Educational Studies
Vol. 34, No. 4, October 2008, 361–376

Cases of incongruity: exploring the divide between adolescents' beliefs and behavior related to academic dishonesty

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The past several decades of research has produced many important insights into prevalence and correlates of academic dishonesty. While these studies have offered important contributions to our understanding of such cheating, we are in need of research that allows us to hear what students have to say about it. This paper begins to fill the relative void of student voices by presenting results from individual interviews with a sample of adolescents who acknowledge cheating despite believing that is wrong to do so. Specifically, the present investigation uses a multi-case research design to explore the phenomenon of belief–behaviour incongruity, as it relates to academic dishonesty, among a demographically and academically diverse group of high school students. Four distinct cases of BBI are presented, each representing a complex configuration of psychological, social, cultural and situational factors: *unable*, *under-interested*, *under pressure* and *unrepentant*. Educational implications and suggestion for further research are discussed.

Keywords: moral judgement; academic dishonesty; adolescence

The past several decades of research has produced many important insights into the prevalence and correlates of academic cheating. We know that it is a widespread problem and one that seems to have grown considerably since the 1960s (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield 2001; Schab 1991). It is also clear from the existing research that many students who report cheating believe that it is wrong (Anderman, Griesinger and Westerfield 1998; Jordan 2001; Stephens 2004a). This belief–behaviour incongruity (BBI) has largely been investigated indirectly, through surveys or hypothetical vignettes that assess students' achievement goals, their motives for cheating and/or their tendency to neutralise responsibility for cheating. While these studies have offered important contributions to our understanding of academic cheating and some insight into BBI, we are in need of research that allows us to hear what students have to say about cheating and the incongruity they experience between their beliefs and behaviours related to academic dishonesty.

This paper begins to fill the relative void of student voices by presenting results from individual interviews with a sample of adolescents. Specifically, the present investigation uses a multi-case research design to explore the phenomenon of BBI among a demographically and academically diverse group of students who cheated despite believing that it was wrong to do so. Thus, the present study is a phenomenological study as it "describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell 2007, 57; emphasis in original). Unlike many phenomenological studies, the primary thrust of the present work is not the reduction of individual experiences with a

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ISSN 0305-5698 print/ISSN 1465-3400 online
© 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/03055690802257127
http://www.informaworld.com

phenomenon to a "universal essence" (see Creswell 2007, 58). Rather, we are primarily concerned with capturing the variety of ways in which individual students experience BBI. In doing so, we hope to offer a more complete accounting of the diverse thoughts and emotions that students experience as they engage in cheating even when they believe it is wrong.

Literature review

> I think times have changed. Cheating is kind of considered, I don't know, just a kind of daily thing that's out there … It's almost a big deal if you don't cheat. (McCabe 1999, 682)

The problem of academic dishonesty has long since been characterised as an "epidemic" (Haines et al. 1986), after substantial growth that began in the 1960s (McCabe and Trevino 1996; Schab 1991). By most accounts in the recent literature, the majority of secondary and post-secondary students engage in cheating behaviour. For example, in their *2006 Report card on the ethics of American youth*, the Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006) found that 60% of secondary students reported cheating during a test at school within the past year (35% did so two or more times) and 33% reported plagiarising material from the Internet (18% did so two or more times). McCabe (2005) found similar numbers in his national surveys of college undergraduates: 70% admitted to engaging in some form of academic dishonesty, nearly 25% admitted to "serious" test cheating and 40% to Internet plagiarism. The problem is also prevalent at graduate schools, especially business schools where 56% admitted to some form of academic dishonesty (i.e. copying other students' work, plagiarising or using prohibited materials on an exam) within the past year (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield 2006).

Studies exploring *who* cheats in high school and college have produced mixed results. While many studies have found that males cheat more than females (e.g. Calabrese and Cochran 1990; Schab 1972), other studies have not found gender differences (e.g. Josephson Institute of Ethics 2002). Though most studies of cheating among college students have also revealed gender differences (e.g. McCabe and Trevino 1997; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes and Armstead 1996), a meta-analysis of 34 studies involving undergraduates produced a small mean effect size (Whitley, Nelson and Jones 1999); males may cheat more than females, but not much more. Although no high school studies of cheating have examined age effects, results from college studies have consistently shown that younger students report cheating more often than older ones (e.g. Haines et al. 1986; Jordan 2001). Finally, research examining the relation between cheating and academic ability (often indexed by grade point average, GPA) has shown a small negative association in both high school (Josephson Institute of Ethics 2002) and college (e.g. McCabe and Trevino 1997; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes and Armstead 1996). The 1998 Annual Survey of Who's Who among American High School Students, however, illustrates that cheating is not simply a problem among low-achieving students. In their 29th Annual Survey, 80% of America's highest-achieving students admitted to having cheated (the highest percentage in the history of the survey).

