

# The Science of Cheating

A Psychologist's Perspective

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EVERY YEAR OR SO, another survey comes out showing that a majority of students have cheated at least once, and suddenly it seems like we have a cheating epidemic. Actually, cheating has been around at least since the first standardized exams were used to select civil servants in ancient China (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002)—even though the penalty at the time was death! Although the amount of cheating does seem to have risen in the past several decades (McCabe & Treviño, 1996), the frequent alarm calls regarding cheating do little to help us understand this behavior. More specifically, they typically fail to address the motivations behind cheating, which are our best hope at preventing it from happening at the outset. This is especially odd, given that the past decade has witnessed substantial empirical research into the topic. In this chapter, I briefly review that research, integrating research-based prevention strategies throughout.

Before I begin, two caveats. First, I'll focus on cheating that occurs in the classroom setting, almost always during a test or other evaluation. Plagiarizing term papers is a form of academic dishonesty worthy of detailed study, but it differs from classroom cheating in important ways, and we have less research to support recommendations about preventing it. Second, although understanding the motivation behind cheating requires a certain amount of empathy, readers shouldn't view the research discussed here as providing excuses for students who cheat. All moral transgressions, however severe, have causes, at least according to the perpetrators, but those causes don't excuse the behavior, nor should they necessarily affect our response to it. Our goal is to understand cheating so that we can stop it from happening, not to help us learn to tolerate it. With those thoughts in mind, let's get inside the heads of students who cheat.

One research strategy when appraising motivation for cheating is simply to ask students who admit to having cheated for their justifications. Many scholars have done just this, and we have data dating back to 1938, when high school students surveyed by W. W. Ludeman described the pressure to get good grades as its primary motivating factor. Many more recent studies have been conducted, and the same few reasons tend to recur in students' responses: (a) competition for good grades, (b) inadequate time to study for exams, (c) unfair or overly difficult assignments, and (d) a lack of interest in the course and material (Cizek, 1999).

Admittedly, these reasons may be rationalizations used by cheaters to assuage their guilty consciences, but if we can keep students from using those rationalizations, they may be kept from cheating in the first place. There are, then, two practical implications of these commonly offered reasons. First, instructors should take pains to present their assignments as fair and meaningful tasks organized into a workload that is reasonable, at least by the official standards of the academic institution (for example, 3 hours of work for each credit). When discussing reading assignments on the first day of class, instructors should discuss how they decided how much reading to assign and how much time students should expect to devote to the reading. Second, instructors who grade using a curve should know that it may exacerbate the sense of competition between students. Specifically, if your class's grading system is set up in such a way that only a certain percentage of students will receive A's or B's, students know that they are being judged against each other, rather than against a common standard, giving them another reason to cheat.

All of this is based on students' self-reported justifications for cheating, which have obvious limitations, especially when used as the sole method of investigation. Rather than directly asking students about their reasons for cheating, some researchers have instead examined the correlations between cheating behavior and other student characteristics. In these studies, there is no experimental manipulation; students are asked to complete a brief survey reporting their own cheating behavior as well as one or more other measures (for example, a demographic questionnaire or personality test). Cizek (1999) and Whitley (1998) each conducted a comprehensive review of the correlates of cheating, and their reviews agree on many points. Both found the following demographic factors to be associated with a higher (statistical) risk of cheating: being male, holding down a full-time job, and belonging to a fraternity or sorority. The relationship between age, year in school, and cheating is more complex; more upperclassmen than freshmen cheat, but if year in school is held constant (e.g., when considering only sophomores), older students in that year are less likely to cheat than younger students are.

What can we take from these correlations? Obviously, we should not use demographic variables to suspect students of cheating or to relieve them of suspicion. However, we can use these statistics in two ways. First, when discussing issues of academic integrity with the class as a whole, statements can be targeted to upperclassmen (“Many of you are getting close to graduating ...”) or other high-risk groups. Second, these statistics lead to possible explanations of elevated cheating rates. In particular, students who have additional responsibilities (e.g., employment) or time-consuming commitments (e.g., fraternity activities) may be less willing to devote time to studying for tests, leading to more cheating. If this is indeed the case, making test-preparation activities part of students’ grades (e.g., handing in answers to review questions) or part of class itself (e.g., brief review sessions) may help. Speaking to the concerns that underlie this lack of preparation (“I know that many of you have a busy week ahead ...”) can also help to address and modify students’ choices when setting priorities, keeping students from rationalizing that, since their instructor doesn’t understand their situation, they’re justified in breaking the rules that the instructor sets.

