

Cheating

cheat ['chEt]: 1) to deprive of something valuable by the use of deceit or fraud; 2) to influence or lead by deceit, trick, or artifice; 3) to elude or thwart by or as if by outwitting; 4a) to practice fraud or trickery; 4b) to violate rules dishonestly; 5) to be sexually unfaithful -- usually used with *on*; 5) to position oneself defensively near a particular area in anticipation of a play in that area.

<http://www.webster.com/dictionary/cheat>

Cheating takes many forms. The variety of behaviors it entails, and the wide range of contexts in which it occurs, is as diverse as human species itself. From infidelity in the bedroom to malfeasance in the boardroom, people betray, trick, deceive and defraud each other (and sometimes themselves) in a number of creative (as well as mundane) ways and places. This entry for the *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology* will focus on academic cheating, the sort that is most relevant to faculty, administrators, and researchers reading this volume. Specifically, this entry describes several important facets or subcomponents related to the psychology of cheating. These are organized around five core questions: What is it? How often does it occur? Who does it? Why do they do it? When/where do they do it? And, What can faculty do to prevent it?

What is it? Definitions and typologies of academic cheating

It is generally understood that cheating involves an act of deception, fraud or betrayal that often unfairly advantages the cheater over others. However, a cursory review of the literature suggests that there is no universally embraced definition academic cheating. For example, some researchers have defined cheating indirectly and vaguely, such as “a violation of an institution’s policy on honesty,” while others seem to have left the meaning of cheating up to students’ interpretation by asking them directly how often they “cheat” on their work or use “cheat sheets” when they take tests. More typically, researchers have avoided such ambiguity or subjectivity, respectively, by asking students how often they have engaged in a specific set of behaviors, such as “copying from a neighbor during an examination” or “copying material without acknowledging the source.” This latter approach is sometimes combined with a corresponding set of questions that asks students if they consider the behavior “cheating” or to rate how “serious” they think it is. Not surprisingly, the more likely students are to define a behavior as “cheating” the less likely they are to report engaging in that behavior.

In addition to the wide variation in how researchers have operationally defined cheating, several investigators have created various typologies of cheating. Gary Pavela, for example, described four general types of academic dishonesty: 1) the use of unauthorized materials on any academic activity (e.g., using “cheat sheets” during an exam); 2) fabrication of information, references, or results (e.g., falsifying lab results); 3) plagiarism (e.g., copying verbatim another’s work without proper attribution); and 4) helping others engage in academic dishonesty (e.g., allowing another to copy your homework). Newstead and his colleagues conducted an exploratory factor analysis on 21 academic behaviors and derived the following five factors: 1) plagiarism (which included a fabrication item); 2) collaborative cheating; 3) exams, collusion; 4) lying (e.g., lying about a medical condition to get an extension); and 5) exams, noncollaborative. More recently, some

researchers have made a distinction between traditional or conventional cheating and digital or Internet-based cheating.

In sum, academic cheating or dishonesty (the terms are often used interchangeably) has been defined in numerous ways and various typologies have been constructed in an effort to map its vast terrain. Taken together, academic cheating can be broadly defined as the use unauthorized or unacceptable means in any academic work. The means or actions include, but are not limited to, lying, using crib notes during exams, copying other people's work without permission, altering or forging documents, purchasing papers, plagiarism, unpermitted collaboration, altering research results, providing false excuses to miss assignments or make-up exams, etc.

How often does it occur? The “epidemic” of academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is a pervasive problem in secondary and postsecondary institutions. By most accounts in the literature, the majority of students seem to be doing it and doing it in more than one way. For example, in their 2006 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, the Josephson Institute of Ethic found that 60% of secondary students reported cheating during a test at school within the past year (35% did so two or more times) and 33% reported plagiarizing material from the Internet (18% did so two or more times). Donald McCabe has found similar numbers in his national surveys of college undergraduates: 70% admit to engaging in some form of cheating, nearly 25% admit to “serious” test cheating and 40% to Internet plagiarism (77% of students don't believe such plagiarism is very serious). The problem is also prevalent at graduate schools, especially business schools where 56% admitted to some form of academic dishonesty (i.e., copying other students' work, plagiarizing, or using prohibited materials on an exam) within the past year.