In sum, the majority of students engage in some form of cheating behaviour and attempts to create a demographic profile of the "cheater" are problematic. As Miller et al. (2007, 26) concluded in their review of who cheats: "Conclusions from the multitude of cheating studies may be varied and sometimes even conflicting; however, the one conclusion we can draw from them is that there is no clear-cut profile of a student who cheats".

Belief–behaviour incongruity: knowing the right, doing the wrong

> Like people have morals, they don't always go by them … [Cheating] doesn't lessen that grade. It says an A on the paper and you don't go, "Oh, but I cheated". You're just kind of like, "Hey, I got that A". So it doesn't really matter necessarily if it has to do with your morals or anything, you just kind of do it. (Stephens 2004b)

While Kohlberg (1969, 397) claimed that moral judgement "can be a quite powerful and meaningful predictor of action", Blasi's (1980) now classic review of the literature investigating the relations between moral reasoning and moral action suggested otherwise. Although a statistically significant link exists, Blasi concluded that the strength of the link varies depending on the domain of action under investigation.

Empirical research exploring the relations between moral development and academic dishonesty has produced mixed results. Leming (1978), for example, found that while undergraduates high in moral development cheated significantly less in a high-threat/high-supervision situation (i.e. a situation in which both the probability and consequences of getting caught were manipulated to appear high), they cheated just as often as students low in moral development in the low-threat/low-supervision condition. Similarly, Malinowski and Smith (1985) found that while college students high in moral judgement cheated less overall than their low-reasoning counterparts, they cheated just as often when the temptation to cheat became strong. The high school student quoted above, who has the moral reasoning ability typical of a graduate student, offers an illustration of how belief and behaviour can conflict when other goals or values are prioritised.

Efforts to explain the gap between moral cognition and moral action date back several decades (for a review see Bergman 2002). As a result, there are now numerous studies in the literature indicating that many students experience belief–behaviour incongruity specifically in the domain of academic dishonesty (Anderman, Griesinger and Westerfield 1998; Davis and Ludvigson 1995; Jordan 2001; Stephens and Gehlbach 2007; Stephens, Young and Calabrese 2007). In the wake of Blasi's (1980) seminal review, Kohlberg and his colleagues posited that the relationship between moral reasoning and moral action was mediated by responsibility judgements, which he defined as a sense of personal accountability to "follow through" and "perform the right action" (Kohlberg and Candee 1984, 57). Around the same time, Blasi (1983, 1995) put forth his Self Model, which emphasised the role of moral identity and the need for self-consistency as the crucial link in the chain connecting moral cognition and moral action. As Blasi (1983) described, "Since a judgment of responsibility concerns the necessary relation between agent and action, not to act according to one's judgment should be perceived as a substantial inconsistency, as a fracture within the very core of the self, *unless neutralizing devices are put into operation*" (1980 201; emphasis added).

Blasi's caveat is an important one and is at the heart of the Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory of delinquency and Bandura's (1986, 1990, 1999) model of moral disengagement. Rather than affirming the will and activating one's sense of personal responsibility to perform the right action, neutralisation devices obscure or even negate one's personal agency by attributing responsibility for one's conduct to others or situational contingencies. Empirical research has demonstrated a strong positive association between cheating and a "neutralising attitude" (Diekhoff et al. 1996; Haines et al. 1986; LaBeff et al. 1990; McCabe 1992). McCabe (1992), for example, found that displacement of responsibility was the most prevalent device employed by undergraduates: 61% of self-admitted cheaters rationalised their cheating by blaming others and/or some aspect of the situational context. In their study of high school students, Evans and Craig (1990) found that

displacement of responsibility to the teacher was most pronounced among college-bound and high-achieving students. It seems clear that neutralising devices, such as displacement of responsibility, contribute to the observed incongruity between many students' beliefs and behaviours related to cheating.

