Ethon and unethic.

Students and the unethical behavior during academic years
Magdalena Iorga*, Tudor Ciuhodaru, Sandy-Narcis Romedea

Abstract

In a morally corrupt world, education remains the sole rescue anchor to guide the new generation towards a rehabilitation of moral values. The finding is based on the fact that all those studies which have followed moral reasoning have highlighted the importance of moral reasoning in daily life but also in the professional career, the certainty that moral reasoning is deeply connected to the academic preparation level and the importance of teachers as role models able to inspire values and moral principles. The papers’ focuses want to identify students’ unethical behaviors during the academic years and the differences between different types of faculties.

Keywords: academic field, students, unethical behavior, cheating.

1. Problem Statement

The numerous studies focused on the issue of ethics at an academic level have emphasized the fact that, in the last fifty years, at least at the level of students’ moral behavior, including someone into the “deviant student” category means that this person is not among those who were included or included themselves, at least once during their academic years, in an academically wrong behavior (Hollinger&Laza-Kaduce, 1996, quoted by R. Cummings). Bower’s study (1964), carried out on over 5000 students in 99 higher learning institutions, revealed that three out of four students admitted to having practised different forms of academic fraud, such as: plagiarism, copying answers from other students during exams, consulting their notes during written exams, doing homework that the teacher indicated as individual work in collaboration with others, or lying to the teacher about their reasons for turning in papers past the deadline. McCabe and Trevino (1993) investigated a batch of 6000 students in 31 academic campuses, with results similar to Bowers’ study. Two out of three investigated individuals admitted to having taken active part in questionable behaviors during their academic years prior to the study. Other studys (Chidley, 1997; Hollinger&Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; Lupton, Chapman&Weiss, 2000; Tang&Zuo, 1997; Thorpe, Pittenger&Reed, 1999) prove that the percentages of academic dishonesty stay over 70%.

James Rest summarizes the main conclusions: between the ages of 20 and 30, young adults go through dramatic and spectacular changes in their strategies for solving ethical problems. These changes are related to certain shifts in social perception and in the social roles that individuals take. The scale of these changes is
associated to the length and level of education. Educational attempts to enhance acuity in sensing moral problems and to reach maturity in ethical reasoning have had measurable results (Rest, 1996).

Scientific literature mentions a few important aspects, such as: proving the importance of the environment, personality traits and moral commitment in shaping the ethical portrait (Barnett & Dalton, 1981), underlining the fact that, in the maturation of ethical behavior, the discipline policies and support of the faculty are significant (Kibler, 1993), identifying five areas of manifestation of unethical behavior: cheating in tests and homework; inappropriate use of resources; the quasi-error, the subtle manipulation and the coarse manipulation (Ferrel & Daniel, 1995), proving the importance of the student’s maturity level, with regard to the level of ethical behavior (Diekhoff & LaBeff, 1996), identifying peer disapproval as the strongest factor to influence avoidance of unethical behaviors and actions (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), the assimilated practice of ethical behaviors throughout the years of study or the indirect participation in these later, in one’s professional career (a study that included second and third-year students revealed that those who participated in or witnessed unethical behaviors and situations would later engage in this type of behaviors - Werner & Heiberger, 2000), proposing three important factors for covering the levels of moral maturation, namely: the psychological, demographic and situational factor (Hardin & Carpenter în 2001).

2. The study

The participants in the study are 369 students of one of the main Romanian university centres. The students come from five prestigious Romanian universities, of various profiles: technical, arts, medical sciences, agriculture, and teaching. They were surveyed about the practice of unethical behaviors during their academic years. 64.2% are female (N=237) and 35.8% are male (N=132). They mainly come from north-eastern Romanian counties – 93.7% (N=346), especially from Iași, the studied university centre – 44.4% (N=164), the rest of 16.3% (N=23) being from other regions of the country. Most of them come from urban areas - 80.5% (N=297), the rest being from rural areas - 19.5% (N=72). Students from 19 types of faculties and 21 counties were taken into consideration. The surveyed subjects attend specialized courses (academic years 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). The data has been analyzed using the SPSS 17.0 program for Windows, with frequency and descriptive data field analysis, cross-analysis, benchmarking averages (ANOVA, T-test) and nonparametric tests (chi-square test).

3. Findings

The study emphasized the differences between the various fraud methods employed by students, comparatively in the five universities, taking into account the following variables: sex, the environment of origin, year of study, number of siblings and one’s place in the family, the type of family and the motivation leading to such behaviors.

