

# Attitudes, Perceptions, and Tendencies of the Iranian Students in Medical Fields towards Cheating and Academic Dishonesty

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background and Objectives:** Despite universities initiating different controlling systems, cheating is still rampant and a global phenomena. One side of the problem of cheating involves the attitudes, perceptions and tendencies of the university students towards cheating and academic misconduct. The present survey seeks to elaborate on the above aspects among the students at one of the most important universities in Tehran, Iran. **Methods and Sample:** The study has benefitted from the translated and validated version of the questionnaire used by Lupton and Chapman (2002). The sample included 386 students studying at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Tehran in different fields of medical sciences. **Findings and Discussion:** The survey has found some very interesting results on what Iranian university students think of cheating and academic dishonesty, despite all the controlling systems used in assigning homework and initiating mid-term and final exams. Almost 81.1 % of the female students and 85.2 % of male students did not consider “giving the exam answers to someone at the following semester” an act of cheating. Moreover, 72.2 % of students responded that they had not cheated. Interestingly, 65.4 % of the respondents have admitted that they had given information of a previous exam to another student. The results showed that sex did not have any role in cheating and academic dishonesty ( $p=0.826$ ). The results indicate that the students’ attitude towards cheating and academic misconduct was significantly different ( $p<0.001$ ) based on their field of study.

**Keywords:** Medical Education; Cheating; Academic Dishonesty; Higher Education

## INTRODUCTION:

Cheating in academic circles is a problem that many researchers have devoted their time and energy reviewing and analyzing. Many universities have even regulated terms against those who involve themselves in cheating. However, there has become a demarcation between cheating and plagiarism. The University of Calgary, for example, has differentiated between the two, defining cheating as “an extremely serious academic offence” while considering plagiarism as a behavior that “involves submitting or presenting work in a course as if it were the

student's own work done expressly for that particular course when, in fact, it is not” [1]. Other universities have also had similar definitions for such actions [2]. The reasons for initiating such regulations roots from the evidence of dishonest activities on the part of the students. There have been numerous reports on what the students engage in the academic areas in different parts of the world and what their views are concerning the cheating issues [3-6]. The expectations of the colleges and universities would require students to have “proper” behavior, yet the literature suggests that this does not usually

happen: students cheat on exams and assignments and falsify the bibliographies, etc. [7]. With the introduction of new digital technology such as the internet, computers, cell phones, earphones, etc., the methods of cheating have indeed evolved. There existed 225 websites providing people (students) with term papers for school assignments [8]. Today, there are more cheating reported in online environments than those in face-to-face, traditional conditions (9). For some, the burden for committing cheating is put upon the web environment [10].

The concept of cheating per se has been dissimilar among different researchers. Some differentiate between 'planned cheating' and 'panic cheating' [11]. Planned cheating occurs when the person does something on purpose and by full attention to what one is committing, while panic occurs when there has been no plan for cheating, e.g., when one suddenly finds himself not knowing an answer to a question during an exam. Some researchers feel that cheating is the plague of the teaching profession [12]. For other researchers, cheating or academic dishonesty is rampant worldwide and must be addressed decisively.

### **Cheating Across Cultures:**

The culture of Cheating: Some researchers believe that cheating is endemic across cultures [13]. Indeed, there are numerous examples of cheating behaviors and academic misconduct across cultures [14]. The social norms may impact upon the view of what cheating is and what is not. This has support from the social learning theorists as well [15& 16]. In a college or university campus, for example, if more students are seen committing cheating, then not engaging in cheating may be considered unusual or not the norm. In addition, researchers postulate if students come to college with the idea of cheating already on their mind [17& 18], or whether they are honest and have proper academic behavior, and learn cheating during the higher education settings. It is suggested that if the academic staff provides meaningful assignments, as well as creating an atmosphere of academic

integrity, the rate of cheating might be reduced [19]. It might also be important whether the students are studying in fields related to people's lives, like pharmacy, for example, or a purely theoretical major. In one study, it was shown that students of pharmacy have admitted to at least one kind of academic misconduct behavior during their studies [20]. In reality, the students of pharmacy have not considered types of academic dishonesty as being a clear cheating behavior. For some researchers, the culture of cheating behaviors are meant to be gender specific, with males having more tendencies to cheat [21, 22, & 23].

