rates going as far back as 1941 when the rate was reported to be 23%, much less than 88% in 1980. McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2001) also reached a similar conclusion after reviewing a decade of research that some forms of cheating had dramatically increased. On the average, it is estimated that 70% of students engage at least once during their college enrollment in some form of academically dishonest behavior (Whitley,

1998).

Many justifications have been given for cheating behavior such as pressure to succeed, student stress, too heavy a work load, ineffective preventive measures by instructors, and peer pressure (Davis et al., 1992; McCabe et al, 2001; Wajda-Johnston, Handal, Brawer, & Fabricatore, 2001). Some researchers have noticed another reason for cheating, a lack of personal integrity (Davis et al, 1992; Eisenberger & Shank, 1985; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999; McCabe et al., 2001). Davis et al. (1992) and Davis and Ludvigson (1995) concluded that to effectively deal with the problem of cheating, institutions and faculty need to be strongly committed to addressing the problem and facilitating the internalization process of ethical behaviors that oppose cheating. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley, and Washburn (1998) echoed this conclusion in their study of a national sample of psychology instructors and gave reasons why academically dishonest behavior should be proactively confronted. One vehicle suggested for reaching this goal is for institutions to adopt academic honor codes which "place significant responsibility on students to maintain an environment of academic integrity, and evidence suggests that they can be quite successful" (McCabe et al., 2001, p. 220). While suggesting for colleges to create an environment of trust and honor to combat academic dishonesty, Dean (2000) concluded, "An emphasis on mature behavior, self-responsibility, and proper conduct enhances academic integrity" (p. 4). In their qualitative study, McCabe et al. (1999) included lack of responsibility and a lack of integrity as additional factors that may influence academic dishonesty.

The construct of student personal responsibility encompasses the concepts of integrity, maturity, proper conduct, and internalization of ethical behaviors. Although several indirect attempts of considering the role of personal responsibility in academic dishonesty have been made by several researchers (e.g., Blankensip & Whitley, 2000 Davis et al., 1992; Eisenberger & Shank, 1985; McCabe et al., 2001, McCabe et al., 1999), this variable has not been examined directly in relation to academic dishonesty. In the present study, we focused on academic dishonesty in relation to students' sense of personal responsibility. Faculty's estimate of prevalence of academic dishonesty was also examined.

In spite of the seriousness of the problem, there is evidence that professors underestimate and ignore the prevalence of academic dishonesty on American campuses (Keith-Spiegel et al., 1998; McCabe et al., 2001; Wajda-Johnston et al., 2001). Also, "many faculty simply look the other way when they see cheating occur in their courses," which may passively encourage cheating (McCabe et al., 2001, p. 226). Whitley (1998) reported that students who cheated in high school or college were more likely to engage in academically dishonest behaviors in graduate school. Furthermore, students who engage in academically dishonest behavior in college tend to engage in dishonest acts in the workplace (Nonis & Swift, 2001). Hence, the unethical behavior continues. A rise in business and political scandals of the 21st century corresponds to and may even rest on the rise in academic dishonesty in college. Therefore, it is essential

that institutions create a climate of academic integrity by fully engaging professors in enforcing academic standards of behavior in the classroom and instilling student personal responsibility (Nonis & Swift, 2001). In the present study, we explored the link between academic dishonesty and student personal responsibility, which might add to insight about the problem and aid in designing measures for prevention and remediation of this escalating problem.

Symaco and Marcelo (2003) considered cheating as "a violation of rules and regulations, a phenomenon most people abhor yet profess to have committed at one time or another" (p. 327). Based on their questionnaire, we used the following conditions to define academic dishonesty: cheating on in-class examinations, plagiarism, gaining knowledge of questions of an upcoming test, and stealing or obtaining a copy of the test prior to examination. The student personal responsibility was measured by the Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10 (Singg & Adler, 1999) with an operational definition which includes such things as class attendance, completing class assignments, being reliable, and doing a fair share of work both inside and outside the college. Our independent variables were academic dishonesty and sex and our dependent variable was personal responsibility. Age was controlled by using traditional-age students 24 years old or less.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 271 undergraduate traditional-age ($M = 20.73$, $SD = 2.95$; 38% men and 62% women) students enrolled at a regional southwestern university. There were 67% Caucasians, 4% African Americans, 23% Hispanics, 2% Asians, and 4% reporting to be other. Of these, 28% of the participants were freshman, 26% sophomores, 23% juniors, and 22% seniors.

Instruments and Procedure

Volunteer undergraduate students of 24 years of age or younger were administered a

General Information Questionnaire, the Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire, the Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10, and the Professors' Opinion Questionnaire. The Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire consisted of six questions which were adapted from a questionnaire used in a study by Symaco and Marcelo (2003). Each question asked the respondent to answer how he/she would behave in a given academic situation. The respondent could choose between a response that would signify academic honesty or one that would signify academic dishonesty. Summated rating of the items gave a range of 0 (no cheating)--6 (cheating in all situations) and the responses could also be categorized as honest and dishonest. The questions included the following

conditions for cheating: cheating on in-class examinations, plagiarism, gaining knowledge of questions of an upcoming test, and stealing or obtaining a copy of the test prior to examination. Because different studies have used different definitions of academic dishonesty ranging from very specific to more general (Wajda-Johnston et al., 2001), we used two measures, one specific and one general. First measure was specific to cheating on in-class examinations and second measure used a summated rating obtained from answers to six more common types of academically dishonest behaviors.

The Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10 (SPRS-10; Singg & Ader, 2001) was used to determine how young college students accepted responsibility in everyday life situations. The scale contains 10 positively or negatively worded items with scores ranging from 10 (low) to 40 (high) that are answered on a 4-point scale. Responses range from most always like me to mostly never like me. Some items are scored in reverse order. The scale has an internal consistency coefficient of .74. The SPRS-10 showed a significant positive correlation ($r = .49$, $p < .01$) with the well established Conscientiousness (C) Scale of the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised and it was positively related to academic performance ($r = .21$, $p < .01$) and self-esteem ($r = .23$, $p < .01$).

The Professors' Opinion Questionnaire was used to survey professors' opinions as they related to academic honesty. Four questions were similar to questions asked of students and included the conditions stated above for cheating. Professors could respond to each question by estimating the prevalence of cheating at their campus.

RESULTS

Overall, a significant inverse relationship was found between academic dishonesty and personal responsibility ($r = -.26$, $p < .01$). This relationship was further explored by considering the following analyses.

Cheating on in-class examinations. We expected SPRS-10 mean score of those students who admitted to basic academic dishonesty, cheating on in-class examinations (dishonest students) to be lower than those who did not admit to cheating. Further we examined the role of sex in the relationship between basic academic dishonesty (cheating on in-class tests) and student personal responsibility. The 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) results showed a significant main effect of academic dishonesty on student personal responsibility. Honest students' mean SPRS-10 score ($M=31.55$, $SD=3.81$) was significantly greater than the score for dishonest students ($M=29.62$, $SD= 4.31$; $F_{1, 267} = 12.35$, $p=.0005$). As in the previous studies (Singg, Holscher, & Perez, 2004; Singg, Ledesma, & Baker, 2002; Singg & Potter, 2002), sex did not show significant main effect on responsibility (Men $M = 30.27$, $SD = 4.07$; Women $M = 30.90$, $SD = 3.97$; $F_{1, 267} = 1.31$, ns). The interaction effect of academic dishonesty x sex

was significant with regard to SPRS-10 mean scores of four subgroups ($F_{3, 267} = 3.97, p < .05$). Tukey/ Kramer procedure for pairwise comparisons showed that honest women differed significantly from all other subgroups. Honest women had greater SPRS-10 mean score ($M = 32.40, SD = 3.85$) than dishonest men ($M = 29.85, SD = 5.05; t = 11.59, p < .05$); dishonest women ($M = 29.38, SD = 3.53, t = 16.94, p < .05$); and honest men ($M = 30.69, SD = 3.50, t = 8.89, p < .05$). Of the honest group, a larger portion (65%) were women and of the dishonest group, men (51%) slightly outnumbered women.

Level of academic dishonesty. The summated rating of six questions yielded scores ranging from 0 (no cheating)--6 (cheating in all situations). Interestingly, 0% (0) women scored 6 as compared to 3% (3) men; 8.6% (14) women scored 0 as compared to 5.7% (6) men; and the most frequent score for both sexes was 1, 32.7% (57) women and 35.2% (37) men. The summated scores were categorized to indicate levels of academic dishonesty: 0-1 (none to low), 2-3 (moderate), and 4-6 (high). The data were analyzed by a 3 (academic dishonesty levels) x 2 (sex) factorial analysis of variance. The results were similar to the results for the basic academic dishonesty of cheating on in-class tests. A significant main effect of level of dishonesty was found on responsibility ($F_{2, 265} = 10.21, p < .0001$). The Tukey/ Kramer procedure was applied for pairwise comparisons which showed that only high level dishonesty group had significantly lower SPRS-10 score ($M = 28.84, SD = 4.27$) than the moderate level group ($M = 31.19, SD = 3.68; t = 10.21, p < .05$) and the none to low level group ($M = 31.69, SD = 4.0; t = 17.27, p < .05$). SPRS-10 mean scores for none to low level and moderate level groups did not differ significantly. Again, the main effect of sex on responsibility was not significant (men $M = 30.37, SD = 3.87$; women $M = 30.78, SD = 4.07; F_{1, 265} = .54, ns$). The level of academic dishonesty x sex interaction effect on responsibility was significant. The Tukey/ Kramer procedure for pairwise comparisons showed that subgroup of women with none to low level of dishonesty ($M = 32.79, SD = 3.71$) was the only group that differed significantly from women with high level of dishonesty ($M = 28.24, SD = 4.69; t = 19.09, p < .01$). All other comparisons were not significant. Other subgroup means were men with none to low level ($M = 30.50, SD = 4.13$), men with moderate level ($M = 31.07, SD = 3.56$), women with moderate level ($M = 31.31, SD = 3.76$), and men with high level ($M = 29.45, SD = 3.90$) of dishonesty.

