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Abstract

This study investigated high school students' perceptions of cheating and its prevalence. Students were administered the Academic Honesty Survey to determine their perceptions and prevalence of cheating across three academic settings: tests, homework, and report writing. Overall, students had traditional perceptions of what constitutes cheating. Despite these perceptions, most students cheated. In addition, cheating perceptions and prevalence varied across academic settings. Perceptions and prevalence declined going from test to homework to report writing settings. Three other interesting patterns emerged. First, cheating was tied to effort. Cheating actions that still required students to exert effort were viewed as less dishonest than those that required little effort. Second, cheating was tied to giving versus receiving. Giving information was viewed less harshly than receiving it. Last, cheating perceptions were tied to environment. Cheating behaviors occurring outside the classroom were viewed less harshly than those occurring inside the classroom.

"Just because you plagiarize, that's not like cheating," a freshman high school student informed his teacher, the first author of this article. The student could define plagiarism, and he described various methods of cheating for tests and other schoolwork, but he simply did not recognize that plagiarism is cheating. "Teachers don't tell you plagiarism is cheating; they just tell you not to copy and paste," he argued. This conversation led the teacher, in partnership with educational psychologists, to investigate high school students' perceptions about and prevalence of cheating. How many other students have misperceptions about academic dishonesty and how many students actually cheat?

Cheating is a pervasive problem within American high schools. The topic of student cheating has been researched—both in terms of perceptions and prevalence. In terms of prevalence, most studies report that about 75 percent of students cheat. Bruggeman (1996) compared prevalence of cheating at secular and parochial schools. He found that cheating and lying were prevalent at both types of schools, with between 70 percent and 80 percent of students engaging in dishonest actions. Somewhat surprisingly, cheating was no more prevalent at one type of school than the other. Similarly, Whitley (1998) reported that nearly three in four students admitted to cheating on academic work. Moreover, McCabe's (2001) study of 4,500 U.S. schools reported that 74 percent of students admitted to cheating on exams and as many as 90 percent of students admitted to using the Internet to plagiarize. According to many commentators, educators, and researchers, the phenomenon of cheating has reached "epidemic" proportions (e.g., ABC News Productions, 2004; McCabe & Stephens, 2006).

The prevalence of cheating now seems particularly pervasive where digital technology is involved. The rapid expansion and development of digital technology has transformed academic cheating into "digital cheating." In a recent *New York Times* article, educators and school administrators spoke about how digital forms of academic dishonesty are on the rise (Glater, 2006). One possible reason for this increase is the huge amount of information that is rapidly accessible via computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), search engines, instant messenger systems, cell phones, and MP3 players/ iPods™. Students are now capable of using these systems to plagiarize, take credit for work done by others, falsify data, and download articles to copy and paste on tests and assignments.

In terms of perceptions about what constitutes cheating and the origin of faulty perceptions, students often blame their cheating on teachers' failure to explain cheating adequately (recall the student's comments at the start) or to enforce academic honesty (McCabe 1999). Students might be right. Less cheating occurs when students are taught ethical guidelines (Ames & Eskridge, 1992; McCabe & Treviño, 1993). And, McCabe and colleagues (McCabe, Treviño, & Buttefireld, 2001) found that although teachers support academic honesty policies, they are reluctant to punish cheating. As a result, students witness their peers cheating and getting away with it. Consequently, they come to perceive cheating as commonplace and acceptable.

Educators, meanwhile, often attribute cheating to a fault in students (Anderman & Midgley, 2004). Anderman and Midgley conducted a longitudinal study investigating changes in students' perceptions of cheating behavior. Results

showed that cheating increased as students' transitioned from middle school to high school and that students' perceptions of school and classroom environments were related to their cheating behaviors. In particular, perceptions about cheating changed in accordance with the goals that were emphasized in students' classrooms and schools. Murdock and Anderman (2006) confirmed that students' goals are related to their decisions about cheating behaviors. For example, one or more of the following goals might influence a student to cheat: getting a good grade, avoiding looking incompetent, or impressing the teacher or peers. Similarly, Jordan (2001) believes that students' perceive cheating as wrong but do it anyway because they neutralize their moral standards. Common neutralizing techniques include diffusing responsibility (e.g., "Everyone copies homework assignments from friends."), minimizing consequences (e.g., "Teachers don't even watch us during the test. I won't get caught."), and euphemistic labeling (e.g., "It does not count as cheating because I copied just a few sentences from the Internet source.") (Stephens, Young, & Calabrese, 2007).