### **Cheating in Different Cultures:**

As was noted earlier, the tendency to cheat is often related to the concept of social learning theory. The evidence abounds on the number of people in different nations who commit cheating during their education studies. In the summer of 2007, the police force in China caught students cheating via advanced computer technology during the university entrance examination [24]. There is increased evidence from students in Australia, Ireland, and the USA committing cheating during academic studies [25]. In some nations, cheating behavior may result in terms of prison time [26]. In Vietnam, teachers were arrested for accepting bribes from the students [27]. In the USA, the students at Stanford University were found cheating more than before [28]. In some cultures, however, cheating, especially among students of medicine, is considered a "bad" behavior [29]. In Poland, the students do not agree what is cheating and what is not [30].

In the west, with numerous immigrations from many nations whose cultures dictate somewhat different social, personal, and interpersonal behaviors, people have to follow individualism. Everything has to be done individually. The reasons are clear: people's languages, religions, verbal and nonverbal communications systems are different. Everything is different; it is quite natural to require students at schools and in higher education to perform the tasks individually.

The homework initiated by the academic staff has to be done on an individual basis. Referring to libraries is an individual act. Cheating has not only been a taboo, it has also been illegal which can easily be seen from the terms and regulations put forth by the universities both in North America and Europe. Therefore, any kinds of face-to-face interactions among the students for the purposes of helping each other on assignments might be considered bad behaviors. The experience of one author of the present paper reminds him of a time [30 years ago) while he was studying in the USA. In one occasion, he had been unable to do his chemistry assignments for the class. When he asked his classmate to give him the assignments, his classmate had replied that such an action was illegal and considered as cheating. As was shown earlier by the available abounding literature, the opinions, or it is better to say that the culture about cheating has changed for the worse.

In a country such as Iran, the group goals and discipline are regarded as having the highest values. Everywhere throughout the nation, the unity is of utmost importance. Therefore, based on some unwritten rules, cooperation and collaboration are promoted, suggested and supported. This might be true in most eastern nations. The ideas of respecting the elders root from the same group goals, even if what the elders say is not really true. Helping the others in need is supported too. Therefore, when the students enter primary schools, they are asked to help other students in every way possible. Children grow up with the opinion that helping one another, even when a classmate is unable to do her homework, is a good thing, the right thing. When they enter universities, they are already mentally prepared with the idea of helping others is the “right” thing to do. A good example is the way that the clergies entering theology colleges follow. These clergies are required to teach the other clergies who are in lower levels than they are. Even clergies live in the same dormitories with those who are in a lower or higher academic positions. The

senior clergies have to teach the juniors, the juniors, have to help the sophomores academically, and so on. In fact, they role model the teachers’ roles. There are no written examinations: only pass or fail. This kind of learning has been promoted and used for hundreds of years. Indeed, this is part of the culture as the blood is in the veins. The previous, traditional schooling systems [also known as Maktab Khaneh = the house for learning) which was basically operated by the clergies followed the same cultural essence of ‘help’. The modern schooling system which is based on a centralized format from the west has not yet been able to change the traditional learning atmosphere. In fact, individual learning has not been supported or advanced by the educational system. The students easily share their books during the same semester. The books are even handed over [with all the answers of the questions in them) to the students on the following semesters. This is an example of what would be considered as academic misconduct in the west.

Lupton and Chapman [2002) in their study concerning the comparative study between the American and Russian university students note that the attitude of Russian and American university students on what is an academic misconduct and what is not are statistically different, however, the researchers could not say why they are different [31]. This might be culturally determined as it was discussed earlier in this paper.

As for the rules and regulations concerning the academic misconduct on the part of the students, and the penalties set forth, the picture is vastly different inside Iran. The main body for initiating these rules and regulations is the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution which was established to fulfill the needs of the new era following the Islamic revolution. The only rule which was approved concerning cheating is the act approved in 1995 which only generalizes the penalties regarding cheating. This body is legalized to make such decisions as the entire educational system, whether higher education or pre-university schoolings, are under its supervision and guidance.

## **Methodology:**

### **Method and Sample**

Undergraduate and graduate Iranian university students from different majors at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Tehran, Iran, were asked to participate in the study. Consent to participate in the study was obtained in advance and the questionnaires were administered in the classes. In Iran, students are assigned in cohorts and remain in their respective class throughout their academic studies. Therefore, students with different majors rarely present at the same time in English classes. Given the sensitive nature of the questions, respondents were repeatedly told, orally and in writing, that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. The respondents were asked to answer as many questions as possible, as long as they felt comfortable with the particular question.

