Academic Dishonesty and Autonomy Linked

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Abstract

The researcher investigated the relationship between adolescent autonomy and reported academic dishonesty, using the Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty Survey (Lipson & McGavern, 1993), a section of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), and a demographic survey. The 40 participants (34 women and 6 men), selected from a Christian liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States, ranged in age from 18 to 24 (M = 19.73). The results showed a significant difference in levels of academic dishonesty between people with low levels of autonomy and those with medium levels in that students with low levels of autonomy reported a greater amount of academic dishonesty. Interestingly, 100% of the students in the study reported cheating at least once during the current academic year. The results suggest a possible relationship between a perceived sense of autonomy and reported academic dishonesty.

Most teachers and administrators in schools deal with academic dishonesty on a regular basis. Middle school students, high school students, and college students alike will admit to having cheated in some way at school. The Center for Academic Integrity (Keohane, 1999) reported that over 75 percent of college students cheat at some point in college. This organization also reported that “80 percent of high-achieving, college-bound students have cheated, that they think cheating is commonplace, and that more than half do not consider cheating a serious transgression” (Keohane, 1999, from the web site). Furthermore, the Educational Testing Service reported that a web site giving away free research papers for students gets an average of 80,000 hits every day (Keohane, 1999). These same amounts of cheating may be taking place at numerous institutions in the United States.

Some schools have attempted to decrease this high level of academic dishonesty by implementing honor codes. These honor codes often involve students pledging to not cheat and to report instances of cheating to authorities. At schools with honor codes, teachers stress academic integrity in numerous ways, even allowing students to take part in the judicial aspect of dealing with cheating. Everyone tries to foster an environment of honesty. Researchers have found that less cheating occurred at schools with honor codes (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999), but that schools with inadequately enforced honor codes did not experience a similarly decreased level of cheating (McCabe et al., 1999). Researchers reported that an environment in which adults stressed the importance of integrity helped to decrease cheating more than an honor code environment did (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

In order to understand this problem more fully, the researcher sought to study academic dishonesty and describe those individual traits that may account for a high level of cheating among students. The researcher assessed the relationship between academic dishonesty and level of autonomy. Researchers have defined academic dishonesty as getting or giving unauthorized help in academic work or plagiarizing assignments (Storch, Storch, & Clark, 2002). Ryff (1989) described people with a high level of autonomy as being self-determined, independent, resistant to pressures to conform, and evaluating themselves by their own standards.

People who reported high levels of academic dishonesty often share various individual characteristics. Robinson, Amburgey, Swank, and Faulkner (2004) described correlations between academic dishonesty and subject variables such as grade point average and gender. Previous research found that male students reported more acceptance of academic dishonesty than female students (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). However, when researchers examined overall research studies, they
did not find consistent evidence of a relationship between gender and cheating (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Further studies found positive relationships between academic cheating and variables such as watching large amounts of television and low involvement in school activities (Pino & Smith, 2003).

Researchers also suggest that academic dishonesty may relate to levels of self-control and self-esteem. Tibbetts (1999) reported that low self-control positively correlated with academic dishonesty. However, Bolin (2004) failed to discover a direct relationship between these two variables. Studies found that those individuals indicating low levels of self-esteem and personal integrity also reported a high level of academic dishonesty (McCabe et al., 1999; McCabe et al., 2001). Thorpe, Pittenger, & Reed (1999) noted this same correlation but identified that social desirability (one's desire to look good for the researcher) may have contaminated the results.

Studies also relate autonomy to academic dishonesty. Researchers found that low self-efficacy related to high levels of academic dishonesty (Finn & Frone, 2004; Satterlee, 2002). Pressure from others to succeed in school also strongly correlated with academic cheating (Finn & Frone, 2004). A report by Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor (1992) stated that the need for social approval positively correlated with levels of academic dishonesty.

This research study describes the relationship between academic dishonesty and autonomy among college students at a small Christian liberal arts college. The researcher hypothesized that students reporting low levels of autonomy would report higher amounts of academic dishonesty than those with high levels of autonomy. The results of this study may help us understand this area of psychology. They may also make educators more knowledgeable about ways to decrease academic dishonesty.