The present investigation

As the foregoing literature reveals, there is no single "profile" of students who cheat, nor is there one explanation for why they do so; males and females, low-and high-achieving students, those that believe it is okay and those that think it is morally wrong, all engage in cheating. The pathways to, and patterns associated with, academic dishonesty are as varied as the behaviour itself. Accordingly, the present investigation used a collective or multiple-case study design to explore the variety of "lived experiences" that students have with academic dishonesty and the belief–behaviour incongruity that often accompanies it. According to Yin (2003, 13), case studies are a valuable approach to understanding a "phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". The present investigation explored the phenomenon of belief–behaviour incongruity as it related to academic dishonesty among a small, diverse group of adolescents nested in different contexts. In doing so, we addressed the following sets of questions:

(1) Why do students cheat? That is, what are their "theories" of why other students cheat? Why do they themselves do it?
(2) Is cheating morally wrong? That is, do students think of cheating as a moral problem, a social convention or a personal choice? Do these judgements vary depending on the type of cheating involved and/or circumstances under which it occurs?
(3) How do students feel about cheating? Specifically, do they experience guilt or remorse for cheating? If so, when and why? If not, why not?
(4) Is cheating ever justified? That is, do students believe that cheating is sometimes the right or acceptable thing to do? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?

Methods

In order to explore the phenomenon of belief–behaviour incongruity in its various instantiations, we recruited a purposeful sample of demographically and academically diverse students in the Northeastern United States. Although participants were recruited through various means (classroom visits by the authors, participation in summer programs as well as personal contacts), those that were selected for inclusion in the study were interviewed because they either (1) believed cheating to be wrong but found themselves doing it anyway ($n = 9$), or (2) did not cheat at all ($n = 6$). Of the 15 students we selected for interview: seven males and eight females; one Hispanic, one Arab-American, three African-Americans and eight Caucasians. Each student was individually interviewed for 60–90 minutes by one or both of the authors using a semi-structured interview protocol that prompted students to discuss their perceptions of their schools, classes and peers; academic goals and aspirations; and their beliefs and behaviours related to academic cheating (see Appendix 1 for complete version of this protocol).

As indicated above, nine of the 15 students we interviewed were those who reported cheating despite believing that it was wrong (i.e. cases of belief–behaviour incongruity). For the purpose of this paper, we selected four students who offered the clearest representation

of four distinct cases of belief–behaviour incongruity. The remaining five students who cheated were not as easily "typed" as a singular, specific case of belief–behaviour incongruity. Thus, for the sake of clarity and parsimony, we limit our analyses and discussion of data in this paper to those four students who offered the most clear and distinct cases.

Results

We present the findings of our investigation in two forms. First, we provide a brief narrative of each student, describing both the person and the environment in which he or she is embedded. These narrative descriptions are designed to give the reader a sense of the student – his or her perceptions, beliefs and behaviours as they relate to schooling and academic dishonesty. Secondly, we provide a matrix of central ideas and quotations from the interviews. This matrix (Table 1) is designed to facilitate cross-case comparisons of how these four students think and feel about academic dishonesty and the belief – behaviour incongruity they experience.

Case 1: Javier

Javier is an 8th-grade Hispanic (Puerto Rican) male at an ethnically diverse, low-achieving middle school in a small, economically depressed New England city. Javier likes school, particularly hanging out with friends and playing on the football team. He plans to go to college so he can learn how to develop video games, which he also enjoys playing. Javier seems very socially minded; his hero is his uncle, a man he admires "because he's always doing things for people and he always looks out for his family". Javier sees cheating as wrong but finds himself doing it and feeling guilty about it:

> I only do it if I'm really, really stuck on something, like on a test if don't know the question.

He states further:

> When I cheat, it's like I don't want to but then it still happens, but then at the end I feel bad that I did it because I know that I'm not really learning anything.

In addition to "cheating" oneself of learning, Javier sees cheating as wrong because students that do so are "getting credit that they don't deserve".

According to Javier, other students cheat because "they're worried about their grades and stuff". He goes on to say that:

> Kids mostly just fool around, they don't listen to the teachers, but during the end of the year they're all frustrated saying that they're gonna fail and they don't wanna stay back because all their friends are going to the other school.