The procedure for conducting the present study followed studies administered by Lupton and Chapmen (2002, 2004) and Lupton, Chapman, and Weiss, (2000) [32, 32]. The survey was translated into Farsi by two professional academic translators whose native language was Farsi, and back translated into English by two professional academic translators against the original English version. The final translated version of the questionnaire was validated for internal consistency and reliability. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  was found to be .80 for the questions related to the attitude side.

A total of 600 SBMU students participated in the study with 386 usable surveys returned of which included majors in medicine (N=39), dentistry (N=27), occupational health (N=23), nursing (N=57), midwifery (N= 26), physical therapy (N=17), medical lab technology (N=32), audiometry (N=24), nutrition (N=21), pharmacy (N=107), and biostatistics (N=12). Although the students were in English courses featuring different curricular formats, the classes included either General English, or ESP (English for Specific Purposes), or EMP (English for Medical Purposes). All

demographic information was considered confidential (See Appendix). Students, on average, completed the survey in ten minutes. The data were analyzed by SPSS 16.

### **RESULTS:**

The data analysis showed that 149 (38.7 %) of the participants were male [age 21-45 years; M=21.68(3.27)], and 234 (61.3 %) were female [age 21-45 years; M=21.35 (3.86)]. As for what the Iranian students consider as cheating and academic dishonesty, which were asked in questions 8-10 in the scenarios presented (See Table 1, and Appendix for the full questions), almost 81.1 % of the female students and 85.2 % of male students did not consider "giving the exam answers to someone at the following semester" an act of cheating. The receiver of the answers for the same exam would not be considered engaging in academic dishonesty by 72.9 % of the male students and 52.2 % of the female students, respectively. Using someone else's projects and homework on a previous semester which would require one to often go to the library; however, would not be considered academic dishonesty by almost half of both male and female students (55.4 % of the male and 50.2 % of the female respondents, respectively).

When reviewing the behavior area of the act of cheating and academic dishonesty, almost half of the students admitted that they have cheated during an exam or for homework (See table 2, and Appendix for Question 6). However, as for the class they were in when they completed the questionnaire, 72.2 % of students responded that they had not cheated. Interestingly, 65.4 % of the respondents have admitted that they had given information of a previous exam to another student (Question 13), while only 42.3 % of the students admitted receiving information about an exam in a previous semester from a student who had taken the exam.

When reviewing the attitude area of the survey, the results showed that sex did not have any role in cheating and academic dishonesty ( $p=0.826$ ). As for the students' academic rank, the Duncan analysis showed a significant difference, showing that the higher

the academic rank, the lower the tendency for cheating ( $p=0.021$ ). This was especially more pronounced between the sophomores and senior students. A Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be  $-0.5$ , showing an inverse linear correlation for the age of the students: the older they become, the less tendency they would have for cheating and academic dishonesty. The students' average (GPA $\leq 20$  in Iranian grading system) did not play any role on their tendency towards cheating (Pearson correlation coefficient =  $-0.5$ ). Finally, no significant difference was found between undergraduate and graduate students on their attitude towards cheating and academic dishonesty ( $p=0.733$ ).

## DISCUSSION:

The study begins to explore whether the students in the east, compared with those in the west, have the same perception when asked about cheating and academic dishonesty. This is evident in the scenario questions 8-10 (See Table 2). A strong majority of the respondents did not believe that handing over exam results and/or receiving them after an exam (questions 8 and 9) is considered academic dishonesty and cheating. Indeed, this is similar in accordance with the results obtained in 2002 by Lupton and Chapman [31]. However, when asked if going to the library instead of using what another student has completed as a project during the semester is wrong (question 10), almost half of the students (47.4 %) reported that it was cheating. This suggests to the researchers a different idea about the cultural differences.

In Russia, for example, a stronger percentage of the respondents considered these acts as cheating [19]. Though the 'yes' answer in our case included only 16.3% , and 29 % for questions 8 & 9, respectively (which are much higher than what the American students have responded), on the 'No' answer side, it may be concluded that they are almost as close. Indeed, Americans and Iranians may be culturally very different, but when it comes to the perception of acts considered as academic dishonesty and cheating, they are more similar.

The questionnaires were disseminated while students were in the middle of the semester, where in most cases no mid-term tests or weekly quizzes were taken. As the students responded, 72.2 % answered that they had not cheated in the usual classroom exams. This may increase the chances of cheating if there had been those tests taken after the mid-term.