Although previous research confirms why perceptions about cheating might change or be at odds with behaviors, it does not reveal students' perceptions about what behaviors actually constitute cheating. Moreover, existing research investigates academic dishonesty as an all-or-nothing behavior when it is possible that students might think and act differently about cheating in different academic settings. For example, a student who believes sharing test answers is dishonest and not do it might believe that sharing homework answers is okay and do it. Moreover, context-specific perceptions and behavior might be at odds. For example, students who perceive that copying test answers is dishonest might do so nonetheless. Therefore, it is important to measure both cheating perceptions and prevalence across academic settings. The present study, then, examined cheating across three common academic settings. Students were asked to gauge their cheating beliefs and actions germane to settings involving testing, homework, and report writing. By evaluating students' cheating beliefs and actions across settings, educators might better gauge students' cheating perceptions and actions, educate students about cheating, and control it.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 100 high school juniors from four 25-student English classes in a large Midwestern high school. This public high school enrolled students primarily from middle SES homes who, on average, had ACT composite scores of 24. Juniors were included because they had sufficient opportunity to form perceptions about cheating and to practice or counter those perceptions. On average, participants had a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 on a four-point scale, worked about eleven hours each week, and spent between one and ten hours per week participating in extracurricular activities.

Instrumentation

The primary researcher developed the 18-item *Academic Honesty Survey* (found in Appendix A) for this study in conjunction with other high school teachers, an academic dishonesty researcher, and an expert in survey construction. In addition, survey construction was guided by literature on academic dishonesty instruments and cheating behaviors (e.g., Anderman & Midgley, 2004; Stephens et al., 2007). Three preliminary items gathered information about students' GPA, weekly employment hours, and weekly extracurricular participation hours in order to determine if these factors related to cheating. These three factors were examined because of their interrelationship and potential relationship with cheating. Academic achievement is somewhat negatively affected by part-time employment (Singh, 1998) and somewhat positively affected by extracurricular activities (Marsh, 1992). Previous research with college students found that cheating was mildly more prominent among those with lower GPAs and those with greater nonacademic responsibilities (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). The main items reflected three main facets of schoolwork: taking tests, completing homework, and writing reports.

Each main item posed a specific scenario and asked two questions: a) Is this cheating, YES or NO; and b) Estimate the number of times you have performed this action as a high school student: (1) 0, (2) 1-2, (3) 3-4, or (4) 5+. The first five items asked students to determine if certain test-taking behaviors are cheating: (1) glancing at a classmate's answers, (2) providing answers, (3) using notes prepared outside class, (4) sharing test questions following an exam with someone yet to take the exam, and (5) sharing test answers following the exam with someone yet to take the exam. The next six items related to homework assignments: (6) completing take-home tests with a partner, (7) copying take-home test answers from a classmate, (8) copying a classmate's homework answers, (9) doing individual homework with a partner, (10) giving a completed assignment to another student, and (11) submitting a classmate's assignment as one's own work. The last four items pertained to completing a report: (12) basing the paper on a movie instead of reading the required text, (13) using *Cliff's Notes* or some other note service instead of reading the required text, (14) downloading information from the Internet as your own, and (15) failing to credit a source in the report.

Procedures

Participating students in four different English classes completed the *Academic Honesty Survey* at the start of the class period in their respective classrooms on the same day. The primary researcher administered the surveys to each class. The surveys were distributed and verbal instructions for completing the survey were given. In particular, students were asked to answer honestly, knowing that their answers would remain anonymous. Students had the opportunity to ask questions before beginning the survey. All students completed the survey within fifteen minutes.

Results

Students' responses were first analyzed with respect to the demographic variables of GPA, work time, and extracurricular activity time. These variables did not affect significantly students' perceptions of cheating or cheating prevalence (all Fs < 1). Therefore, students' responses were examined collectively with regard to cheating perceptions and prevalence in each of the three academic settings: tests, homework, and reports. Results from each academic setting are described in turn, and all data are found in Table 1 in Appendix B.

Tests

Students' responses to cheating in test situations are presented in the upper portion of Table 1. The perception data down the left column indicated that most students had a strong and traditional perception about cheating with regard to test taking. In most cases, 85 percent to 95 percent of students believed these test-taking behaviors constitute cheating. The lone exception is in how students responded to providing test questions to others yet to take the test. Surprisingly, only 47 percent considered this action to be cheating.