Method

Participants

The researcher used a convenience sample of 40 undergraduate students from a Christian liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States. The sample consisted of 34 women and 6 men (38 Caucasians, 1 person of another race, 1 student did not answer), ranging in age from 18 to 24 (M = 19.73, SD = 1.24). This admittedly small sample contained 13 participants with low autonomy, 15 participants with medium autonomy, and 10 participants with high autonomy (2 students failed to complete the appropriate information and were not grouped into a category).

Instruments

The researcher used three instruments: the Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty Survey (Lipson & McGavern, 1993), the autonomy section of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), and a demographic survey. The demographic survey consists of open-ended questions concerning race, sex, age, academic performance, and other subject variables.

The Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty Survey (Lipson & McGavern, 1993) consists of 17 questions. The participant completed these questions by circling a number from 1 (never) to 4 (frequently) that most accurately described the degree to which he or she engaged in academic dishonesty. Some items on this survey include "listing references without reading the sources" and "copying from another student during an exam or quiz" (Lipson & McGavern, 1993). Although the researcher ensured anonymity and confidentiality so that people admitting academic dishonesty could not be identified, the reader is cautioned that some students may have lied in order to protect their images.
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The section of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989) that measures autonomy consists of 14 questions completed by indicating a number from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). Example questions from this paper and pencil survey of autonomy include “I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions” and “It is difficult for me to voice my opinions on controversial matters” (Ryff, 1989).

Procedure

A group of student volunteers served as participants in this study. When they arrived for the study, they signed an informed consent, which stated their rights as a participant and assured them of confidentiality. Next, the participants completed the three surveys and returned them to the researcher, at which time they received a debriefing statement. The debriefing statement informed the participants of the purpose, procedures, and hypothesis of the study.

Results

The researcher hypothesized that people with low levels of autonomy would report higher amounts of academic dishonesty when compared to those with high levels of autonomy. The researcher divided participants into three groups based on reported levels of autonomy (13 participants with low autonomy, 15 participants with medium autonomy, and 10 participants with high autonomy). The group with a low level of autonomy reported significantly more academic dishonesty than those in the group with medium levels of autonomy, t(36) = -1.03, p = .04. The researcher found no significant differences between people with high levels of autonomy and those with low or medium levels. Every participant admitted to having cheated at least once in the academic year.

Discussion

The results partially supported the hypothesis that people with low levels of autonomy will report higher amounts of academic dishonesty than those with high levels. The results indicated that those people with low levels of autonomy reported more cheating than people with medium levels of autonomy. Furthermore, the results partially supported previous research findings (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Finn, 2004; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Satterlee, 2002; Thorpe, Pittenger, & Reed, 1999; Tibbetts, 1999) that indicated a relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty. In other words, individuals who are highly influenced by others tended to cheat more than those who have a sense of assuredness in their own convictions.

Various factors may have influenced the results of this study. Given that this was a descriptive comparative study, the groups may have differed on variables other than cheating. Furthermore, the sample of participants came from only one small Christian liberal arts college and consisted of only 40 students. Due to these facts, more extensive studies need to be done before these results can be applied to larger populations.

Social desirability may have affected the results of this study. Social desirability involves the tendency of people to answer in a way that they feel society wants them to, instead of truthfully. In this study, students might have not admitted to cheating because the campus environment, their families, or instructors view cheating as wrong and unacceptable. Further, students at a Christian institution may have felt additional pressure not to admit the sin of cheating.

No matter what level or quantity of cheating takes place at schools, teachers can always take steps to help prevent it. One way to prevent cheating may be to increase students’ autonomy. Teachers can
do this by repeatedly encouraging students, letting them know that they will succeed in school. Teachers should focus on academic integrity, rather than on the negative side—academic dishonesty. By implementing honor codes, or even only aspects of them, teachers may help students better understand the importance of honesty. Furthermore, educators need to remain constant in their discipline. They might set consistent punishments for cheating and allow no exceptions, lest students think that they could get away with cheating at a lesser cost.

Overall, when dealing with academic dishonesty, educators need to set clear policies and abide by them consistently. They need to find ways to increase the students’ self-worth and individual autonomy. Although it may require great effort to deal effectively with cheating in schools, it is important that teachers take the necessary steps to help promote an honest and concerned environment for all students.

References


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