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# Understanding Cheating: From the University Classroom to the Workplace

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# Understanding Cheating: From the University Classroom to the Workplace

## Abstract

Cheating is defined as taking information, credit, or reward that one neither deserves nor did the work to achieve. Cheating behavior is often seen as a driver behind many of our current economic problems and the temptation to cheat has been associated with our downward slide in business practice for the past two decades. For example, the current housing crisis has been explained in part as banks cheating in terms of qualifying people for loans. Additionally, current headlines focus on legislators and Wall Street analysts who cheat investors by unfairly taking advantage of inside information not publicly available to others in the market. Cheating defeats fairness of competition and undermines the basis of business integrity. Writers in the business press are expressing concern over the widespread levels of 'cheating' among business executives. Enron, HealthSouth, and Tyco, all cheated shareholders in order to pad the pockets of their corporate executives. Some of the smartest and best business minds have fallen subject to the temptation to cheat and the result has been some of the most wide-ranging financial regulation in our history. The Sarbanes-Oxley and Dodd-Frank Acts were enacted in reaction to the perceived prevalence of cheating by business managers. The controversial new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is yet another attempt to address this problem. Classroom teachers are also experiencing a growing concern over what seems to be ever increasing levels of cheating among students. Students cheat for a variety of reasons including a felt pressure to maintain good grades and because they perceive many opportunities to cheat but few real penalties for getting caught. Instructor behavior may unwittingly exacerbate the problem by giving unclear or arbitrary assignments that create a climate for cheating when students view the benefits of figuring out and completing the assignment honestly to be minimal at best. The problem of classroom cheating is that students are likely to carry the behaviors they learn in the classroom into the workplace. It is this prospect that leads us to examine the nature of classroom cheating as a precursor to what might happen in actual business settings. It is likely that many of us have cheated at something or in some way, however unimportant, in our lives. We may have taken advantage of unsuspecting others in sports or play and the amount of harm done is probably very little and accepted as part of the interaction. But when the stakes get higher and include academic or business integrity and the validity of a grade or financial statement are at stake, then cheating has significant potential consequences, and needs to be both understood and managed.

## Disciplines

Accounting | Applied Behavior Analysis | Cognitive Psychology | Personality and Social Contexts

## Comments

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# Understanding Cheating: From the University Classroom to the Workplace

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## INTRODUCTION

Cheating is defined as taking information, credit, or reward that one neither deserves nor did the work to achieve. Cheating behavior is often seen as a driver behind many of our current economic problems and the temptation to cheat has been associated with our downward slide in business practice for the past two decades. For example, the current housing crisis has been explained in part as banks cheating in terms of qualifying people for loans. Additionally, current headlines focus on legislators and Wall Street analysts who cheat investors by unfairly taking advantage of inside information not publicly available to others in the market. Cheating defeats fairness of competition and undermines the basis of business integrity.

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amount of harm done is probably very little and accepted as part of the interaction. But when the stakes get higher and include academic or business integrity and the validity of a grade or financial statement are at stake, then cheating has significant potential consequences, and needs to be both understood and managed.

## **WHO CHEATS**

The literature on cheating seems to be clear on two main points – one is that cheating seems to be increasing, and the second is that honor codes or codes of ethics seem to decrease cheating. Regarding the first point, numerous studies of student self-reports of cheating behavior indicate increasing levels of cheating across almost all institutions and nationalities.<sup>1</sup> Students seem to be cheating more, everywhere. And business students appear to be among the worst (or best?) cheaters.

The second line of research on cheating behavior indicates that honor codes or codes of conduct/ethics may serve to reduce cheating behavior.<sup>2</sup> The logic is that a well articulated and communicated statement that defines and prohibits cheating works to set an organizational climate less conducive to cheating by clearly outlining the expected norms of behavior.

The problem is that almost all these studies have relied on self-reported surveys to establish findings about cheating. In other words, study subjects were either asked to recall an instance where they cheated or imagine a hypothetical situation where they might cheat, and then the researchers try to draw connections between these self-reports and the larger cheating phenomena.

In this paper we present summaries of a significant subset of studies that looks at actual cheating behavior that occurred naturally. Our goal is to show how these studies illuminate our understanding of cheating behavior, which allows us to conclude by providing a set of recommendations for how managers might prevent or forestall such behavior going forward.

We found that cheaters are not necessarily bad people and can be found at all levels of moral reasoning. Put another way, we found no correlation between the level of cheating and the ability to reason morally. We also found that cheaters tend to psychologically distance themselves from their behavior. They tend to reconstruct reality into a more gracious view of themselves and create a more logical explanation of their behavior. In conjunction with these rationalizations, we found that cheaters often use teams as a crutch. They confuse teamwork with using the work of others and passing it as their own. Stated differently, cheaters do not see any problem with using the work of others and calling it their own when such unauthorized collaboration can be rationalized as a form of teamwork.