It is hard to know how much of this view is a product of psychological projection. Javier is not a strong student and clearly has other priorities or preferences (socialising with friends and playing football and video games). He may well fear failing and being left behind while his friends advance. His guilt about cheating may extend beyond a sense that it is wrong, and may include a sense that he could have done more if he wasn't busy playing games. In sum, Javier represents a case of a student who is *unable and ashamed*. This configuration of thoughts (unable) and feelings (shame) contrasts greatly with our next case.

Case 2: Brent

Brent is a white male senior at an ethnically diverse, low-achieving high school in the same small, economically depressed New England city that Javier lives in. Brent has good relationships with his teachers, likes the diversity of students at his school and doesn't feel pressured for grades. He is ranked in the top 50 of his class of just over 200 students. His favourite subject is maths because he's "pretty good at it" and it "comes easy" to him. His main goal for high school is to "get passed it [and] go to college". Similarly, Brent's main goal for college it to "get passed it [and] get a job". He wants to be an accountant because he's good with maths and prices. When asked if he could be anything he wanted, Brent said he would like to be a professional poker player. He plays quite a bit now and is involved in a "club" that meets every week to gamble (with real money).

Brent cheats frequently on tests – on five out of every 10 tests (short answer or multiple choice tests) – and with great effect (a difference of 20 to 25 points). Although he acknowledges that such cheating is:

> wrong because it's using someone else's hard work to get a better grade rather than taking the time to do it yourself … because they take the time to do it and you shouldn't get the same grade.

Brent none the less says he feels "indifferent" about it:

> It's wrong but I don't really focus on it.

Brent is strategic in how he cheats. He doesn't bring in "cheat sheets", which can be used as evidence if caught. Rather, he purposefully sits next to a student with "a 98 average":

> She'll put her paper closer to mine so I can see it, or even tells me nonverbally.

Brent is also a prodigious plagiarist. He acknowledged doing so about "10 to 15 times" in just the past six months of school; always cutting and pasting from the Internet. When we interviewed Brent, he had just submitted a two and a half page report, all of which was plagiarised from the Internet (three different websites). Once in MS Word:

> I'll select the whole thing and make sure it's all the same text, all the same size, the same font.

In sum, Brent's thoughts and feelings about cheating might best be summarised as a case of *under-interested and indifferent*. He's simply not very interested in learning (or working hard at it) and he isn't much emotionally affected by his cheating, which he acknowledges is wrong.

Case 3: Laura

Laura is a white junior at a predominately white high school in a small, economically diverse New England town. She describes most of her teachers as "really good and really helpful" and acknowledges the "huge divide" among students: the A- and B-level (honours and college prep tracks respectively) students rarely socialise with the G-level ("G" connotes general) students, "Walking down the hall you can tell who are the G-level kids and who aren't". Ironically, Laura feels that it is A- and B-level students who are the most disaffected with school as they feel neglected:

> A lot of the lower-level teachers actually care more because a lot of them want to try to help all the kids who aren't going anywhere, who aren't going to college.

Laura is an A-level student and plans to go to college but is uncertain about her major or career path:

> I used to want to be a history major but now I don't want to do that. I used to want to be pre-med but now I really don't want to do that. I wanted to major in journalism for a while but now I don't want to do that. It kind of changes every year … I see the good in a lot of things.

Laura believes cheating is morally wrong, but

> a lot of times, you rationalise things in your head. It's like, "This class sucks. I'm cheating the system". I'll be like, "He doesn't spend any time making up new tests for this book; I don't have to spend any time studying".

She doesn't cheat very often, and when she does, it is mostly in the form of copying homework assignments. She says she never plagiarises and that the extent of her test cheating is limited to calling in sick (when she isn't prepared) and occasionally asking about the content of an exam that other students have already taken. She'd "feel awful about it" if she cheated on a test as she has seen other students cheat:

> It's not worth feeling that guilty … I always do well on the tests [and] I'd just as soon study as feel guilty … It bothers me a lot when people cheat off of other people. I've been cheated off of and it bothers me so much because people are taking advantage of the fact that I studied.

Unlike the other students represented in this study, Laura is striving to attend an elite private university. She is keenly aware of the high standards needed to do so and is even outraged by them. In discussing a friend of hers who had just been rejected by his college of choice, she says:

> He had 1580 on the SATs, awesome extracurriculars, all As, really good at some random sport and he didn't get into Princeton. It's like: "What do they want?"