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Psychological traits are somewhat stronger correlates of cheating than demographic factors are; three such traits have shown the most consistent associations (Cizek, 1999). First, there is a particularly robust relationship between a “grading” motivational orientation and cheating: students who are motivated by grades rather than a desire to understand the material are far more likely to cheat. Second, students who feel alienated or dissatisfied with school life are more likely to cheat. Finally, higher levels of anxiety about academic performance put students at risk for cheating. These three variables may all lead to cheating via a common pathway. They all lead students to care less about the real goal of classes: mastery of knowledge and skills.

If the relationship between caring about learning and cheating is causal in nature—that is, if students with mastery goals cheat less *because* of their goals, one question comes to mind: can we change students’ goals and motivational orientations? Ormrod (2003) reviewed evidence suggesting that we can, and she gives several strategies for doing so. These include pointing out the real-world utility of knowledge and skills covered in class, emphasizing the importance of deep understanding rather than rote memorization, and encouraging students to view instructors as resources for learning rather than just as lecturers and exam graders.

So far, the research reviewed and strategies proffered in this chapter have focused on making cheating “unnecessary” by providing students with strategies for academic success. As helpful as many of these strategies are, some students will inevitably elect to cheat anyway. Thus, we must also motivate students not to cheat by providing negative consequences for cheaters, attending to the “cost” side of the cost-benefit calculations that students engage in, at least implicitly, when deciding to cheat. Indeed, in the sophisticated models of cheating behavior developed by Whitley

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(1998) and Murdock and Anderman (2006), students’ perceptions of their ability to cheat, their risk of getting caught, and the likely consequences of being caught all play major roles as disincentives to cheating.

Three suggestions follow naturally from this “economic” model of cheating. First, instructors should make the costs of cheating explicit and obvious to students. On the first day of class, as well as on test days, students should be reminded that cheating will not be tolerated and that punishment will be certain. I often tell students that I will take all actions that are available to me as an instructor; this is a bit vague, but it lets students know that I will pursue cases of cheating passionately. Second, instructors should make cheating easy to detect by arranging the students’ seats so that students are not too close together and so that an instructor has room to walk in between seats to get a closer look at students, if necessary. The idea here is to keep students from even considering cheating by making it not worth the risk. Third, instructors shouldn’t stay at the front of the room for the entire testing time, but should instead walk around the room, perhaps in between rows of seats; this gives students an opportunity to ask clarification questions as well as letting students know that the instructor takes proctoring seriously. I usually walk around every 15 minutes during an exam, with a constant look of interest (raised eyebrows and a half-smile) on my face, to let students know that I’m not walking over to their chair to accuse them of cheating, but just to check on how the test is going.

Some colleagues whom I respect as teachers have vehemently disagreed with me about these strategies, as well as those discussed earlier. Our job as instructors, they say, is not to motivate students not to cheat, but to teach content and skills, and if students *do* cheat, they get punished anyway, so why spend time persuading them not to cheat? No doubt some readers of this chapter will agree, and so I want to take this opportunity to answer that criticism. Simply put, a cheating-related confrontation between a student and an instructor never ends well. If the student admits to cheating, the instructor is faced with the difficult task of determining and applying appropriate

consequences, and if, as is often the case, the student denies having cheated, the instructor is in an even worse position. Either way, if the instructor penalizes a student, the student may appeal, sometimes turning the event into a “he said, she said” affair. As an instructor, I’ll do almost anything to avoid this situation, but I only see one reasonable, ethical way of doing so: making sure that students don’t cheat in the first place. When considering the increasingly complex procedures for handling academic dishonesty at the college level, you can’t help but realize that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

All this means that I don’t bring books to read while my students are taking an exam, and that I have to carefully prepare a few comments about cheating to be delivered on each exam day. It means that I spend time thinking about how to present my course assignments so that students will be persuaded to study for exams and won’t feel the need to cheat. Occasionally, it can be inconvenient, but this extra effort keeps me from dealing with academic integrity disputes, from awkward meetings with department chairs and student conduct committees, and from adversarial e-mail exchanges with accused students whose honesty I usually can’t determine with much confidence. This frees me up so that I can focus on designing engaging lectures, relevant class activities, and valid evaluation procedures—in short, it lets me focus on teaching. I can’t agree more with my colleagues that we’re here, first and foremost, to teach, not to police student conduct. But it’s by thoughtfully doing the latter that I can spend less time in the academic integrity office and more time where I’m needed—in the classroom, with my students.

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