

**Academic dishonesty- Understanding how undergraduate students think and act**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this investigation is to explore and understand the justifications given by students to the existence of dishonest behavior and understanding the extent to which the justifications given might influence denouncing and cheating behavior. 1277 undergraduate students of two Portuguese Public Universities were surveyed about their own cheating behavior, their propensity to denounce and the “neutralizing attitudes”. As predicted, “neutralizing attitudes” was negatively correlated with self cheating behavior and positively correlated with reporting. The likelihood of copying is greater when the purpose is “helping a friend”, “when the courses are more difficult”, “to get higher marks/grades”, and because “peers accept and tend to see copying practices as normal”. Results support the notion that context emerges as a very important influence in the decision to cheating. The environment-peer pressure and the normalized attitudes towards academic dishonesty are the main influences on the propensity to cheating.

**Key Words:** Academic dishonesty; Cheating; Plagiarism;

## **Introduction**

The wealth and global competitiveness of a country stands in the quality of its education system. Academic dishonesty undermines the quality of education and it’s against the education system’s major aims - to create responsible and respectful citizens. The normalization of academic dishonest behaviours may have an influence on those who will be the future decision makers of the country. Thus, students’ beliefs and practices about academic integrity are likely to influence individual and business ethics values.

The interest in ethical behavior in general and misconduct in particular has increased in the recent years mainly due to the publication of ethical scandals in the academia but also in the industry context. Academic misconduct is not new – indeed it has been extensively studied in the literature. The incidence of the phenomenon, and the indications that is increasing over time, seems to be justified by the fact that cheating is “ordinary” among students.

However, the problem of cheating at schools seems to be more serious now. The most recent studies show that number of student cheating has increased rapidly during the last decade, their attitude toward cheating have changed, as well as ways they cheat. The question is what has led

to such expansion of academic dishonesty? According to some researchers, the most influencing factor was the fast technological progress, and the development and popularization of the Internet, which have enabled students to cheat with ease in ways that were hard to imagine several years ago.

Understanding how students think actually and what are the main influences in their decision to commit an academic dishonest behavior may allow higher education institutions to discourage such behavior, as ensuring the academic integrity at different education levels.

Knowing the valid reasons considered by students to cheating behavior help to rationalize some behaviors. Dishonest behavior may include "submitting a paper done by someone else, "not collaborating in a team assignment ", "copying on tests/exams from someone else", "using unapproved materials on a test/exam", "allowing someone to copy in a test", "plagiarizing a paper – whole or partially, using the internet", "writing a paper for another student". Denouncing an incident of cheating or plagiarism includes denouncing "a friend," "a stranger", "if anonymity were guaranteed" and "if there was a code of honor". Those who copy tend to consider cheating as an acceptable behavior and tend to describe it as a cause of external factors.

In this sense, the purpose of this study is to understand the justifications given by students to the existence of dishonest behavior and understanding the extent to which the justifications given can influence denouncing and copying behavior.

## **1. Literature Review**

The idea that dishonest behavior is common among undergraduate students has been well documented in the literature (McCabe and Trevino 1993, McCabe and Trevino, 1997, McCabe et al., 2002) and has focused on its causes and effects. The interest in ethical behavior in general and academic dishonesty in particular has increased in recent years mainly as a result of publicizing of scandals in academia and business as well.

Academic dishonesty is not a new phenomenon, indeed it has been extensively studied in the academic context and empirical evidence indicates that is changing and increasing in recent years. Drake noted that 23% of the students copied in 1941, Hetherington and Feldman pointed

out to a rate of 64% in 1964 and Baird, in 1980, recorded an incidence of 76%, in 1989 Jendreck estimated a rate of around 40/60%. And in 2004, Smyth and Davis pointed out to a rate of 74%. The study by McCabe (2005) also recorded high rates of cheating, of around 71%, demonstrating that the phenomenon is more serious in business schools.