The high frequency of academic cheating is not a new problem – it's been labeled an “epidemic” numerous times since at least the 1980s – but there is evidence suggesting that it has grown over time. In “Schooling without Learning: Thirty Years of Cheating in High School,” Fred Schab documented the upward trend of academic dishonesty among high school students over the course of three decades. For example, in 1969 only 33.8% of students indicated that they had “used a cheat sheet on a test”; 67.8% admitted doing so in 1989. Letting other students “copy your work” moved from 58.3% in 1969 to 97.5% in 1989. Similar trends have been reported among college students. More recently, some have claimed that the Internet has *caused* a spike in plagiarism. Although such a concern is warranted (cutting and pasting is, after all, much quicker and easier than retyping word for word), research data suggests otherwise. First, plagiarism rates has not grown significantly, if at all, since the rise the Internet in the early 1990s, and, second, most students who report using the Internet to plagiarize also report using conventional means to do so. In short, the Internet does not appear to be creating a new generation of plagiarists, and is probably best described as a conduit to, not a cause of, such cheating.

Who does it? The demography of the dishonest

The subtitle of this section, “the demography of the dishonest,” is intentionally misleading. It reflects the common assumption that only certain “bad” people cheat, while the rest of us are

“good” people who would never do so. The preceding section on the prevalence of cheating illustrates the faultiness of this assumption. The stark reality is that most students cheat at some point each and every year from middle school and graduate school. Therefore, the question isn’t, “Who does it?” [Every “type” of student cheats - male, female; younger, older; black, white; etc.], but rather, “Who does it more often?” With this in mind, there are some demographic characteristics that have been associated with cheating.

In his meta-analysis of over 100 published studies of undergraduate cheating (for the practical reason of access as well as ethical requirement of obtaining parental consent, there are relatively few studies of cheating among middle and high school students; not enough, that is, to conduct meta-analyses and ascertain meaningful patterns), Bernard Whitley found age and marital status to be the most significant demographic predictors of cheating; specifically, younger and unmarried students were more likely to cheat than older and married students. Sex, parental financial support, on-campus residency, and number of hours of employment produced small effect sizes; specifically, cheating was more prevalent among students who were male, received more financial support from their parents, lived on campus, and were employed for fewer hours per week. Some researchers have used the terms “immaturity” and “lack of commitment” to describe or explain cheating among students with a combination of the demographic characteristics (e.g., young, unmarried, funded by parents, and unemployed).

Although academic ability or achievement (as measured by grade-point average, GPA hereafter) is not necessarily a demographic variable, it has been included in numerous studies of cheating. As with most demographic variables, GPA seems to have only a small relationship to cheating in college; undergraduates with lower GPAs report higher levels of cheating. Again, data at the secondary level is scant, but according to the 29th Annual Survey of Who's Who Among American High School Students, 80% of the USA's best and brightest students reported cheating to get to the top of their class. This study and others suggest that the percentage of high-achieving students who cheat is comparable to that of lower-achieving students. It may be, however, that cheating among high-achieving students may be strategic and selective, and therefore “less” in an absolute sense.

In sum, there is no demographic profile for “cheaters”; most students do it at some point. And, while age, sex, marital status, etc. may be correlated with cheating these demographic variables are almost never strong predictors of cheating. This is especially true when the conceptual model and statistical analyses of the study include psychological, social and contextual factors. Cheating, in other words, is a complex problem. Any attempt to understand it more fully must go beyond demography and examine the more potent psychological and processes that lead to cheating.