Two interesting patterns emerged from the perception data for tests. First, students' perceptions of test honesty seemed linked to effort. Students generally believed it is okay to supply test questions to other students yet to take the test (47 percent thought this was cheating), but it is not okay to supply answers (84 percent thought this was cheating). In the supply questions case, the recipient must still expend effort to answer given test questions; in the supply answers case, the recipient need not expend effort. Second, students perceived actions taken outside of the testing area as more acceptable than if they occur during the test. For example, 94 percent thought that providing test answers during a test was cheating, whereas just 84 percent thought that providing test answers outside of class was wrong.

There is discord between students' test-taking perceptions and actions. Even though most students believed six of the seven actions to be cheating, the bulk of students admitted to cheating in these ways. The upper-right column of Table 1 confirms that 59 percent to 87 percent of students cheated on tests in these ways at least once. Examining the test prevalence data in Table 1, the most prevalent behavior is glancing at other students' papers (87 percent).

Homework

The middle section of Table 1 shows student perceptions and prevalence for cheating on homework. Note that the perceptions for homework are lower than those for testing. In general, students condone dishonest homework practices more than dishonest test practices.

Two interesting patterns emerged from the perception data on homework. First, students' perceptions of homework honesty again seemed linked to effort. When little effort

is involved, such as when submitting someone's work as one's own (93 percent) or copying someone's answers for a take-home test (88 percent), the action was perceived as more dishonest than when students must still put forth effort, such as when doing individual homework with a partner (23 percent) or when doing a take-home test with a partner (67 percent). Second, students' perceptions of cheating depend on whether information is given or gained. More students believed "turning in someone else's previous work as your own" to be cheating (93 percent) than "giving a completed assignment from a previous class to another student" (68 percent). They found "giving" less serious than "getting." When giving one's work, it does not mean necessarily that the work will be used fraudulently, so the behavior was not commonly viewed as cheating. However, using someone else's work by submitting it as your own was clearly perceived as cheating.

Despite a strong indication that several homework practices were considered cheating, students admitted to performing these actions. For example, 93 percent of students declared submitting another student's assignment as their own to be dishonest, but 20 percent of students did this at least once. Students seemed especially prone to ignoring instructions to complete homework individually. Ninety-one percent completed individual homework with a partner and 60 percent gave their completed assignments to a partner. The prevalence of homework cheating might actually be underestimated because of lack of opportunity. For instance, some students might not have ample opportunity to give a completed assignment to another student or submit another student's work.

Reports

In terms of report writing, students' perceptions of cheating are again linked to effort. Few students believed that consulting outside sources to write a report rather than reading the book is cheating. As shown in the bottom portion of Table 1, just 39 percent believed that using a movie to write a book report is cheating, and 53 percent believed using sources like *Cliff's Notes* to write a book report is cheating. This kind of shortcut to writing a report is not viewed as dishonest, perhaps because students must still put forth effort to write the report themselves.

Conversely, students perceive the less effortful direct use of someone else's work as cheating. Table 1 shows that 83 percent believed using Internet information as your own is cheating, and 66 percent believed it is wrong to use someone's ideas as your own. From the opposite—and more startling—perspective, however, one-third of students believed that it is acceptable to plagiarize.

In terms of behaviors, roughly 50 percent of students engaged in these dishonest—or at least questionable—behaviors. These indices of behavior might again be somewhat restricted because of opportunity. For example, there are not always movies or *Cliff's Notes* available for the required book. Moreover, movies might be quite different than the book.

Discussion

The results of this research revealed that most students have traditional perceptions of academic dishonesty. The majority recognized most traditional forms of cheating, though some maintained beliefs that strongly contradict most school handbooks. It seems shocking that even 6 percent of students believed that providing answers during a test is not cheating, or that 54 percent believed that plagiarism is not cheating. Even though most students had a traditional view of what defines cheating, many still cheat. For instance, 85 percent believed glancing at test answers during a test is wrong, yet 87 percent did so.

The disconnection between cheating perceptions and behaviors does not fit well with traditional moral reasoning theory (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984) that posits that people will do what they believe is morally right. The disconnection, though, fits with more contemporary theory (Turiel, 2006) that posits that people do not always do what they believe is morally right. Instead, they weigh other personal considerations that might run counter to moral beliefs. A high school student, for example, might believe that copying a test answer is wrong morally but do it anyway because attaining a high GPA and entering a selective college are personal considerations that outweigh and override moral ones.