Feeling the pressures herself and hearing of experiences such as these have deeply affected Laura's orientation towards learning and her view of higher education:

> I think that it fosters a mindset of "What do I have to do?" rather than "What do I want to do?" I don't work because I want to learn; I work because I know I have to get an "A" because I have to get into college … I just think there's too much they want from us. I was worrying about this stuff when I was 14 – taking classes and getting ready for college. I just think there's too much pressure and that forfeits academic stuff … It makes you feel so dehumanised to go through the day and just have no time to do anything that you want to do. I started to go crazy this year just because there are times when you want to do something, even if it's totally mindless like watching a random, stupid TV show. And it seems like they don't want you to do that. It's really frustrating … but there's nothing you can do about it. If you want to go to a good college, this is the stuff you have to do.

In sum, Laura represents a case of a student who is *under pressure and exasperated*. This configuration of thoughts and feelings contrasts greatly with our next case involving a student at the same school.

Case 4: Marjorie

Marjorie is a white junior at the same high school as Laura. She is also an A-level student. While Marjorie and Laura share similar perceptions of their school, they are very unlike each other with respect to their thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to academic dishonesty. Marjorie cheats frequently and expresses no remorse about doing so or outrage at (or even awareness of) the broader "system" that Laura is so cognizant of and troubled by. Part of this difference might be explained by the fact Marjorie does not aspire to attend an elite private university. She plans to go to a state university. Like Laura, though, she is not sure what she wants to major in or pursue as a career:

> College is the place to go figure out what you want to do.

For Marjorie, cheating is "pretty common" and not something students take "seriously until someone gets caught", which is very rare. With respect to homework cheating, she says:

> Nobody gets upset … because people have a lot to do and it happens all the time … Everyone has to do the same assignment, so it's give a little, take a little. If you want to copy someone's homework, you should expect them to copy off you sometimes.

These mutually advantageous exchanges primarily occur over the Internet (via Instant Messaging) among a social network of approximately 25 "buddies". While Marjorie views test cheating as "worse" than homework cheating, "It's okay to ask friends but not someone you just met". When asked about her on own test cheating, which she does on "two out of five or six tests", she says:

> I try not to do it, but if I don't know something and I'm looking at my friend's paper, I don't tell myself, "Oh, no, that's so bad" … If I really studied for a test and I don't know a question, it just kills me because I studied so hard and feel like I really deserve a good grade for it, so that's when I'm more likely to just quickly ask for an answer because I put so much time and effort into getting a good grade.

In sum, Marjorie's thoughts and feelings about cheating might best be summarised as a case of *unreflective and unrepentant*. She does not seem to think very much about her cheating and even to feel that it is justified, as either part of reciprocal exchange (in the case of homework) or moral desert (on exams she's studied for).

Cross-case matrix: core categories and key quotations

In order to facilitate cross-case comparisons, we created a matrix of core categories and key quotations. More specifically, Table 1 offers a snapshot of each of our four students' perceptions, beliefs, feelings and justifications related to academic dishonesty.

Discussion

By using a purposive sample of adolescents who believe cheating is wrong but report doing it anyway, the present study sought to build on and extend existing theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding students' beliefs and behaviours related to academic dishonesty. Taken together, this multi-case study captures four distinct "lived experiences" with academic dishonesty and belief–behaviour incongruity. Each case, each

Table 1. Matrix of core categories and quotations.