## **UNDERSTANDING CHEATING BEHAVIOR**

The cheating incident that formed the basis for our studies occurred unexpectedly in two sections of an undergraduate accounting class at a private university in the Midwest. The instructor gave a take-home midterm exam and without authorization, a number of students accessed an online instructor's manual for answers and/or collaborated with others to answer the questions. The instructor had access to computer records so he knew who actually used this method to cheat on the take home exam. Cheating through unauthorized collaboration was uncovered as described below. There were sixty-four students enrolled in the two sections, and

although students were explicitly told not to use outside sources or collaborate, forty-eight of sixty-four are known to have cheated.

The instructor learned of the large-scale collusion directly from students in the class after the exam was due. He decided to make the episode into a learning experience rather than punish the group, and immediately decided to look into the possibility of collecting data. Because of his good relationship with the classes, the students were open to letting him study their behavior.

Of the sixty-four students in the two sections, approximately two thirds were enrolled in the College of Business, and one third enrolled in other colleges. Participation in the study was voluntary. All sixty-four students in the two sections agreed to participate.

This incident is unique in two very important ways. First, it presents a naturally-occurring cheating event as the cheating was not part of a manipulated experiment. Second, we knew who actually cheated and the amount of cheating for each individual. Consequently, we were able to study actual cheating behavior centered on a focal event that was salient to the study subjects. We were able to determine the level of actual cheating behavior in the following ways.

First, students were asked “To what extent did you receive assistance on the project from outside sources (e.g. working with friends, accessing the online answer manual)?” In addition, at this university, a record was kept of all persons going to university Web sites, so the faculty member knew which students had gone to an unused and not publicly available portion of another professor’s Web site to look at the Instructor’s Manual solution for the take-home problem. It is important to note that this solution differed considerably from that taught in the class and which was the focus of the exam. Finally, the faculty member could see which students had answers identical to those the students who visited the illicit website.

Based on these measures of cheating, we found that twenty-six percent of the students did not cheat at all. We also found that forty-four percent worked with a colleague and thirty percent obtained a solution from a web site, with two-thirds of those students sharing their information with another student. This result led us to three studies designed to help understand and explain the underlying dynamics of this situation.

## **CHEATING BEHAVIOR STUDIES**

We first examined how moral reasoning helped predict cheating behavior by using a very well established survey for measuring moral reasoning called the ‘Defining Issues Test’ or DIT.<sup>3</sup> The DIT uses case scenarios to measure one’s ability to see moral issues and apply good moral reasoning to a situation. We hypothesized that higher levels of moral reasoning would be found with lower levels of cheating, but what we found was rather surprising. We did not find a strong relationship between moral judgment scores and cheating behavior. Additionally, we found that moral judgment and honesty were not related, but higher levels of cheating behavior related to less honesty in how students responded to the questions they were asked. That is, those who cheated most were the most likely to say they hadn’t. We also found that males and females cheated to an equal degree.

We also found that the extent to which students selected actions based on their views of utilitarian justice affected the above relationship significantly. This behavior is referred to as being a ‘utilizer.’ In other words, cheaters often view cheating as an issue of efficiency or as an

opportunity to make an unjust system fair. Utilizers see cheating as a way to correct perceived inequities and move to create a more fair system for themselves.

Next we looked at student responses to open-ended questions about their participation in the cheating event.<sup>4</sup> We asked questions like: 'when is it okay to cheat?' and 'under what conditions could cheating be justified?' Using these responses we were able to understand how students rationalized cheating behavior. In particular, we found that students tried to distance themselves from the wrongfulness of cheating using four types of rationalization: 1) separating themselves from the action, 2) blaming a third-party for influencing the decision, 3) re-defining the action as something good, and 4) defining alternate outcomes from the behavior. Supporting these rationales were nine basic arguments based on confusion, character, professor clarity, attractive nuisance, culture, intent, acceptance, comparisons and outcome.

These results have important implications for understanding cheating behavior. Students engaged in wrongful actions not just because factors discouraging such behavior were ineffective, but because they actively sought rationales that would justify these actions. For example, the ability of respondents to separate themselves from their actions is intriguing in that they are discussing why they do not do a good act (refrain from cheating and do their own work) to explain why they did something wrong (cheat). We found it interesting that many students did not approve of cheating per se, and were able to define their own acts of cheating as being within ethical bounds, while they gave examples of behavior by other students that was unacceptable.

The third study examined relationships between perceived ethical organizational climate and actual cheating behavior by students completing the take-home exam problem. Our major finding was that students who perceived the classroom as having a climate focused on local groups (i.e. team identification is pre-eminent) engaged in more cheating behavior than did students who perceived climates focused on broader organization or societal groups. This 'team interest' is associated with a high need for cooperation and a focus on jointly produced outcomes.

