Keeping Up With the Joneses: Students’ Perceptions of Academically Dishonest Behavior

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To understand undergraduate perceptions of academic dishonesty and honor codes, our participants estimated the likelihood that they, their friends, and the average college student would plagiarize or cheat on tests. Undergraduates reported that the average college student was most likely to cheat, their friends would be less likely to cheat, and they themselves would be the least likely to cheat. They did not believe that an honor code would have a large effect on their cheating behaviors, but it would reduce the cheating behaviors of their friends and the average student. We discuss these results in the context of social norms research.

Academic dishonesty is a pressing issue for all members of college campuses. When students plagiarize or cheat, they compromise their personal integrity and the institution’s reputation. The percentage of college students who cheat has remained relatively consistent (McCabe & Treviño, 1996; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001) and is typically between 66% and 75% (McCabe & Treviño, 1996, 1997). What has changed is that people who cheat do so repeatedly and in an increasing number of ways (McCabe & Treviño, 1996). Importantly, computer technology (i.e., the Internet) may have some influence on the specific type of plagiarism, such as copying one or two sentences without sources (McCabe et al., 2001).

Whitley (1998) reported that several factors influenced the likelihood students will engage in academically dishonest behavior. For example, age and self-reported cheating behavior are negatively correlated, and when individuals reported higher competence in a particular task, they were less likely to cheat. A campuswide honor code also reduced the amount of cheating.

One of the strongest predictors for cheating behavior is one’s perception of peers’ cheating behaviors (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). This finding implies that the perceived cheating culture on campus influences students’ propensity to engage in academic dishonesty. The idea that students use peers’ behavior to guide their behavior is interesting given the substantial social norms literature showing that students are notoriously inaccurate when it comes to judging the norm.

According to the social norms literature, people use their beliefs about other people’s behavior to make decisions about their participation in similar behaviors (Perkins, 2003a). Martens et al. (2006) found that college students overestimated alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, and number of sexual partners among campus peers. Thus, if students believe that most college students binge drink, then they may binge drink using the mistaken belief that “everyone else is doing it” as a justification for their behaviors.

Importantly, the social norms literature demonstrates that regardless of the accuracy of a particular belief (e.g., that most college students binge drink), these ideas exert a powerful influence on decision making. Consequently, students may find themselves struggling to fit in with a social norm that might not actually exist. In this case, they increase their drinking to meet their expectations about the average college student’s drinking habits. Both their accurate and inaccurate perceptions rather than reality guide their behavior (Perkins, 2003a).

To better understand the role of students’ perceptions on academically dishonest behaviors, we examined undergraduate perceptions of college cheating and how a modified honor code might influence these behaviors. Traditional honor codes typically incorporate elements such as unproctored exams, a signed honesty pledge, a student-based judicial process, and a student obligation to report any suspected cases of academic dishonesty (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2003; McCabe & Pavela, 2004; McCabe,

Treviño, & Butterfield, 2002; Melendez, 1985). Alternatively, modified honor codes make academic integrity a priority, let students participate in the judicial review process, and some allow unproctored exams (see Dufresne, 2004, for more information on honor codes). In our study, students estimated the likelihood that they would engage in academically dishonest practices (cheating on an exam and plagiarism). Each participant also estimated the likelihood that the average college student and their friends would cheat and plagiarize to determine if students would apply different standards to these three different groups.

Method

Participant and Institution Characteristics

Fifty-six undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course (23 men, 33 women) earned partial course credit in exchange for their participation. Participants were freshmen (73%), sophomores (18%), and juniors (9%) and represented 18 majors. The institution where we collected these data is a private liberal arts college that enrolls fewer than 6,000 students and currently does not have an honor code. We collected data during the spring semester, which suggests that these students had already spent at least one semester learning about the rules and procedures of the college.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed a survey assessing their estimates of different cheating behaviors during a 20-min experimental session. They estimated out of 100 assigned papers the number of times that they, their friends, and the average college student would plagiarize. They made the same three judgments for the number of tests (out of 100) on which they, their friends, and the average college student would cheat.