Why do they do it? Morality, motivation and misconduct

One of the most insidious aspects of academic cheating is that most students who report doing it also report believing that it is wrong to do. Why, then, do they do it? This question has been approached by numerous scholars in a wide variety of ways. The most direct way, of course, is to simply ask students why they cheat. Studies that have done so have yielded a fairly consistent pattern of results: pressure for grades, perceptions of poor teaching, time constraints, and lack of

interest are typically among the primary reasons students cite when asked why they cheat in school. While this approach may be the most straightforward and efficient, it is also the most atheoretical and superficial. For deeper insights into the question of why students cheat, even when they believe it is wrong, we need to turn to theory-driven studies that have employed more sophisticated research methods.

Some of the earliest and most prominent research on academic cheating focused on moral character to explain why some students did it and others did not. Contrary to expectations, Hartshorne and May in their classic *Studies in Deceit*, did not find evidence that honesty was a fixed, individual trait that reliability differentiated cheaters from non-cheaters. Instead, situational factors, such as risk of detection and group approval, were the most influential factors in determining cheating behavior. Similarly, later studies that investigated the relations between moral development and academic cheating found that students with high reasoning ability cheated just as much as low-level reasoners when the threat of detection was low and the potential reward high. This is consistent with broader findings that moral judgment and moral action are not highly correlated and the other components of moral functioning need to be accounted for.

Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues, for example, theorized that the relationship between moral development and moral action was mediated by two distinct but related types of moral judgment: deontic and responsibility. They described deontic judgment as a “first-order” judgment concerning the rightness or wrongness of given action (deduced from a moral stage or principle) and responsibility judgment is a “second-order” affirmation of the will to act in terms of that judgment. Presumably, students who report cheating, despite having rendered a deontic judgment that it was wrong to do so, did not make a judgment of responsibility; that is, they did not feel a sense of personal accountability to “follow through” and “perform the right action.” Very few studies on academic cheating have directly tested this hypothesis, and those that have used the construct of “moral obligation” to do so. Conceptually, moral obligation and responsibility judgment are very similar, and, as expected, students who reported feeling a stronger moral obligation to refrain from cheating were less likely to report doing so.

Other psychologists as well as sociologists have also been interested in explaining the gap between moral judgment and moral action, and have offered what might be considered the anti-thesis of Kohlberg’s responsibility judgment or moral obligation: moral disengagement or neutralization of personal responsibility. Minimizing consequences (e.g., it’s “no big deal”), euphemistic labeling (or non-labeling, not acknowledging cheating as “cheating”) and displacing responsibility (blaming others) are three of the many disengagement mechanisms or neutralization techniques that individuals use to avoid or reduce self-recrimination when they have behaved criminally or immorally. Empirical research has demonstrated strong positive associations between cheating and moral neutralization. Displacement of responsibility seems to be the most prevalent strategy neutralization technique used by undergraduates: 61% of students who reported cheating rationalized their cheating by blaming others and/or some aspect of the situational context. Similarly, a study of high school students revealed that they were most likely to blame their cheating on teachers, and that this displacement of responsibility to the teacher was most pronounced among high achieving and college-bound students.

Interview studies suggest that many students are aware of the incongruity between their beliefs about cheatings (“It’s wrong”) and their behavior (“I do it”). They acknowledge the incongruity but are quick to dismiss it for the pay out of higher grades. As one student (who scored very high on a moral reasoning assessment, thinks of herself as an honest person and believes cheating to be morally wrong) put it:

Like people have morals, they don't always go by them. ... So I mean, even if you get that test and you're like, "Oh yeah, I cheated on this test," it doesn't lessen that grade. It says an A on the paper and you don't go, "Oh, but I cheated." You're just kind of like, "Hey, I got that A." So it doesn't really matter necessarily, if it has to do with your morals or anything, you just kind of do it.

In other words, students’ academic motivation (pursuit of high grades) can trump their moral judgments. One of the most well-established approaches to understanding students’ academic motivation is achievement goal theory, which posits the existence of two types of achievement goals: 1) to develop ability, often called a mastery or learning goal, and 2) to demonstrate ability (to avoid the demonstration of a lack of ability), often called a performance goal or ego goal. Mastery goals orient individuals toward developing their knowledge, learning new skills, and using self-referenced evaluation criteria. Performance goals, on the other hand, focus individuals on appearing smart relative to others, displaying skills, avoiding the appearance of inability, and the use of norm-referenced evaluation criteria. In educational settings, both types of goals are posited to exist at three levels – school, classroom, and personal. Further, students’ goal orientations are thought to be situational, not dispositional – the extent to which a student is mastery and performance oriented is determined (at least in part) by the classroom goal structures, which are themselves partially determined by the school goal structures.