The findings of the third study indicate an association between students' concern for the 'team' and a greater likelihood of engaging in cheating behavior. Similarly, our findings indicate that the team interest climate orients organization members toward the good of the team or local group rather than to some other ideal standard of behavior. In our study, while the course was generally structured to facilitate a team environment, the specific assignment was an individual one. As successful completion of most assignments in the current course depended on the abilities and cooperation of the team, it appeared that the rules for this individual assignment were subsumed in and worked against the team-oriented culture of the class. The problem is that students were apparently not able to relinquish their concern for the team in the face of the explicit but contrary directions of the instructor.

In business schools the phrase "rational self interest" is used both normatively and descriptively. For students, cheating is perhaps motivated by a rational view of what it takes to survive in the university context; after all, if cheating is as widespread as thought, not cheating would put the student at a competitive disadvantage for grades, scholarships, jobs, etc. Business school instructors might be contributing to the problem by encouraging students to act in their rational self-interest while simultaneously urging them to work collaboratively with others. Cheating then is seen by students to be a way to succeed, and the team provides a focal point from which to rationalize behavior and a relevant moral standard. This is extremely important especially with the emphasis on teams in both business schools and the workplace. Given these potentially

negative outcomes from group identification it becomes important, for both managers and business school faculty to provide clear instructions for all activities and carefully monitor team outcomes for violations of desired moral standards of behavior. After all, while collaborations to get 'better' results is not in itself bad, doing so to gain an unfair advantage can have both serious and negative consequences for the organization, its stakeholders and society at large.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

For practitioners, our results provide guidelines for encouraging ethical behavior in the workplace. If cheating is on the rise then we must get better at identifying and monitoring it. And if codes of ethics help, then we must construct them with sections devoted to the topic of cheating with definitions and descriptions most relevant to the organization's context. With regard to the three studies summarized above, we see three general recommendations for practicing managers.

First, managers should expect cheating to be an outcome of the 'utilizer' mentality. This means managers should understand that cheating may occur when employees view a work situation as either unfair or simply inefficient. Consequently, managers should clearly explain the cause and effect relationships of organizational policy and should clearly define the goals and rewards of the formal system. If the formal system makes sense, the informal comparisons are less likely to take over.

Second, managers should understand that cheaters tend to both rationalize their behaviors as reasonable and distance themselves from it. By first outlining the processes used to justify unethical behavior, managers can counteract likely rationalizations by addressing them directly. For example, managers can emphasize that competing social norms are not relevant, that the action is wrong regardless of the underlying intent, or that it is the wrongfulness of the action that is important and not the degree of wrongfulness. While not a panacea for controlling unethical behavior, such an approach should help reduce the offending behavior.

And finally, managers should work to create work assignments that require individual work which then leverages that individual effort by further group processing. In addition, taking into consideration the results of our study, managers should carefully communicate expectations with teams and offer to help clarify those expectations. Teams should be used to help support, not defeat, the identification of ethical issues. Managers using teams in the workplace should provide ample opportunity for teams to learn to work together and should make expectations explicit when making formal assignments to teams.

In a current business environment where unethical behavior appears to be as prevalent as ever, the prospect of better understanding cheating behavior seems compelling. Our findings are that ethical climates characterized by a strong team interest are associated with a higher frequency of actual cheating. Regardless of whether team interest is a cause or a post hoc rationalization for cheating, instructors and managers should seriously consider the challenging ethical context a focus on team interest might create.

Corporate scandals such as Enron, HealthSouth, Tyco, and WorldCom, along with reports of extensive cheating by students, argue for the importance of understanding cheating behavior. We need to understand both why such behavior is happening and what we can do to counteract it. Our studies contribute to this general effort by outlining various strategies cheaters use to justify and rationalize their unethical behavior. The strategies used to rationalize cheating are

an important warning about the future professional behavior of today's students and if tomorrow's managers are going to be able to forestall future cheating, then the processes by which these strategies emerge need to be clearly understood.

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<sup>2</sup> McCabe, D., Trevino, L., and K. Butterfield. 2002. Honor codes and other contextual influences on academic integrity: A replication and extension to modified honor code settings. *Research in Higher Education*, 43(3): 357-378.

<sup>3</sup> West, T., Ravenscroft, S. P., and Shrader, C. B. Cheating and moral judgment in the college classroom: A natural experiment. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 54, 2004, pp. 173-183.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, J., West, T., Ravenscroft, S., and Shrader, C. B., Ethical distancing: Rationalizing violations of organizational norms. *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, fall 2005, pp. 101-134.

<sup>5</sup> Shrader, C. B., Ravenscroft, S. P., Kaufmann, J. B. and West, T. D. Classroom cheating and student perceptions of ethical climate. *Teaching Ethics*, (forthcoming, fall 2012)