	Javier	Brent	Laura	Marjorie
A case of …	*Unable*	*Under-interested*	*Under pressure*	*Unrepentant*
Perceptions: *Why do students cheat?*	"Because they're worried about their grades … Kids mostly just fool around, they don't listen to the teachers; but during the end of the year, they're all frustrated saying that they're gonna fail and they don't wanna stay back because all their friends are going to the other school"	"Because they don't have the answer … Not enough studying … Looking for the easy way out … Not really looked down upon because most people do it"	"There's so much pressure now just for your college application. You have to do a sport but you also have to do other extracurriculars, and you also have to have a job and then you also have to have all 'A's in honour's classes"	"All these A-level kids feel like they have to get an 'A' on tests and some will do anything. But it's not like they're doing something so bad. It's not a big deal to people"
Beliefs: *Is cheating morally wrong?*	"Always wrong." *In what ways is it wrong?* "If you study for a test and get a good grade, you'll feel happy and be proud that you did it. But if you cheat, you won't feel proud of yourself because you know you cheated"	"I think probably not. Depends on what you cheat on, like if you cheat on a higher level [that] could be morally wrong … Cheating on a college entrance test – you get in when you shouldn't and somebody else is left out that should be there"	"[It's] wrong to do … But a lot of times, you rationalise things in your head. It's like, 'This class sucks. I'm cheating the system'. I'll be like, 'He doesn't spend any time making up new tests, I don't have to spend any time studying'"	"It's worse to cheat on test, but every once in a while if I need one or two answers, I don't think it's a big deal … It's OK to ask friends but not someone you just met … I try not to but … I don't tell myself, 'Oh, no, that's so bad'"
Feelings: *How do you feel about your own cheating?*	"Sort of feel bad for a while"	"Indifferent, don't really think about it … It's wrong but I don't really focus on it"	"I don't think it's ever totally right – sometimes I think it's OK"	*Do you feel guilty about cheating?* "No, because I've probably been cheated off of just as much as I've cheated"
Justification: *Is cheating ever the right thing to do?*	"No." *What if the teacher said it was OK?* "It would be sort of OK because you have permission from teacher, and wouldn't feel badly about it"	"Yeah, if I'm going to do bad in something. I'd say it's good for me to do, if I'm gonna fail something"	"Probably not. But there are a lot of times where I just don't care. Afterwards I feel a little bad …"	"If I really studied for a test and … feel like I really deserve a good grade for it … because I put so much time and effort into getting a good grade"

Note: All names are pseudonyms. Italicised text represents researcher's/interviewer's voice. Text inside quotation marks represents student voices.

student, represents a complex configuration of psychological, social, cultural and situational factors. Yet, these cases of *unable*, *under-interested*, *under pressure* and *unrepentant* are not necessarily unique. Indeed, it is likely that many students who cheat do so with thoughts and feelings and under circumstances similar to Javier, Brent, Laura or Marjorie. It is also likely (indeed certain) that there are numerous other types of "lived experiences" not represented here, other complex person-in-context configurations associated with dishonesty and incongruity.

In the remainder of this paper, we discuss cross-case findings around two broad sets of issues or themes that were central in our investigation of students' experiences with belief–behaviour incongruity. First, we discuss students' judgements about the morality of cheating, focusing on the influence of the form of cheating involved and the context under which it occurs. Second, we discuss how students' academic motivation, in particular, their achievement goals and sense of competence, affects their cheating behaviour and "justifications" for cheating.

Moral judgement and academic dishonesty: different forms, different norms

Social judgements about cheating varied widely among the students reviewed in this paper. Whether or not a particular behaviour was "cheating" and constituted a moral wrong, a conventional violation or a personal choice (Nucci 2001; Turiel 1983) depended on the type of dishonesty involved. In other words, student norms related to cheating – both attitudinal and behavioural – vary greatly depending on the form of dishonesty one is talking about. For example, while all four students in this study did not see homework cheating as wrong or even define it as "cheating" (and not surprisingly, therefore, readily acknowledged frequently engaging in such cheating), there was considerable variation in how these students thought and felt about test cheating. Brent and Marjorie, who didn't feel academically pressured and weren't especially engaged in learning, did not regard test cheating as inherently wrong and, in the case of Marjorie, even found cheating to be justifiable at times (i.e. when she'd studied hard and deserved to do well).

In contrast, Javier and Laura both believed test cheating was morally wrong. Laura, who was striving to gain admittance to an elite university, was keenly aware that other students' test cheating may disadvantage her. The competition for grades, it seemed to Laura, is a zero-sum game and one that she loses when other students cheat (i.e. her loss in terms of class rankings and teachers' perceptions of who are the most "successful" students). Javier, on the other hand, described his test cheating as an act of necessity, when he feared failure. The source of this fear was twofold: a perceived lack of ability and a lack of effort (as he preferred to spend his time socialising with friends and playing games). Perhaps most interestingly, Javier was the only student we interviewed to express guilt or shame for cheating. This is not surprising, given that feelings of inability (uncontrollable) are associated with shame and a lack of effort (controllable) with feelings of guilt (e.g. Boonin 1983; Keltner 1996).