The students represented 11 majors at the university. The results indicate that the students' attitude towards cheating and academic misconduct was significantly different ( $p<0.001$ ) based on their field of study; however, as there have been some 9 different majors involved in the study, we may only conclude that in some majors the students do more cheating than in others. Moreover, when it comes to committing cheating (self report on cheating acts, question 6 of the questionnaire; see Appendix) more than half of our respondents admitted that they had cheated (50.1 %). This finding is in line with the study by Sierles, et al (1980) who found that 58 % of the medical students had cheated [34]. However, our results are much higher than those reported in the study by Heather, et al (2010) who found out that only 10 % of their respondents in the school of pharmacy admitted cheating in exams [35].

The Iranian students enter universities directly from high school. The "childish" behavior and teenage manners may stimulate them to cheat on high school exams, sometimes even for no reason (which is future research to identify other reasons), or they may even look at it as a kind of cooperation which was discussed earlier in this paper. When these students enter colleges and universities, they may still have the academic dishonesty mind set developed in secondary school. Unlike the results obtained in the study by Moffatt, (1990, p2) that stated "The university at the undergraduate level sounds like a place where cheating comes almost as naturally as breathing. There, it's an academic skill almost as important as reading, writing and math" [36], our students did not show a strong agreement on the issue. On whether the students believe that others cheat or not, only

12.4 % of our respondents disagreed, while 21.6 % have strong agreement that other students cheat (question 23; see Appendix). This is the opposite of the results indicated by Heather, et al (2010) that a majority of their respondents (90 %) had believed that others cheat [35]. It may be that their students have put the prevalence of cheating burden on other students' shoulders. In our study, it was shown that 29.1 % of the respondents strongly believed that cheating is bad, while 21.2 % strongly disagreed that it is not so bad (See Table 3, and question 19 in Appendix).

Iranian university students are faced with an academic environment, an almost westernized system of education, which is basically in line with the American methods of academic learning. Our results have indicated that as they grow academically, their tendency and attitude towards cheating and academic dishonesty changes for the better: the senior students have much less tendency towards cheating compared with sophomore students. This is similar with the results obtained in other studies [11], where a strong majority of UAE senior students of medicine (82 %) had considered academic misconduct to be wrong. Therefore, we may conclude that the academic environment, growth, and the feeling of being a university student may deeply overshadow the idea of handing over the exam results, or homework assignments, or even direct cheating during exams. Further scrutiny on the issue of changes of the cultural beliefs may be necessary.

From all the academic fields under study, the students were basically undergraduates; however, some of them were graduate students (studying at the masters' level and Ph.D). ANOVA results indicate that there was a significant statistical difference between the attitudes of the graduate and undergraduates for their attitudes towards cheating and academic misconduct ( $p=0.021$ ). In other words, the higher the academic rank, the lower

the tendency towards cheating. This is strongly opposite to the findings in the study by Hrabak, et al (2004) where they found that in Croatia, the higher the academic year the students, the more widespread cheating and academic misconduct among the students in medical fields [37].

On the issue of plagiarism and using other students' work and notes (question 24 of the questionnaire; see Table 3, and Appendix), 10.3 % of our respondents strongly disagreed while 25.5 % of them strongly agreed that this is a form plagiarism. This is quite different from the results obtained in the study by Wood (2004) who stated that plagiarism is rampant among college students [38].

### **Implications for Future Research and Conclusions**

Although cheating and academic dishonesty can be traced back to over 1000 years ago, today, these concepts, exacerbated by technology and norms, are phenomena of the 21 century and truly a global issue for teachers and administrators. Future global studies must look for not just tendencies but study the reasons why. Moreover, the academic staff's attitudes and proctors' beliefs towards cheating and academic dishonesty also need to be scrutinized, if an honest environment is what we are striving for in higher education. Universities spend a lot of time and resources to use proctors and create controlling systems. The results have indicated that there is still a prevalence of cheating among students. An aspect of future studies has to focus on the proctors' attitudes towards controlling systems. Still other aspects which require further researches include the repetitive final exam questions which may motivate the students not to adequately study and prepare for the exams. Students in the medical fields need special attention in this respect as they will deal with patients' lives and a higher level of public scrutiny.