Following these questions there was a brief explanation of a modified honor code:

One type of honor code requires that students sign a pledge stating that they will act in an upstanding manner and that they will not engage in any type of academic dishonesty. Moreover, one institution has these basic tenets in their honor code: All students and employees of the College are responsible for reporting alleged violations of the Codes of Conduct to the appropriate College official (This would include knowledge of any type of academic dishonesty). Students are expected to uphold worthy standards of personal conduct and to recognize the principles and obligations of good citizenship. Students are expected to participate fully in the academic and social programs of the College. Students will have their views and welfare considered in the formation of College policy. They will be consulted or represented on College councils and committees that affect them as members of the College Community.

The participants then gave a second set of estimates of plagiarism and cheating assuming this type of honor code was in place.

Results

Figure 1 shows student perceptions (expressed in mean percentages) of plagiarism and cheating with and without the honor code. We submitted the percentage means for the estimates of plagiarism and cheating to

![Figure 1. Student ratings of plagiarism and cheating.](image-url)
separate 2 (no honor code vs. honor code) × 3 (average college student, participant’s friends, and respondent) repeated measures ANOVAs using a .05 alpha level for all of our analyses.

The plagiarism and cheating dependent measures ANOVAs yielded identical results. There were significant main effects for the honor code variable: plagiarism measure, \( F(1, 55) = 15.21, p < .05, \text{MS}_e = 75.47 \); cheating measure, \( F(1, 55) = 21.52, p < .05, \text{MS}_e = 97.83 \). Both analyses yielded significant main effects for the target person variable: plagiarism, \( F(2, 110) = 30.82, p < .05, \text{MS}_e = 144.5 \); cheating, \( F(2, 110) = 46.93, p < .05, \text{MS}_e = 163.23 \). Most important, both two-way interactions were significant: plagiarism, \( F(2, 110) = 5.14, p < .05, \text{MS}_e = 24.62 \). Paired samples Bonferroni adjusted \( t \) tests comparing the six pairs of control and honor code bars help to clarify the nature of these interactions. Each of the paired \( t \) tests was significant at the adjusted \( p \) value of .016. Students believed that an honor code would have a greater influence on the average student’s behavior, plagiarism \( t(55) = 4.16 \); cheating \( t(55) = 4.43 \); followed by their friend’s behavior, plagiarism \( t(55) = 3.94 \); cheating \( t(55) = 3.69 \); and then their own behavior, plagiarism \( t(55) = 2.67 \); cheating \( t(55) = 3.06 \).

Discussion

When considering academically dishonest behaviors, students reported that others are more likely to engage in these behaviors than they are. When assessing how an honor code would affect these behaviors, students reported that whereas an honor code would substantially reduce other students' propensity to engage in academically dishonest behaviors, an honor code would not have as strong an effect on their own behavior.

Our participants committed the same social norms error (overestimating the likelihood that other students would engage in a behavior) as others have done with alcohol and drug usage and sexual behaviors (Martens et al., 2006). The similarity of these two errors is an important consideration when developing strategies to combat academic dishonesty. We can conclude that our participants believe other students, including their friends, cheat and plagiarize more often than they themselves do. As such, when students evaluate the decision to cheat or not, if they believe the average student cheats, they might believe that it is in some way acceptable for them to engage in cheating behaviors also. We acknowledge that the external validity of our findings is limited by the small sample, but these results give initial insight into the role that perceptions play in students' decisions to engage in academically dishonest behavior.

Intervention Strategies

A social norms approach to behavioral intervention includes providing individuals with accurate information about typical behaviors to puncture the inaccurate perceptions that individuals use to justify their behavior (Perkins, 2003a). If academic institutions want students to model academically ethical behaviors, the institutions should present them with information demonstrating that these ethical behaviors are the norm.

Successful social norms intervention strategies need to have consistency, depth, and breadth. Perkins (2003b) emphasized the importance of conveying messages multiple times, across situations, and via a variety of media. If students do not receive consistent messages throughout their college experience, it is more likely that the message and the resulting desired behaviors will lose their perceived importance and seem relevant only in certain situations. Whitley (1998) emphasized the importance of developing an academic culture that supports an honor code and discourages cheating. Part of this process might include regular exposure to the institution’s policies of academic integrity via the college catalog and other published materials.

References


**Note**

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