Perceptions and prevalence of cheating vary across academic tasks. Generally speaking, perceptions about what constitutes cheating declines from test taking to homework completion to report writing contexts. Cheating behaviors generally decline as well moving from test taking to homework completion to report writing contexts. This odd pattern means that students actually cheat more in academic contexts where they well recognize their behaviors as cheating. This pattern signifies that knowing what constitutes cheating is certainly no deterrent to cheating. As to why cheating is most prevalent in testing contexts, students might view tests as high-stakes (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003) outcomes likely to influence academic and professional careers. And research confirms that students face pressure to cheat in high-stakes testing environments (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Alternatively, students might simply be more ill prepared to answer test questions from memory than to complete homework or write reports using available resources. Inadequate test preparation due to ineffective cognitive strategies (Gubbels, 1999; Rachal, Daigle, & Rachal, 2007) has been linked to cheating (Anderman & Murdock, 2007).

Three other trends emerged. First, cheating was related to effort across academic tasks. Dishonest actions requiring little effort were more likely perceived as cheating than those requiring greater effort. For tests, divulging test answers was perceived more dishonestly than divulging test questions, perhaps because the latter still requires effort (to answer the questions) on the part of the recipient. For homework, less effortful actions like submitting someone's work as one's own or copying someone's answers for a take-home test were perceived more dishonestly than more effortful actions such as doing individual homework with a partner or doing a take-home test with a partner. For reports, less effortful plagiarizing actions were perceived more dishonestly than more effortful actions such as using movies or *Cliff Notes* to help write a report.

Second, cheating was defined, in part, by whether information was given or received. And students clearly thought that it was better to give than receive. For example, just 68 percent believed it was wrong to give a completed assignment to a classmate, but 93 percent believed it was wrong to receive and submit someone else's work as your own.

Third, students perceived actions taken outside of the classroom as more acceptable than similar actions taken inside the classroom. For example, more thought that providing test answers during an in-class test was cheating than providing test answers outside of class. Moreover, students generally perceived out-of-class misdeeds associated with homework and report writing as more acceptable than such in-class deeds during testing. The apparent relationship between environment and cheating perceptions might hinge on teacher monitoring. In the in-class test environment, versus outside of class, students are monitored more closely and have a greater chance of getting caught by their teachers. Perhaps the added risk of getting caught makes the in-class offense seem more serious than the out-of-class offense.

In terms of implications, students should a) expand their perceptions of what constitutes cheating and b) behave more ethically across academic settings. Teachers, of course, can be instrumental in changing students' cheating perceptions and actions. In terms of perceptions, teachers can provide and discuss with students written policies or guidelines about what constitutes cheating. Students who are aware of cheating policies cheat less often than those who are unaware (Ames & Eskridge, 1992; McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Our own informal Internet search of "academic honesty guidelines" uncovered numerous published materials that teachers can adapt for their students. In terms of actions, three teacher practices might reduce cheating: a mastery learning orientation, tougher sanctions for misdeeds, and better monitoring.

Research has confirmed that students are less likely to cheat in mastery-oriented than performance-oriented settings (Murdock & Anderman, 2006). In mastery-oriented settings, students perceive a task's intrinsic value and seek to master it. The learning process is enjoyable, engaging, or rewarding. In performance-oriented settings, students instead perceive a task's external benefits like high grades or a spot on the Honor Roll. Students seek a certain product but are not always concerned about the process for achieving it. Some take short cuts and even cheat to attain their goal. Teachers can raise the intrinsic value of academic tasks and reduce cheating by making tasks more valuable in their own right and by minimizing evaluation procedures that stress high performance over mastery (see Anderman, 2007).

In terms of sanctions, research shows that less cheating occurs when schools establish, communicate, and enforce an honor code that includes serious penalties for cheating (Mc-Cabe, Treviño, &Butterfield, 2001). These researchers point out that when teacher reaction to failure is lax, students tend to cheat more in those classes. One recent example of using harsh sanctions to discourage cheating occurred at Simon Fraser University in Canada (Gatzemeyer, 2009). Students caught cheating received a final grade of "FD" (that meant failure with dishonesty) on their permanent transcript.