The literature on cheating in the U.S. can be divided in two separate approaches: the individual differences approach that relates the individual variables with the incidence of dishonest behavior, and the contextual approach that analyze the importance of situational or contextual factors as predictors of cheating.

Whitley (1998) cataloged the individual differences into five dimensions: demographic characteristics, attitudes toward cheating, personality variables, and situational factors. McCabe and Trevino (1997) found that few studies on academic integrity had been conducted in more than one campus and had examined individual and contextual factors (Davis et al. 1992; McCabe and Trevino 1997). The studies that have focused on the individual differences approach have used variables such as sex, age, academic achievement, level of parental education and participation in extra-curricular activities.

Recent studies suggest that male students copy more than female, worse academic results students copy more than students with good results, the lowest parents educational level is associated with cheating, and students involved in extra-curricular activities such as fraternities /sororities and intercollegiate athletics devote less effort to study and more to dishonest behavior (McCabe et al. 2002).

On the other hand, contextual factors that have been mentioned as an influence on cheating include honor codes, students' perceptions of peers' behavior, students' perceptions of faculty's academic integrity policies, students' perceptions of the effectiveness of these policies, students' perceptions of the likelihood of being reported, and students' perceptions of the severity of penalties .

### **1.1.How students think and act**

Understanding how students think and what affects their decision to have a dishonest behavior may allow academic institutions to reduce its incidence. To discourage such conduct, academic

institutions can ensure more honest behavior in different educational levels. Those who copy can find justifications for the fraud they committed and thereby mitigate the cognitive dissonance of their behavior. Literature indicates that neutralizing attitudes are often correlated with cheating (Haines et al. 1986; Pulvers and Diekhoff 1999). Neutralizing attitudes are not considered a sufficient cause for cheating but could help to rationalize certain behaviors. According to Murdock and Stephens (2007), who copies tend to consider their behavior acceptable when they can describe it as a cause of external factors. Watching others to copy, knowing that others copy regularly and believing that others do not take the matter too seriously may facilitate the neutralization of those attitudes.

The study of Davis et al. (1992) helps to understand an inconsistency between students' beliefs and actual behavior. They found that around 90% of students affirmed that copying it is incorrect and that teachers should be concerned if students copied and 76% of those students admitted they copied in the university.

The research of Smyth and Davis (2004) also reflects an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior, where although 92% of students consider the behavior of cheating unethical and 45% indicates that it is a socially acceptable behavior. In this regard, some studies have suggested that while students recognize the seriousness of academic dishonest behaviors many students learn that copying is a common behavior in universities despite the prohibition of political institutions (McCabe et al. 2002; Smyth and Davis 2004).

The model of academic dishonesty proposed by McCabe and Trevino (1993) takes as its premise the concept of social justice in that it suggests that the perception of peers' behavior is the most influential variables of the dishonest conduct of students, ie, the observation of fraudulent conduct has an effect of normative support for cheating and social acceptance of such conduct.

Researchers argue that when students believe that others copy and when they believe that their schools do nothing to discourage such behavior, this argument may be used to justify their own behavior (McCabe, 1992, McCabe et al., 1999). Another justification can be given based on goal orientation theory which argues that students may be learning-oriented or performance-oriented (Anderman et al. 1998; Dweck 1986; Rettinger et al. 2004). A performance-motivated student is more motivated to copy, while learning-motivated students are less able to copy (Jordan 2001, Newstead et al. 1996).

*Hypothesis 1:* Neutralizing attitudes are positive correlated with one's own cheating behavior.

*Hypothesis 2:* Neutralizing attitudes are negatively correlated with the propensity to denounce.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

1277 undergraduate students of two Portuguese Public Universities were surveyed about their own behavioral intentions to cheat, their propensity to report cheating and their justifications or "neutralizing attitudes". The sample is composed by 64,4% female students and 34,8% male students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 61 with a mean of 20, 45 (SD= 3,82). 30,7% were first year students, 32,3% second year, 32,4% third year, 2,3% fourth year students and, finally, only 1,3% were fifth year students. 9,5% were working students. Entrance Grade Point Average (GPA) was 158,4 (SD=14,23) and course average was 137,4 (SD= 16,26).