These findings are not unique to this study, but rather mirror those of previous investigations where considerable variations are evident in students' judgements about the definitions and/or severity of various types of academic dishonesty (e.g. Anderman, Griesinger and Westerfield 1998; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes and Armstead 1996; Stephens and Gehlbach 2007; Stephens, Young and Calabrese 2007; Taylor, Pogrebin and Dodge 2002). For example, homework cheating is always regarded as less severe and more acceptable than test cheating, if it's seen as cheating at all. Plagiarism, in contrast, often occupies a middle ground. Some students, like Laura, viewed it as quite severe (as it has both elements

of theft and dishonesty), while others, like Brent, viewed plagiarism – especially Internet plagiarism – as innocuous "because the Internet is there to be looked at".

Academic motivation and cheating: unable, under-interested and under pressure

Students' judgements about the morality of cheating and their academic motivation and behaviour are not mutually exclusive domains. All of these students were cheating to advance themselves in a system that has placed an ever-increasing emphasis on grades. While Laura may have been the most explicit in communicating that grades were more important than learning, this seemed to be the "water" that all four students were immersed in. That is, none of these students challenged the assumption that cheating was a common and accepted means of coping in an educational system that is more orientated towards the *demonstration* of competence (through high test scores and grade point averages) than the *development* of competence (Midgley 2002).

For Javier, cheating was motivated by a sense of incompetence – the lack of ability to meet the demands placed upon him. For Brent and Marjorie, it was a lack of engagement in the learning process; they simply didn't seem to care about learning, school was seen as something to "get passed" with as little effort as possible. While Laura also reported losing her interest in learning, she clearly felt "under pressure" to perform and, as described above, identified the source as the system of higher education. Specifically, the unrealistic expectations that universities now demand of their applicants – high standardised test scores, 4.0 GPA, extracurricular involvement, etc. – instilled in Laura the belief that such high standards must be met at the expense of learning. Not surprisingly, these findings comport with those of the past ten years of empirical research into the links between academic motivation and cheating (Anderman, Griesinger and Westerfield 1998; Anderman and Midgley 2004; Anderman and Murdock 2007; Jordan 2001; Murdock, Hale and Weber 2001; Murdock, Miller and Kohlhardt 2004; Rettinger, Jordan and Peschiera 2004; Stephens and Gehlbach 2007).

Educational implications

The present investigation offers several implications for educators, particularly those at the secondary level. First, it seems clear that teachers must take the time to communicate, or, better yet, build consensus with students concerning which behaviours constitute academic dishonesty, and why such behaviours are morally problematic (e.g. issues of honesty, fairness and distributive justice). Secondly, teachers must orientate students towards the adoption of mastery goals by structuring the classroom environment (through instructional, assessment and recognition practices) around the *development* of competence. Such mastery goals should be more salient than performance goals, which emphasise the *demonstration* of competence and have been associated with maladaptive motivational patterns and academic behaviours (such as cheating). Finally, Javier reminded us of the need to support learners as they grow – developing their sense of efficacy by scaffolding learning with a range of pedagogical strategies (e.g. the use of coping models, the setting of proximal goals when longer-term projects are under way, and providing constructive verbal feedback and motivation).

Limitations and future directions

The chief limitations of the present study include a small sample size and limited sources of data. While phenomenological studies typically include a small size, we do not claim to capture the full range of students "lived experiences" with belief–behaviour incongruity.

More research of this sort is needed. This research should also be more extensive, involving multiple data sources and a series of interviews (rather than one) as recommended by some methodologists (e.g. Seidman 1998). Such approaches would enable triangulation of data and increase the reliability, validity and generalisability of findings. Finally, we believe more work is needed on the emotions associated with cheating. Findings here suggest that feelings of guilt may fade over time as students habituate to cheating and become desensitised.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the John Templeton Foundation for its encouragement and financial support. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or the Center for Academic Integrity.

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Appendix 1. Academic motivation and integrity study protocol for individual interviews

1 *Introduction*
- Myself and the broad purpose of the research.
- Statement about confidentiality.

2 *Perceptions of school culture*
- General probes: I'd like to begin by asking you to describe your school. What kind of place is it? What are the students and teachers like? What seems most important and valued at this school?
- Academic climate: What about grades and test scores? Are those very important at this school?
- Social–moral climate: What about relationships between teacher and students? Do teachers really care about students at your school? Do students care for each other? Are administrators and teachers fair to students? In general, are the school's policies and practices fair to students? How much say do students have in how things get done at your school? How do you feel about this? Are some students treated differently than other students? Do certain students get recognised/acknowledged more than others?

