



The relationship between cheating behavior and sensation-seeking

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty is a problem in academia and cheating is a problem in society at large. Sensation-seeking was proposed as a personality trait that is positively related to one's likelihood to cheat. A sample of 105 undergraduates participated in a research activity for course credit where cheating on a trivia game to win a cash prize by taking answers from a sealed folder was an option. As anticipated, sensation-seeking predicted cheating. Consistent with previous research, males were also more likely to cheat than females. Targeted interventions are suggested as a possible remedy.

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1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty has long received the attention of empirical research. The opposing outlooks of scholastic cheating discussed by Drake (1941) function as a reminder of the relevance of this research topic. One perspective on academic dishonesty offers that cheating only hurts the individuals undertaking the act (Drake, 1941). Without actually learning course material, students will be ill suited to succeed in future endeavors. A divergent perspective regards cheating as a character defect and an affront to the integrity of academic institutions (Drake, 1941). The recent abundance of widely publicized financial (e.g., the corporation Enron allegedly misreported profits to defraud investors) and political scandals (e.g., the Governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, allegedly tried to sell a seat in the US Senate to the highest bidder) involving unethical professional behavior has served as a reminder of the continued importance of research on academic misconduct (Kisamore, Stone, & Jawahar, 2007; Smyth & Davis, 2004). Given that research indicates academic dishonesty is positively related to various forms of occupational dishonesty (e.g., Sims, 1993), even when controlling for age and gender (Nonis & Swift, 2001), the notion that cheating only hurts the student engaging in the act seems more tenuous than ever.

The current study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature examining which factors predict academic dishonesty. Past studies investigating whether demographic and personality factors correlate with academic dishonesty typically relied on self-report measures to assess attitudes towards cheating and occurrences of cheating (e.g., Davis & Ludwigson, 1995; McCabe & Trevino,

1997). Similar to recent research examining the relationship between perceptions of free will and cheating (Vohs & Schooler, 2008), this study eschewed self-report measurement, instead favoring a behavioral approach to the assessment of cheating. In doing so, this study seeks to provide behavioral validation for the existing survey data that suggests a significant association between sex and student cheating. In addition, a personality factor is explored that has not received empirical attention in the academic dishonesty literature: sensation-seeking.

1.1. Sex

The majority of findings regarding sex and academic dishonesty indicate that males engage in cheating more frequently than females (Smyth & Davis, 2004). Although, some studies have found null results (Houston, 1977), and others have reported that females cheat more than men. For instance, Leming (1980) found that women cheated more than men across low and high risk cheating conditions. However as of 1997, the major studies including multi-campus samples rather than single campus samples reported significantly lower levels of cheating for females (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). This cross-institution finding was replicated by McCabe and Trevino (1997) and also found in Tibbetts' (1999) work that looked at students across academic disciplines. Due to this robust empirical trend, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1: Males are more likely to engage in academic cheating than females.

1.2. Sensation-seeking

Sensation-seeking is conceptually defined as the drive to experience novel, complex, unusual, and intense stimuli (Zuckerman,

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1979, 1994). Past research has linked sensation-seeking to illicit drug use (Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002) incarceration (Herrero & Colom, 2008), and risky sexual behavior (Donohew et al., 2000). Sensation-seeking has also been conceptually and empirically linked to impulsive behavior (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993), with researchers treating sensation-seeking and impulsivity as complementary components of the same decision-making process (Donohew et al., 2000).

The ramifications of impulsive and risky decision-making, typical of individuals high in sensation-seeking, have been identified by rational choice models of deviance. The perceived pleasure and excitement of risky decision-making has been linked to deviant behavior (Hoyle et al., 2002). Furthermore, individuals with low self-control (high impulsivity) have been found to favor deviant behavior because it can serve as an easy shortcut for obtaining various resources (Tibbetts, 1999).

Germane to the context of academic dishonesty, Kisamore et al. (2007) examined the relationship between cheating and prudence: a personality factor conceptually and empirically related to conscientiousness (Murphy & Lee, 1994) and sensation-seeking (see Bogg & Roberts, 2004 for detailed analysis). Given the empirical support for the relationship between deviant behavior and risky/impulsive decision-making, it was surprising that prudence was not significantly correlated with perceptions of cheating occurrences. However, prudence was negatively associated with the consideration of misconduct and positively correlated with reporting the cheating of others. It is possible that the ambiguous association between prudence and cheating occurrences can be attributed to the lack of a direct cheating measure in the study. Due to institutional review board concerns, Kisamore et al. (2007) did not ask self-incriminating questions about participants' cheating, instead relying on "fairly subtle measures" (p. 386) to infer dishonest behavior. The following hypothesis is offered to examine whether the expected relationship between cheating and sensation-seeking is exposed when using a design that was not reliant on self-reported cheating or indirect measurement.