### **2.2. Measures**

*Behavioral intention to cheat* – The behavioral intentions to cheat is a 7-item scale ( $\alpha=0.76$ ) assessing the likelihood of considering misconduct. A five likert scale was considered (1-never; 2-very unlikely; 3- somewhat unlikely; 4 – somewhat likely; 5 – very likely). The list includes items adapted from an on-line survey administered by Millersville University and Kisamore et al. (2007) investigation.

Some examples are "turning in work done by someone else as one's own", copying from someone else during a test", "using unapproved materials to complete an assignment", "not collaborating in a team assignment", "allowing someone to copy in a test", "plagiarizing a paper, whole or partially, using the internet", "writing a paper for another student".

*Reporting Cheating* – The reporting cheating scale is a four-item scale ( $\alpha=0.82$ ) designed to assess how likely students are to report a friend, a stranger, "if anonymity were guaranteed" and "if there was an honor code", whom they observe engaging in academic misconduct. A five likert scale was considered (1-never; 2- very unlikely; 3- somewhat unlikely; 4 – somewhat likely; 5 – Very likely).

*Neutralizing attitudes* – The neutralizing attitudes scale measure the justifications given by students. Students were asked about the reasons why some of them copy or allow others to copy. The neutralizing scale is a 13-item scale ( $\alpha=0.73$ ) describing academic misconduct as a cause of external factors. Some examples are “to help a friend”, “due to lack of time”, “because they feel pressured by colleagues”, “because there is not much control by teachers”, “because the punishments are less severe”, “laziness”, “because they want high grades”, “when the subjects are very complex”, “because colleagues accept and consider such behavior normal”, “because does not exist a code of honor”, “because everyone copy”, “because they are dishonest”, “because the assessment is based on memorization”. Students were requested to indicate the extent of their agreement with each of the statements using a scale ranging from 5 “strongly agree” to 1 “strongly disagrees”.

*Demographic Variables:* The participants were also asked to report their age, gender (males coded as 1, females coded as 2), Grade point average (GPA) (course average), schooling year (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>) and students status (1 - ordinary and 2 - working student).

### **3. Results**

Approximately 60% of the participants affirmed never to the likelihood of turning in work done by someone else as one's own, and 40% admitted such misconduct. Not collaborating in a team assignment is considered by 31,2% of participants. Only 25, 8% of students answer that they have never considered the possibility of copying on a test or exam for someone else. 74,2% admitted to have considered the possibility of copying at least once in a written assessment exercises.

The likelihood of participants' consideration of engaging in academic misconduct reveal that allowing someone to copy in a test is well tolerated (13, 4% say never and 86, 6% admitted such behavior).

64% of students admitted the possibility of using unauthorized material in the evaluation exercises at least once, and 36% never admitted so. 57,8% said that they have never plagiarized a paper, whole or partially, using the internet and 42,2% admitted they have considered such misconduct. Finally, 37.7% of respondents admitted the possibility of writing a paper for another student.

83,7% of students do not consider the possibility of denouncing a friend while, in the case of a stranger, 62,6% has admitted to do it. If there were anonymity guarantee allow 43,1% of students would consider reporting a fraudulent behavior. If there was a code of honor, 53,6% of students would consider the possibility of reporting an academic misconduct.

Helping a friend is the most appealed explanation given by students to copying or allowing to copy (87,6% agree and strongly agree). 55,3% of students agree or strongly agree that they copy because colleagues accept this behavior as normal. Other justifications presented are related to the teaching and learning process. 72,2% of students believe that the fraudulent conduct occurs when the subjects are more difficult, or to obtain higher marks/grades (68% agree or strongly agree) or when the assessment exercise is based on memorization (53,9% of students agree or strongly agree). 56,7% of the students points out the lack of time to study as the main reason that justifies the cheating behavior.

