



On the causes of academic dishonesty

By Miguel Roig

In examining the problem of student cheating, Vedran Katavic suggests that we should focus on external, rather than on internal factors. Indeed, many of the explanations given by students who cheat are extrinsic in nature. For example, students often claim that they cheat because they feel pressured to get high grades (or avoid failure) from parents, teachers, etc. They also rationalize their academically dishonest behaviors by explaining that their busy schedule leaves them very little time to study, and that they need to get a high grade in order to qualify for financial aid or to enhance their chances of securing a good job upon graduation. Such emphasis on external factors is also consistent with much of the social psychological literature which has demonstrated that the power of the situation often trumps individual dispositional factors [1]. As a cognitive psychologist, however, I have always found it difficult to accept the dominant role of the situation as the main causal factor of behavior. Instead, another interpretation is that our perceptions and expectancies of situational factors play a crucial role in our behavior, that the two types of variables (situational and individual) interact in unique ways, and that they both must be taken into account in order to have a more complete understanding of the causes of our actions.

If there is one general principle that the social sciences have taught us it is that a full explanation of the causes of most human behavior requires a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Thus, any useful model of behavior must include both types of variables. For example, psychologist Bernard Whitely [2] has proposed a model of student cheating whereby external as well as internal factors exert their effects on students' decision to cheat depending on their strength at a given moment in time. Cheating becomes a function of the relative contribution of certain key variables and their unique interaction. Accordingly, the probability that a student will cheat may be low, if students' academic-moral code is such that they hold strong negative attitudes toward cheating regardless of the benefit-to-risk ratio favoring getting caught. Likewise, students who hold tolerant attitudes

toward cheating will likely cheat, particularly if they feel pressure to get high grades, etc., unless the benefit-to-risk ratio is such that there would be a strong likelihood that they will get caught.

According to Donald McCabe [3], perhaps the leading researcher in the United States in the area of academic dishonesty, an institution's academic integrity climate is an important mediating variable in student cheating. He cites evidence indicating that schools with traditional honor codes report less cheating than those with no honor codes. Another important factor and one that probably covaries with the institutional climate, is students' own tolerant attitudes toward cheating [4, 5]. These and other findings from the burgeoning academic dishonesty literature, together with nearly two decades of college teaching experience, lead me to believe that student cheating is primarily the result of the way in which students view education. Many students these days see a college education mainly as a credentialing process whose primary purpose is not to learn about oneself and the world, but rather to increase the students' chances of getting a better paying job after graduation. If learning were perceived by students as the main purpose of a college education, would it make sense to cheat on examinations? Of course not. Academically dishonest behavior would be truly meaningless in that context and would be analogous to a concerned patient with a known life-threatening condition who deliberately cheats on medical tests in order to avoid getting the true results of his/her condition (Perhaps the medical literature contains pathological cases of patient cheating. If

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so, I think the reader would agree that if they do exist, such cases are likely psychiatric in nature and quite rare). On the other hand, if the mere acquisition of an academic degree is the students' main purpose for attending school, then the entire spectrum of academically dishonest behaviors (e.g., cheating on examinations, plagiarism, using fraudulent excuses to submit late work) become meaningful alternatives. Undoubtedly, such misplaced goals are at least partially responsible for the prevailing attitude amongst college students that cheating 'is just not a big deal'.

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The high incidence of cheating has led to a flurry of educational interventions within the past few years designed to target this class of misbehavior. Many institutions have now enacted honor codes, implemented software to detect plagiarism, and expanded their academic dishonesty policies. In spite of these and other related changes, the rate of student cheating continues to be high at most institutions. I believe that the main reason for this outcome is that most of these interventions target mainly situational variables. If my analysis above is correct, then to win this war on cheating educators must focus on the more difficult task of changing students' attitudes and perceptions.

To decrease cheating, let alone eliminate it, we must focus on these internal factors. Specifically, we need to find a way to make students recognize the importance of acquiring the skills and knowledge imparted to them in school, for only when they possess the critical reading, writing, and communication skills that are acquired by doing actual college-level work will they be able to carry out the tasks that will earn them a high-paying position and subsequent career advancement. Being able to cheat and to plagiarize successfully throughout their college careers may save them time and effort in completing these assignments, but such an approach will rob them of the opportunity to learn the crucial skills that are so important in the modern workplace.

As educators we have a moral obligation to reduce cheating. Thus, it is important that we attend to all of the factors that are known to mediate academic dishonesty. We should not focus on external factors at the expense of internal ones. To fight the cheating epidemic effectively we must change students' current perceptions of the purpose of getting an education. We need to do a better job of winning students' hearts and minds and convince them of the genuine value of learning. This type of attitude change will not be easy and may require a much broader social effort. Until we come up with a formula to do so, our current efforts at curbing cheating will only have limited success.

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Ig Nobel Prizes in medical writing

The Ig Nobel Prizes are awarded for fun and to raise the general public's awareness of science. The prizes are awarded each year around the same time as the Nobel Prizes and are sponsored by the journal *Annals of Improbable Research*. Scanning the list of past Ig Nobel Prize winners, provided by Wikipedia, shows that medical writing is well represented:

- **1992 Literature:** Yuri Struchkov ([hppt://iucr.org/iucr-top/people/struchko.htm](http://iucr.org/iucr-top/people/struchko.htm)) for the 948 scientific papers he published between 1981 and 1990, averaging more than one every 3.9 days.
- **1993 Literature:** E.Topol, R. Califf, F.Van de Werf, P.W. Armstrong et al ('al' here = 972 coauthors) for a medical research paper which has more than one hundred times as many authors as pages.
- **2000 Computer Science:** Chris Niswander for inventing PawSense (<http://www.bitboost.com/pawsense>) software that detects when a cat is walking across your computer keyboard (useful invention for felinephile medical writers).
- **2004 Economics:** The Vatican for outsourcing prayers to India (comforting because it's not just medical writing).

Others prizes do not seem to have such a direct connection with medical writing...

- **2003 Peace:** Lal Bihari from India for leading an active life even though he had been declared legally dead, waging a posthumous campaign against bureaucratic inertia and greedy relatives, and creating the Association of Dead People. Lal managed to obtain a passport from the Indian government to travel to the US to accept the prize only to discover that the US government do not allow dead people to just walk into the country.

Any nominations for future awards can be posted on the website of *Annals of Improbable Research* at <http://improbable.com>. One nomination for next year is for the Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization which gives 'G-Mark' stickers for good design. A manufacturer of adult sex aids entered a product, which impressed the judges, but after the initial excitement the judges regretted that they could not consider the product for the award because they had no means of testing its performance or function.