3 *Academic motivation: interests goals, achievement, identity and aspirations*
- Interests: What is your favourite subject? Why do you like it the most? What is your least favourite subject? Why?
- Goals: In general, what are your major goals when coming to school? What do you hope to accomplish (or avoid doing) when you come to school each day? [Probe for mastery versus performance goals/approach versus avoidance goals.]
- Achievement: How well are you doing in school? Do you think you're learning a lot? What kind of grades do you usually get? [Break down by major subjects: maths, science, English/literature, social studies and world languages if applicable.]
- Identity: How important is school to you? Is it a big part of your life? In what way? Is doing well academically important to you? Is it a big part of who you are as a person? [Note: students' school/academic identity may range from highly identified to alienated/oppositional. This may have implications for cheating as an act of "compliance" versus an act of defiance.]
- Aspirations: If you could go as far as you wanted, how far would you go in school? [Offer choices if necessary: graduate from high school, get an AA, BA/BS, MA/MS, JD/MBA, MD/PhD versus drop out tomorrow if they had chance.]
- Life goals: Where do you want to be when you grow up? What kind of job would you like to have? Where would you live? How important is having lots of money (a big house and nice car) to you? What matters to you most and why?

4 *Theories about cheating: others and their own (if applicable)*

5 *Results from surveys indicate that most high school students cheat at some point during the school year.*
- Others: Can you tell me why you think some students do it? [Probe for details – be attentive to dispositional and situational attributions.] Do any other explanations/reasons come to mind? What about students who don't cheat? Why do you think they refrain from doing it? Any other reasons?
- Self: What about yourself? Why do, or don't you, cheat? [Break down by type of cheating behaviour – homework, plagiarism, and test cheating.] Any other reasons?
- Recall (if applicable): Can you recall a recent occasion when you cheated? [Probe for details: when, where, why, how, emotions, etc.]

6 *Moral judgements about cheating*
- "You've indicated earlier that X is 'definitely cheating', but is it wrong?"
  (a) *Rule contingency*: Does the wrongness of cheating (on a test) depend upon the existence of your school's rule against cheating? In other words, is cheating on a test wrong just

because there's a school or classroom rule against it or is it wrong in some other way or for some other reason? How or in what way is it wrong?

(b) *Rule alterability*: Would it be OK if the school (your principal and teachers) decided to get rid of the rule against cheating (or plagiarism)? In other words, if your teacher or principal said it was OK to cheat in a test, would it be OK to do so? [Differentiate between a typical/routine subject-matter test and a state-sanctioned test such as the Connecticut Mastery Tests or national tests such as the SAT.]

(c) *Rule generalisability*: Is it wrong or all right for members of another society or culture not to have a rule against cheating or plagiarism? For example, would it be OK if people in Canada didn't have a rule against cheating on tests or plagiarising other people's work? [What about people in Mexico, Europe, Asia or Africa – would it be OK if they didn't have a rule against doing so?]

(d) *Act generalisability*: Is it wrong or alright for a member of another society or culture to cheat (or plagiarise) if that society/culture does not have a rule about the act?

(e) *Act severity*: How wrong is it to cheat on a test? [On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is not wrong at all and 10 represents the worst thing a person could do.]

- Just cheating: Can you think of a time when cheating on a test might be justified? In other words, are there certain situations or circumstances that make students less responsible for cheating? [Probe for actual events – involving someone else or self. Draw distinctions between understandable, acceptable, justified cheating. Introduce hypothetical dilemma(s), if necessary. Prompts: (a) *Is cheating ever justifiable? If not, why not? If so, when?* (b) *Can you think of a time you cheated and felt that it was the right thing to do?* [Follow-up questions for details, feelings, reasons, etc.] (c) *Now, think of time you cheated and felt as though it may have been wrong?* [Follow-up to get clear on the distinction – what matters and why with respect to distinguishing just from unjust cheating.]
- Goal conflict: Students today seem busier than ever before and getting into college more difficult than ever before. To what extent is cheating sometimes a way (even if wrong) to help you accomplish your goals?

6 *Final thoughts*

- Is this there anything else you'd like to say about academic cheating or honesty? Something I ignored or overlooked that might be helpful in understanding how you or other students see and think about cheating?

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