For students, cheating is not synonymous of dishonest conduct. Approximately, 50% of respondents disagreed that the act of copying suggests students' dishonesty. Students demonstrate lack of information to respond to the question about the honor code existence (38.6% refers not having an opinion). Students reject the justification that everyone copies and that they feel pressured by peers (70% of both disagree).

In sum, the likelihood of copying is greater when "helping a friend", or "when the subjects are more difficult", or "to get higher marks/grades", and because "peers accept and tend to see copying practices as normal".

**TABLE 1**

Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation of Neutralizing attitudes

Items	Loadings		
	Individual focus	Learning process focus	Environment-peer pressure
"laziness"	,765	,213	
"because they are dishonest"	,686	-,238	,111
"because the punishments are less severe",	,679	-,184	,324
"because does not exist a code of honor",	,485	-,119	,481



”, “because there is not much control by teachers”	,453	-,116	,444
“when the subjects are very complex”, “because they want high grades”	,436	<b>,747</b>	,108
“due to lack of time”	-,228	<b>,622</b>	,176
“ to help a friend”	-,132	<b>,550</b>	,185
“because everyone copy”, “because colleagues accept and consider such behavior normal”	,271	,118	<b>,711</b>
“Because the assessment is based on memorization”.		,115	<b>,617</b>
		,240	<b>,543</b>
“because they feel pressured by colleagues”	,114	,232	,348

Three factors emerged from the factor analysis. The first factor groups 5 items (with loadings above 0.45) and shows a *Cronbach's*  $\alpha$  of 0.727. This factor refers to an individual focus. The second emerging factor groups 4 items and presents a *Cronbach's*  $\alpha$  of 0.709. The third factor emerged was named environment-peer pressure. One item of this factor was withdrawn, since it was found through the analysis of the internal consistency that it would cause for an increase in its internal consistency.

Correlation analyses were conducted. As shown in Table 2 a justification individual centered is negatively correlated with one's own cheating behavior ( $r = -0.156$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and positive correlated with reporting ( $r = 0.147$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). A learning-process justification is positively correlated with one's own cheating behavior ( $r = 0.260$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and negatively correlated with reporting ( $r = -0.116$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). An environment-peer pressure justification is positively correlated with one's own cheating behavior ( $r = 0.129$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Neutralizing attitudes are reasons regarded as valid in order to find justifications to their actions. The results indicate that students who admit reporting peer's cheating behavior consider that behavior is due to laziness, dishonesty and because the punishments are not severe enough. Students who admit the possibility of one's own cheating behavior justified it as a result of the learning-process, ie, when the subjects are complex, when students want higher grades and as a result of lack of time available for study. A context based justification is given by students who have admitted to copy /plagiarize.

**TABLE 2**

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Own cheating behavior	(0.76)								
2. Reporting	0.001	(0.82)							
3. Individual focus	-	0.147**							
	0.156**								
4. Learning process focus	0.260**	-	0.000						
		0.116**							
5. Environment-peer	0.129**	-0.037	0.000	0.000					
6. Gender	0.013	0.007	0.012	-	0.033				
				0.015					
7. Age	-0.060*	0.081**	-	-	0.065*	-0.025			
			0.002	0.116					
8. Schooling year	-0.012	-0.023	-	0.021	-0.013	0.623**	0.013		
9. Student Status	-0.005	0.023	0.003	0.016	0.025	0.515**	-0.007	0.502**	
			-						
			0.006						
10. ACT score	-0.084*	0.073*	0.096	-	-0.016	-0.009	-0.080*	-0.039	0.030
			*	0.056					

\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*p&lt;0.01

Note: Gender was coded 1= Male; 2= Female

Students' status was coded 1=ordinary; 2= working student

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The likelihood of participants' consideration of engaging in academic misconduct reveal that allowing someone to copy in a test is well tolerated. Results indicated also that majority of students admitted to have considered the possibility of copying at least once in a test/exam and using unauthorized material in the evaluation exercises. Otherwise, a minority admitted to have plagiarizing a paper, whole or partially, using the internet.