H2: Sensation-seeking is positively associated with cheating.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 104 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern University were recruited for the study. All participants received extra credit or partial fulfillment of a course research requirement in exchange for their participation and a cash prize ranging from \$5 to \$50 depending how many trivia questions they answered without cheating. If they cheated they were given \$5 regardless of how many correct answers they had. The sample consisted of 55 males and 49 females.

2.2. Procedure

The current study used a variation of Levine, Kim, Park, and Hughes's (2006) procedure to create a realistic situation where participants could choose to cheat or not. Upon arriving at a research laboratory, participants were greeted and shown to a waiting room. In the waiting room a research assistant went over the procedural protocol and had the participants sign an informed consent form. Participants were told that the study was interested in seeing how individuals worked together in teams to answer trivia questions. Their partner was purportedly receiving the same instructions and signing a consent form in a neighboring room.

In actuality, their partner was one of two planted confederates working for the researchers (one male, one female).

Participants were brought into the "quiz room" and introduced to their partner and a researcher performing the role of a "trivia master". The trivia master asked 10 questions that were purposefully designed to be extremely difficult to correctly answer. After asking the third question, a second researcher knocked on the door and entered the room. The second researcher informed the trivia master that her office mate was locked out of their office on the fourth floor (the research room was on the 1st floor). The trivia master apologized for the interruption and informed the participant and the confederate that he/she would be right back. The trivia master then left the room for 3 min shutting the door to the quiz room. The answers to the questions were always left in a folder by the trivia master. The confederate then suggested cheating but never actually took the folder or looked at the answers. After 3 min had passed, the trivia master returned to the quiz room and finished the questions. After completing the questions, the sensation-seeking scale was given in a questionnaire containing filler items. Meanwhile, the confederate informed the researchers about whether the participant cheated. All participants were debriefed at the end of the study.

2.3. Sensation-seeking measure

Sensation-seeking was assessed using the 8-item Brief Sensation-seeking Scale (BSSS) developed by Hoyle et al. (2002). The items were measured on 7-point response scales with labeled end-points ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha which indicated adequate reliability ($\alpha = .72$, $M = 24.93$, $SD = 4.59$).

3. Results

A chi-square test was conducted to examine hypothesis 1, predicting that males would cheat more often than females. The test was statistically significant $\chi^2 (1, N = 104) = 4.41$, $p = .036$, $r = .21$, indicating that males and females cheated at a disproportionate rate. Of the total number of cheaters ($n = 22$), 73% were males ($n = 16$). Approximately 29% of all males cheated compared to only 12% of all females, resulting in an odds ratio of 2.94.

In order to examine hypothesis 2, a point-biserial correlation was calculated. A significant positive association was yielded between cheating and sensation-seeking, $r_{pb} = .22$, $p = .027$. The mean sensation-seeking score for cheaters ($M = 26.84$, $SD = 3.81$) and non-cheaters ($M = 24.41$, $SD = 4.66$) reflect this finding. Overall, the results provide support for both hypotheses. Furthermore, the non-significant correlation between gender and sensation-seeking ($r_{pb} = .002$) indicate that both variables were uniquely associated with cheating behavior.¹

4. Discussion

Taken together, these findings suggest that academic dishonesty is related to certain individual differences. Specifically, the pattern that men cheat more than women was replicated, complementing extant self-reported data (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1997) with consistent findings using an alternative research methodology. Further, sensation-seeking was positively related to cheating.

¹ A hierarchical logistic regression indicated that sensation-seeking is a significant predictor of cheating ($b = .127$, $SE(b) = .059$, $p = .031$, $e^b = 1.135$) when controlling for gender. As recommended by DeMaris (1995) the odds ratio (e^b) can be subtracted by 1 and multiplied by 100 to reflect the percentage change in odds for each unit increase in X. As such, every 1 unit increase in sensation-seeking is associated with a 13.5% increase in the odds of cheating.

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