Over the past ten years, numerous studies have used goal theory to further our understanding of academic cheating. Studies at this intersection of goal theory and cheating have evolved over the past decade and fall into four basic types: inter-individual differences, intra-individual differences, longitudinal, and experimental. In general, these studies have shown that mastery goals are negatively associated with cheating; students are less likely to cheat when they are focused on developing their competence and/or they perceive that classrooms or schools are focused on the development of their competence (these “messages” are communicated verbally through an emphasis on learning and effort as well as non-verbally through instructional and assessment practices). Performance goals, on the other hand, are generally positively associated with cheating; students are more likely to cheat when they, their classrooms or school are focused on demonstrating competence (through, for example, the attainment of high test scores and grades).

In sum, both morality and motivation matter in the perpetration of academic misconduct. In an interesting study that combined these typically distinct approaches to understanding cheating, Tamera Murdock and her colleagues used hypothetical vignettes to isolate the effects of classroom goal structures and teacher pedagogy on students’ beliefs about the acceptability and likelihood of cheating. Consistent with previous research, they found that students believed cheating to be more justifiable (as well as more likely) when the classroom in their hypothetical vignettes was portrayed as focused on grades and the teacher as a poor instructor. They also assessed students’ belief about the morality of cheating (i.e., an absolute, as opposed to context-dependent belief about rightness or wrongness of cheating). Not surprisingly, students’ beliefs about the morality of cheating were less influenced by contextual factors and less strongly

related to the perceived likelihood of cheating; students believe cheating to be morally wrong (regardless of circumstances), but this judgment doesn't much affect their likelihood of cheating.

Where do they do it most often? The “power of the situation”

Individual behavior does not occur in a vacuum; social and situational circumstances exert a powerful influence on personal choices and actions. As discussed in the previous section, students' perceptions of classroom and school goal structure affect not only their cheating behavior but also their judgments about the acceptability of cheating. Also, as discussed above, students' perceptions of teachers' pedagogical competence affects cheating behavior and so, too, do their perceptions of teacher fairness and caring: Students are more likely to cheat when they perceive their teachers are incompetent, unfair, or uncaring.

In addition to these subjective perceptions of teacher qualities, the subject matter also matters. Students report cheating most often in math and sciences courses and least often in social science and humanities courses. Susan Stodolsky's comparative analysis of math and social studies provides some insights into why students may cheat more often in math and science classrooms. Namely, the activity structures (“drill and kill”) and assessment practices (objective, multiple-choice tests) often employed in teaching these domains provide more frequent and accessible opportunities to cheat. However, more research is needed. It may be, for example, that only certain types of cheating (e.g., homework and test-related behaviors) occur more frequently in math and science courses and that other types of cheating (e.g., plagiarism) are more likely to occur in social science and humanities courses.

While all of the foregoing situational factors (real or perceived) have been significantly associated with cheating, peer norms (attitudinal and behavioral) tend to be the most powerful predictors of cheating behavior. For example, Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino's large-scale, multi-institutional study of individual and contextual factors associated with cheating in college, for example, found disapproval of cheating, peer cheating behavior and fraternity/sorority membership to be the three most influential factors associated with cheating. Specifically, students who perceived that their peers disapproved of academic dishonesty were less likely to cheat, while those who perceived higher levels of cheating among their peers and those who belonged to a fraternity or sorority were more likely to report cheating. Moreover, peers are very reluctant to report the cheating others, even at institutions with so called “rat clauses” that require students to do so. Put another way, cheating has become normative behavior among secondary and postsecondary students – it is widely seen and acceptable. Reporting others for cheating, in contrast, would be socially deviant behavior – rarely seen and greatly shunned. Finally, students who cheat rarely get caught. If caught, they seldom are punished severely, if at all.