Results indicate that copying in a test or plagiarizing a paper even though they are both dishonest academic behaviors they are at the same time different in terms of physical and psychological involvement. Privacy is the big difference between copying in a test than plagiarizing a paper. Copying in a test requires public exhibition. The others' direct scrutiny may have a social desirability effect and in consequence an obedience to social norms. In this sense it can be expected that cheating on tests is more influenced by situational and contextual variables. Results indicate that copying in a test is excused by friendship and the normalization of the act. The students felt that their colleagues accept and consider cheating as normal. Although students understand that cheating is against rules, often look at colleagues and realize that copying is acceptable and can be "peer pressure" to copy (McCabe et al. 1999).

Plagiarism is usually a private activity that is more individual motivated than situational motivated (Rettinger & Kramer 2009). So it could be greater social condemned than cheating on tests. Results revealed that most students consider that copying in a test is more socially accepted. McCabe and Trevino's model (1993) suggest that a cheating disapproval is associated with a decrease in such behavior. It will be therefore admitted that in contexts where this behavior is acceptable cheating has a higher incidence.

According to Pulvers and Diekhoff (1999) one of the aspects that neutralize cheating behavior is the belief that "everyone copy". In this study only a small part of the students consider that this is a valid justification for fraudulent behavior. Murdock et al. (2007) concluded that a style of performance-oriented teaching can be considered a neutralization attitude. Results indicated that the likelihood of copying is greater "when the subjects are more difficult ", or "to get higher marks / grades".

Results indicated also that for students, cheating is not due to a really dishonest conduct. This attitude revealed that students tend to consider their behavior acceptable when they can describe it as a cause of external factors and do not ascribe this to justify a lack of integrity or intellectual dishonesty. Otherwise, knowing that others copy regularly and believe that others do not take the matter too seriously may facilitate the neutralization of those attitudes.

In sum, these results support that context emerges as a very important influence in the decision to cheat (more on cheating on a test). This paper concludes that the environment-peer pressure

and the normalized attitudes towards academic dishonesty are the main influences on the propensity to cheat.

Neutralizing attitudes are reasons regarded as valid in order to find justifications to their actions. Who report a peer cheating behavior considers that behavior is due to laziness, dishonesty and a lack of punishment. A learning-based justification and a context based justification are given by students who have admitted to copy /plagiarize.

This study represents a step forward by understanding the “justifications” given by students to the academic misconduct; however a confirmatory factor analysis is essential. Taking into account the lack of studies on academic integrity, further research should explore the directions pointed in this study. It would be pertinent to explore some academic integrity policies.

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Appendix  
Sample scale Items

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*Behavioral intention to cheat – I Would report an incident of cheating ...*

1-never; 2- very unlikely; 3- somewhat unlikely; 4 – somewhat likely; 5 – Very likely

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turning in work done by someone else as one's own

copying from someone else during a test",

"using unapproved materials to complete an assignment

not collaborating in a team assignment

allowing someone to copy in a test

plagiarizing a paper, whole or partially, using the internet

writing a paper for another student

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*Reporting Cheating – I Would report an incident of cheating ...*

1-never; 2- very unlikely; 3- somewhat unlikely; 4 – somewhat likely; 5 – Very likely

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of a friend,

of a stranger,

if anonymity were guaranteed

if there was an honor code

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*"Neutralizing attitudes"*

1 "strongly disagrees" 2"Disagree" 3"Neither agrees nor disagrees/No opinion 4"Agree"  
5"strongly agree"

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To help a friend

Due to lack of time  
Because they feel pressured by colleagues

Because there is not much control on the part of teachers

Because the punishments are less severe

Laziness

Because they want high grades

When the subjects are very complex

Because colleagues accept and consider such behavior normal

Because does not exist a code of honor

Because everyone copy

Because they are dishonest

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Because the assessment is based on memorization

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