## SELBAT

Table 1: Iranian students' perception of cheating and academic dishonesty based on the answers to questions of the scenarios

| Characteristic (Scenarios)         | Category(Sex) | N   | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------|-----|---------|--------|
| Q8: Whether student A has cheated  |               | 384 | 16.4    | 83.6   |
|                                    | Male          | 148 | 18.9    | 81.1   |
|                                    | Female        | 236 | 14.8    | 85.2   |
| Q9: Whether student B has cheated  |               | 384 | 29.2    | 70.8   |
|                                    | Male          | 148 | 32.4    | 67.6   |
|                                    | Female        | 236 | 27.1    | 72.9   |
| Q10 :Whether student B has cheated |               | 383 | 47.8    | 52.2   |
|                                    | Male          | 148 | 44.6    | 55.4   |
|                                    | Female        | 235 | 49.2    | 50.8   |

Table 2: Iranian students' behavior towards cheating and academic dishonesty

| Characteristic  | N   | Yes (%) | No (%) | NONE (%) |
|---|-----|---------|--------|----------|
| Q2: Knows someone who has cheated at this university.                                       | 386 | 68.7    | 31.3   |          |
| Q3: Knows someone who has cheated in this class.  | 386 | 57.3    | 42.7   |          |
| Q4: Has seen someone cheating at this university  | 386 | 63.5    | 36.5   |          |
| Q5: Has seen someone cheating in this class   | 385 | 55.3    | 44.7   |          |
| Q6: Whether he has cheated during university exam or homework                               | 385 | 50.1    | 49.9   |          |
| Q7: Whether he has cheated in this class (exams or homework)                                | 385 | 27.3    | 72.7   |          |
| Q11: Whether he has ever used someone else's previous exam answers                          | 382 | 48.4    | 51.6   |          |
| Q12: Whether he has ever used someone else's answers as his study guide                     | 382 | 34.3    | 65.7   |          |
| Q13: Whether he has given his information of a previous exam to someone else                | 379 | 65.4    | 34.6   |          |
| Q14: Whether he has taken someone else's information on a previous exam                     | 384 | 68.8    | 31.2   |          |
| Q15: Whether he has given information of his class to someone on a later section            | 378 | 37.6    | 40.2   | 22.2     |
| Q16: Whether he has taken information of the same exam from a student in a previous section | 376 | 42.3    | 44.1   | 13.6     |
| Q17: Whether he has used another student's project or homework                              | 381 | 33.6    | 66.4   |          |

TABLE 3: The percentages of the attitudes of the students towards cheating and academic misconduct

| Characteristic   | Category | N   | 1(%) | 2(%) | 3(%) | 4(%) | 5(%) | 6(%) | 7(%) |
|--|----------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Q 18: Instructor discussing issues tied to cheating reduces amount of cheating |          | 377 | 27.1 | 13.5 | 17.2 | 15.6 | 11.4 | 4.8  | 10.3 |
|  | MALE     | 145 | 29.7 | 15.2 | 19.3 | 10.3 | 9.0  | 4.8  | 11.7 |
|  | FEMALE   | 232 | 25.4 | 12.5 | 15.9 | 19.0 | 12.9 | 4.7  | 9.5  |
| Q19: Cheating is not as bad as it is said                                      |          | 378 | 29.1 | 11.1 | 8.7  | 13.8 | 10.3 | 5.8  | 21.2 |
|  | MALE     | 145 | 26.9 | 7.6  | 11.7 | 11.0 | 12.4 | 4.8  | 25.5 |

|   |        |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|--------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Q23: I believe most students cheat  | FEMALE | 233 | 30.5 | 13.3 | 6.9  | 15.5 | 9.0  | 6.4  | 18.5 |
|   |        | 380 | 12.4 | 10.0 | 16.6 | 18.4 | 10.5 | 10.5 | 21.6 |
| Q24: I believe most students cheat in out-of-class homework                   | MALE   | 146 | 13.0 | 8.9  | 15.8 | 18.5 | 6.2  | 8.9  | 28.8 |
|   | FEMALE | 234 | 12.0 | 10.7 | 17.1 | 18.4 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 17.1 |
| Q25: It is the Instructor's responsibility to make sure students do not cheat |        | 380 | 10.3 | 5.5  | 11.8 | 14.5 | 14.2 | 18.2 | 25.5 |
|   | MALE   | 146 | 11.6 | 2.7  | 13.0 | 15.1 | 17.8 | 13.0 | 26.7 |
|   | FEMALE | 234 | 9.4  | 7.3  | 11.1 | 14.1 | 12.0 | 21.4 | 24.8 |
|   |        | 382 | 22.8 | 8.6  | 14.7 | 13.9 | 10.7 | 6.8  | 22.5 |
|   | MALE   | 148 | 24.3 | 10.1 | 15.5 | 14.2 | 8.8  | 7.4  | 19.6 |
|   | FEMALE | 234 | 21.8 | 7.7  | 14.1 | 13.7 | 12.0 | 6.4  | 24.4 |



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