How can faculty prevent it? Strategies for promoting academic integrity

There are many ways that faculty, administrators, and institutions as a whole have attempted to address the problem of academic cheating in their classrooms or on their campuses. While many focus on the prevention and detection of cheating, others have taken a somewhat different approach: the promotion of academic integrity. While the promotion of academic integrity could be construed as a method of prevention, it is much more than that. Efforts to foster academic

integrity, which are done most effectively as institutions with honor codes or committees, provide students with multiple opportunities and role models for learning the importance understanding and concern for core academic values, such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. While detecting and disciplining student who cheat must be part of any holistic approach, it should not be the primary strategy to address the problem. Educational institutions at all levels should help students understand the meaning and importance of scholarship, intellectual property, and integrity. They should also help students develop the will and skill to participate in the academic life in a fair, honest and responsible manner.

Research indicates that students at institutions with honor codes are half as likely to reporting cheating on tests and one-third as likely to report engaging in plagiarism. These reductions are far greater than any other approach know at this time. Unfortunately, relatively few institutions (particularly at the secondary level where the problem of cheating begins to flourish and, therefore, the need is arguably the greatest) have invested the time and resources to transform the culture of integrity of their campuses. This, despite the fact, that there are now several organizations, such as The Center for Academic Integrity, that offer a wide-range of materials and support for doing so. This being the case, the following strategies are offered to individual faculty wishing to mitigate the probability of cheating in their classrooms.

Reducing In Class Test Cheating

The following are simple strategies that faculty can implement and should use, especially in larger lecture-based courses.

- **Space Seating and Monitor:** Where possible, students should be spread out (leaving a space between them) and faculty should move about the room throughout the examination.
- **Create Multiple Forms:** Whether or not spacing is possible, faculty should create multiply forms of their exams, randomizing both the order of questions and the answers.
- **Ban Digital Technologies:** Given the raise in digital forms of cheating, faculty should ban the use of cell phones, PDAs, calculators, laptops, etc. during exams.

Reducing Plagiarism

- **Make Writing Assignments Clear and Manageable:** Provide students with a list of specific topics or require components.
- **Require Process Steps:** Help students avoid last-minute, late-night plagiarism by requiring a series of process steps – topic identification, outline, first draft, peer exchange – that precede the final draft.
- **Meet with Students to Discuss Their Research Papers:** Where possible, meet with students individually to discuss their papers.

Detecting Plagiarism

- **See the Signs:** Make sure paper address the specified topic or requirements and take notice of changes in the voice or style of the writing or mixed citation styles or formatting, anomalies in diction, etc.
- **Know the Enemy:** Faculty should familiarize themselves with the online sources of plagiarism, such as Cheathouse, School Sucks, Screw School, The Paper Store.

- Use Plagiarism Detector: When plagiarism is suspected, faculty should use text-matching program such as Turnitin.com to ascertain whether plagiarism has in fact occurred.

General Pedagogical Advice

Help Students Adopt Mastery Goals and Develop Academic Efficacy

- Engage: Create learning experiences that tap students' interest
- Challenge: Provide *optimal challenge* and scaffold learning experiences
- Empower: Give students a sense of control over the learning process and the products they create.

Create an Academic Climate that Emphasizes Mastery over Performance

- Diversify: Design multi-dimensional learning environment, where expertise is distributed
- Recognize: Emphasize and acknowledge students' effort to learn and understand, not test scores
- Privatize: Provide private individual evaluation of progress and avoid practices that invite social comparisons of performance differences.

Create a Just and Caring Learning Community

- Play Fair: Establish and clearly communicate learning objectives and assessment practices; when possible, include students in curricular decision-making
- Care: Respect and support students in academic and non-academic ways

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See also Plagiarism, Moral Development, Academic Motivation, Self-Regulation, Peer Norms

Further Readings

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