Out of the 369 surveyed students, 237 are female, representing 64.2% of the total, and 132 are male (35.8%). The data on their environment of origin shows that 80.5% come from urban areas and 19.5% come from rural areas.

3.1. Practising unethical behaviors (copying) in relation to the type of university and faculty

The surveyed students come from Al. I. Cuza University (43.4%, N=160), the Technical University (37.4%, N=138), the University of Applied Life Sciences and Environment (10%, N=37), the University of Medicine and Pharmacy (6%, N=22) and the University of Arts (3.3% N=12). The students come from 19 faculties (Theatre, Mathematics, Medicine – General Practice, Psychology, Philosophy, Agriculture, Economy, Biology, Informatics, Geography, Automatic Control and Computer Engineering, Civil Engineering and Building Services, Machine Manufacturing and Industrial Management, Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology, Electrical Engineering, Hydrotechnical Engineering, Geodesy and Environmental Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering, Textiles & Leather Engineering and Industrial Management, Architecture).

Table 1. Distribution according to the type of university
3.2. Students’ unethical behaviors

265 students taking part in the study, representing 71.8%, admitted to having copied during exams at least once; 83% of these (N=220) were never caught, 16.2% (N=43) were occasionally caught, and only 0.8% (N=2) were always caught.

Several types of unethical behavior were found out to be practised during academic years. A higher frequency was encountered with second year students, by comparison with the other years of study (I, III-VI).

Table 2. The frequency of unethical behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unethical behavior</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using unquoted Internet sources</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copying answers from another student during examinations</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using notes during written examinations</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing homework that the teacher indicated as individual work in collaboration with other students</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading an abridged version, a summary of the work, instead of the complete version</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out in advance the subjects to be tackled in an examination, from different sources</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not quoting and not emphasizing the quotes inserted into an academic paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among others, these behaviors are worth mentioning: writing an academic paper under the name of another student (9.15%), visiting a teacher or his family after an exam, in order to influence him (0.4%), lying to the teacher about the reason for turning in a paper past its deadline (7.5%), illegal access to computer databases (1.1%), sabotaging lab experiments (1.9%), buying academic essays, papers etc. (4.2%), offering “gifts” to teaching staff in cases of exam failure (3%), buying the subjects to be given in future exams (1.5%), paper or written material fabrication, by inventing quotation sources (4.5%).

3.3. Students’ motivation to practise unethical behaviors

The most frequent reasons why students resort to unethical behaviors are related to objective parameters of academic life (the high levels of difficulty of courses or the short time to prepare), while the least frequent reasons are related to subjective factors (teacher’s lenience, the importance of a good grade for the student).

Table 3. Students’ motivation with regard to their cheating colleagues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation of the behavior</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course was difficult</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient time to prepare</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was too much to learn for this course</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The subject was not interesting</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The behavior was practised by several colleagues as well</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s lenience</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of the grade</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The large number of credits of the course</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4. Students’ attitudes towards those who copy

Over 90% of students have witnessed a colleague copying. Out of these, 60% made observations directly to those colleagues, while only 4.8% told the teachers about those behaviors.

Copying is a behavior to be penalised in any educational institution, and there are various methods to discourage and decrease its practice, in order to offer equal and honest chances to all students. Penalties can greatly vary from one university to another, from throwing students out of an exam to expelling them from the academic environment. Discouraging this behavior by the educational institution, however, is not supported by the students’ attitudes. The study reveals that students do not take attitude in order for their copying colleagues to be penalised, although this might harm them. An earlier study (Iorga, 2011) emphasizes the fact that the answers of students who witness their colleagues copying and do not take a moral attitude take the stance of indifference (“it’s his business”) and by transferring the responsibility to the teacher (“the teacher should take attitude”).

3.5. Family typology and unethical behaviors

The issue of work migration has important effects on Romanian families. The SOROS and UNICEF statistics have revealed that over 8% of children have at least one parent working abroad. The migration of parents is motivated by the desire to ensure better living conditions for their families and a better education for their children. Including this variable in the study has not revealed a significant difference in the practice of unethical behaviors between children whose families are home and those with at least one parent working abroad.

Approximately 18% of the surveyed students have at least one parent and 30% of them have at least one relative working abroad: the mother (8.1%), the father (4.3%), both parents (5.2%), siblings (11.7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents’ category</th>
<th>General batch</th>
<th>Batch of students who copy</th>
<th>Percentage differences</th>
<th>The evaluation of the difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
<td>significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion

Beside the data regarding the academic motivations, data was collected on reasons that supposedly influence the emergence of unethical behaviors, such as: a single parent family, siblings or parents working abroad, the number of siblings, getting married, and having children.