Finally, teachers need to better monitor and control cheating across academic settings. Although teachers seem to have considerable control over cheating in test situations where they can directly observe students, cheating actually occurs there more often than in homework and report writing settings where direct observation is less likely. Therefore, teachers must be vigilant about controlling cheating on tests, especially the casual peeking at someone's answers that 87 percent of students sometimes do. One way to reduce test cheating is to make alternate versions of the test for students seated near each other. This is accomplished by rearranging the order of the questions or answers. Another solution is to create different tests for each class period to prevent students from passing along the test questions or answers outside of class. Better test supervision and test security practices should help too.

To decrease cheating on homework assignments, teachers might take one of two routes. One, they can assign work that requires extended or subjective responses that are less likely copied than brief or objective responses. Two, they can minimize homework's summative contribution to final grades and make it a more formative process. As previously mentioned, cheating is less likely when work is completed to attain mastery (Murdock & Anderman, 2006).

Teachers should also educate themselves regarding the cheating tools available to students who are writing reports, especially more recent and technological tools. For example, there are websites where research papers can be purchased. Teachers should also alert students that they have the means to identify cheating. For example, they could tell students that they can identify a plagiarized paper by typing a sentence into an Internet search engine and immediately locating the copied source. Teachers should let students know that they have access to the same websites and literary notes that students do and will not be fooled by plagiarized work. These and other suggestions for monitoring and controlling cheating appear in an article by McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2001).

The present study, of course, has limitations that future studies might address. Two limitations are most apparent. First, our sample was limited to high school juniors of relatively high academic and economic standing. The homogeneity of students might explain why student factors (GPA and outside activities) had no relationship to cheating. Future research can determine if the cheating perceptions and behaviors chronicled here apply to other types of students

as well. Second, although we made some speculations about why students do or do not perceive certain actions as cheating or why they actually cheat, we did not directly investigate these issues. Future research can add a qualitative component that hopefully uncovers the whys behind cheating perceptions and behaviors.

Until such research is conducted, the present study offers these final conclusions for students, teachers, and researchers:

- Cheating is prevalent among high school students across the academic settings of tests, homework, and report writing.
- Students' perceptions of what constitutes cheating are often below ethical standards.
- Even when students perceive a behavior as cheating, they are still likely to do it.

Armed with this information, students, teachers, and researchers should seek ways to link students' cheating perceptions with ethical guidelines and to diminish cheating behaviors across academic tasks.

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Academic Honesty Survey

Please answer all items thoughtfully and honestly. Remember that your responses are anonymous and will be combined and averaged with others' responses.

1. What is your current overall GPA?
2. Roughly how many hours do you spend working at a job each week?
3. Roughly how many hours do you spend participating in extracurricular activities like music, sports, and clubs outside regular school hours?

For each scenario below, answer two questions by circling your choice: 1) Is the described behavior cheating? Yes or No, and 2) Estimate the number of times you have performed this action as a high school student: 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5 or more.

Items 4-8 pertain to test taking.

4. Glancing at someone's answers during the test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

5. Providing answers to someone during the test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

6. Using outside notes during the test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

7. Providing test questions to someone yet to take the test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

8. Providing test answers to someone yet to take the test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

Items 9-13 pertain to homework completion.

9. Doing an individual take-home test with a partner

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

10. Copying someone's answers for a take-home test

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

11. Copying someone's homework answers

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

12. Doing individual homework with a partner

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

13. Giving a completed homework assignment to another student

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

14. Submitting someone's homework as your own

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

Items 15-18 pertain to writing reports.

15. Writing a report based on the movie instead of reading the book

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

16. Using outside resources to write a report without reading the book

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

17. Using Internet information as your own

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

18. Writing a report without crediting others for their ideas

    Yes   No

    0   1-2   3-4   5 or more

Appendix B

Table 1
Percentage of students who perceived behaviors to be cheating and percentage of students who performed these actions at least once in high school

Behavior	Perception	Prevalence
Tests		
1. Glancing at someone's answers during the test	89	87
2. Providing answers to someone during the test	94	74
3. Using outside notes	95	54
4. Providing test questions to someone yet to take the test	47	68
5. Providing test answers to someone yet to take the test	84	59
Homework		
6. Doing individual take-home test with a partner	62	51
7. Copying someone's answers for a take-home test	88	45
8. Copying someone's homework answers	75	90
9. Doing individual homework with a partner	23	91
10. Giving a completed assignment to another student	68	60
11. Submitting someone's homework as your own	93	20
Writing Reports		
12. Writing a report based on the movie instead of reading the book	39	53
13. Using outside resources to write a report without reading the book	53	43
14. Using Internet information as your own	83	46
15. Writing a report without crediting others for their ideas	66	34