Professors' estimate of prevalence of academic dishonesty. Based on previous studies, we expected professors in the present study to underestimate the prevalence of academic dishonesty on their campus. Fifty-nine percent of professors believed that less than 10% of the students would cheat during an exam. The overall average response on four questions showed that 44% professors estimated the overall academic dishonesty to be only 10% or less, 27% estimated it to be 30% or less, another 23% estimated it be between 50%-70%, and only 6% estimated it to be 70% or more. To put it in another way, overall 71% of the professors estimated the prevalence of academic dishonesty

on their campus to be 30% or less or 10% or less, while 50% their students admitted of engaging in some type of academic dishonesty.

DISCUSSION

Overall, academic dishonesty is negatively related to personal responsibility. Greater sense of personal responsibility in everyday life situations and academic integrity tend to go hand in hand. Maybe because responsible people hold themselves at a higher level and dishonest behavior may create cognitive dissonance, which may deter them from engaging in such behavior.

Further data analyses showed that students who do not cheat on in-class tests tend to display significantly greater sense of personal responsibility in everyday life situations than those students who cheat. Additionally, women who do not cheat on tests tend to stand out and show greatest sense of personal responsibility in everyday life situations, whereas, men who do/don't cheat and women who cheat on in-class tests tend to display a similar sense of personal responsibility. Also, twice as many women as men are likely to report academic integrity (not cheating on tests). However, among those who do cheat on tests, both sexes tend to engage about equally in this behavior. This finding is in line with Whitley's (2001) finding that women tend to experience more negative affect after cheating than do men, but cheat at the same rate. This indicates that sex difference in cheating are diminishing in the 21st century as compared to a decade ago when men were found to cheat more than women (Davis et al., 1992; Whitley, 1998). While comparing studies conducted in 1963 and 1993, McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported a significant increase in test-cheating behavior of women, while incidence of test-cheating remained about the same for men.

While looking at the overall level of academic dishonesty, results were similar to the results for the basic academic dishonesty of cheating on in-class tests, however, additional interesting findings were revealed. While only 3% men committed all of the stated acts of academic dishonesty (cheating on in-class examinations, plagiarism, gaining knowledge of questions of an upcoming test, and stealing or obtaining a copy of the test prior to examination), none of the women reported engaging in all of the stated dishonest acts. Also more women (8.6%) reported not doing any of the dishonest activities than did men (5.7%). The results also showed that students with high level of academic dishonesty tend to display significantly less sense of personal responsibility than those with none to low or moderate levels of dishonesty. The later two groups tend to be similar in responsibility. When role of sex was examined in the relationship between level of academic dishonesty and student personal responsibility, the significant difference in responsibility was found only between women with none to low level of dishonesty and women with high level of dishonesty. Again women with high level of honesty stood out with greatest sense of personal responsibility. Therefore, these findings indicate that personal responsibility may

be linked to academic integrity more in women than in men. Sex-role socialization theory offers an explanation for this difference by assuming that women as opposed to men are more strongly socialized to obey rules (Ward & Beck, 1997 cited in McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Notwithstanding, the variable of student personal responsibility needs to be included in studying and combating the problem of academic dishonesty. Encouraging personal responsibility would discourage academic dishonesty and lead to academic integrity.

We found that professors at the present university underestimated the prevalence of academic dishonesty. A majority of professors estimated the prevalence of academic dishonesty to be much less than what students reported. While 50% of their students admitted of engaging in some type of academic dishonesty, most professors estimated the prevalence of academic dishonesty to be much less than this. For example, 59% of professors believed that less than 10% of the students would cheat during an exam. Several reasons have been given by previous researchers for instructor apathy or lack of active involvement in dealing with academic dishonesty, such as difficulty in proving the dishonest behavior, stress involved in dealing with the problem, not wanting to invest the time in a difficult procedure to deal with the problem, fear of student retaliation, denial of the problem, and feelings of guilt (McCabe et al., 2001; Keith-Spiegel et al., 1998). Keith-Spiegel et al., (1998) found that 71% professors in their study considered confronting cheating students as one of the most negative aspects of their profession. These kinds of attitudes are result of unsupportive administration and undesirable consequences faced by faculty after confronting students suspected of academic dishonesty (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). Therefore, it is imperative that institutions must support their faculty in fulfilling their duty to maintain academic integrity in their classes (Davis et al., 1992; McCabe et al., 2001; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). Then only the remediation plans can work.

The two foci of the present study were to examine the link between academic dishonesty and student personal responsibility, and to examine faculty's knowledge about the seriousness of the problem. Our findings suggest that student personal responsibility and faculty involvement and awareness of the problem should be considered important moderating variables in war against academic dishonesty. It is a national war of the 21st century that has long lasting and serious effects on our nation's future and needs active involvement of our educational institutions, faculty, students, and government.

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