It has been observed that most students come from two-parent families (85.9%, N=317); 13.6% (N=50) of the students surveyed come from single parent families, and 0.5% (N=2) are orphan. In this sense, one may affirm that 70.7% (N=261) of students have no close relative working abroad, 8.1% (N=30) have the mother working abroad, 4.3% (N=16) have the father working abroad, 5.2% (N=19) have both parents abroad and 11.7% (N=43) have siblings abroad.

Most students are single children – 37.4% (N=138), closely followed by those who have one sibling – 34.1% (N=126), by those with two siblings – 19% (N=70), and by those with three siblings – 6% (N=22). Only 3.5% (N=13) come from families with more than 4 children. Of the students who have at least one sibling – 62.6% (N=231), most – 41.5% (N=96) are the youngest in the family, 30% (N=70) are the eldest, and 28.5% (N=65) have both younger and older siblings.

Almost a quarter of the surveyed students are married – 24.7% (N=91), and 19.2% have children (N=71), of whom 2.8% (N=10) have children out of marriage.

The justification of unethical behavior has most often been the difficulty of the subject studied (31.3%), followed by the insufficient time to prepare (38.1%) and by the great quantity of study material (31.7%). Other commonly invoked reasons have been that the subject was not interesting (23.4%), and that others were doing the same (18.9%). On the other hand, the less commonly invoked reasons have been teacher lenience (12.8%) and the importance of a good grade (5.3%), or the large number of credits of the course (1.9%).

90% (N=332) of those surveyed witnessed at least one colleague copying. Of these, 83.2% (N=307) took no attitude whatsoever. Of the 62 who did take an attitude, most (54.8%, N=34) warned those who were copying,
40.3% (N=25) told the other colleagues about this fact, and only 4.8% (N=3) alerted the teachers about what had happened. With respect to the students’ attitudes when witnessing a colleague copying, those who engage in such behavior themselves tend to warn more often than those who never cheat, but the difference is not statistically relevant – p=0.126. No factor to influence the attitude towards those who copy has been detected (sex, the environment of origin, the university or faculty, family abroad etc.), the statistical calculations revealing p>0.7 confidence indices for all of these factors.

The cross-analysis has not turned out differences between those who copied and those who did not, apart from their environment of origin, relatives working abroad, their university and faculty, and their year of study. Thus, students from rural areas have had a higher percentage among those who copied, but calculating averages has not revealed a significant difference (p=0.096). The students who have not copied have been found out, to a greater extent, not to have parents working abroad – namely, 31% of the students with no parent working abroad have not copied, while this is only true for 20.5% of those with parents abroad (p=0.05).

A comparison between universities shows that, only in the case of students preparing to become teachers, the number of those who copy is lower than two thirds. In other universities, those who copy represent over 75%, T-Test calculations showing the significant difference between the first university mentioned and each of the others. Faculty analysis shows that only Mathematics and Psychology students have a higher percentage of students who do not copy, by comparison with those who do (63.6% vs. 36.4%, respectively 50.7% vs. 49.3%). At all other faculties, the percentage of those who have not copied is below 25%. In addition, there has been a significant difference between students who are single children, 62.3% of whom have copied, by comparison with those with one or several siblings, 77% of whom have copied (p=0.02). In the case of students who have siblings, those with one sibling have had the highest percentage of cheating behaviors – 81.7%, the percentage decreasing as the number of siblings increases.

The ANOVA test establishes the confidence index p=0.045. Moreover, a difference may be noted between students, in relation with their order of birth within the family. 34.6% of the students who are the elder siblings do not copy, but only 15.6% of the youngest siblings do not copy, the average calculation revealing a confidence index p=0.047.

Being married and having children seem to represent “protection factors” against copying, but the average calculation confirms this only in the case of married students, 35.6% of whom do not copy, compared to single students, 25% of whom do not copy (p=0.049).

5. Conclusions

The results of the study show that over 70% of students practise unethical behaviors. Psychology and Mathematics students are the least inclined to adopt cheating behaviors. There is a number of student categories more frequently associated with unethical behaviors: those whose parents work abroad, those who come from families with two children, and, by birth order, those who are the youngest in the family.

With regard to marital status data, unmarried students are more prone to practise unethical behaviors than married students. No significant differences have been revealed to depend on sex, the environment of origin, or becoming a parent.

References


