

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273853885>

Affective Tendencies in Embarrassing Situations and Academic Cheating Behavior

Article in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* · May 2013

DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.383

CITATIONS

2

READS

78

1 author:



[Elena Stanculescu](#)

University of Bucharest

30 PUBLICATIONS 317 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Resilient Educational Communities [View project](#)



Psychological effects of social media on university students' quality of life [View project](#)

PSIWORLD 2012

Affective Tendencies in Embarrassing Situations and Academic Cheating Behavior

Elena Stanculescu*

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Panduri street, 061071, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between affective tendencies in embarrassing situations and cheating behavior in a sample of adolescents. Two objectives were addressed: first, exploring the relationship between cheating behavior and shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, externalization, and detachment; second, analyzing the mediating role of detachment in the relationship between externalization and cheating behavior. The results showed positive correlations between the cheating behavior and externalization and detachment, a negative correlation with guilt, and no relation with shame. It was confirmed the mediating role of detachment. Implications for educators were discussed, emphasizing the importance of stimulation of students' moral rules understanding.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of PSIWORLD 2012

Keywords: academic cheating behavior, shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, externalization, detachment

1. Introduction

Academic cheating or academic dishonesty represents a spread phenomenon in secondary and postsecondary institutions. This psychological construct has been defined as “the use of unauthorized or unacceptable means in any academic work (plagiarism, helping others to engage in academic dishonesty, fabrication of information, references, or results)” (Stephens, 2008). The study of cheating behavior in schools emphasized that this problem has increased in the past years (Jensen et al., 2002). Specialists are agreed that students will cheat when they feel pressure to achieve from significant others, and when the possibilities of being observed are reduced. Cizek (2003) showed that cheating appears when students find that it enable them to obtain good school results investing minimal effort. Another reason could be related to the students' achievement orientations. Those having performance goals (interested in doing well on assessment situations for maximization of the performance) cheat more than students with mastery goals (who are interested in deepen the subject learning). Too high teachers' and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: elistapsy@yahoo.com

parents' expectations toward students' success could create a sense of uncontrollability and desire to cheat in order to avoid low performance. Students with low sense of academic self-efficacy can choose the easiest solution to cheat instead to be effortful and perseverant in preparation for assessment situations. Urdan et al, (2002) noticed that often peers may transmit directly or implicitly, through their actions, that cheating is quite acceptable.

Another topic in this area is the relation between Internet and plagiarism. It has been asserted that the easiness of access to the Internet (cutting and pasting) is conducive to the growing rate of plagiarism. Research data (Stephens, 2008) pointed out that Internet is not a cause for plagiarism, because most students who report using Internet to plagiarize also disclose using conventional means to do so (copying other students' work, copying from books, papers word for word without proper attribution).

The study of the relationship among morality and academic cheating (Murdock et al., 2004) emphasized that there is an incongruity among moral judgments and moral behavior, meaning that students' beliefs about the morality of cheating to be morally wrong do not correlate with the actions in academic settings or probability of cheating.

Moral emotion-eliciting situations can trigger affective tendencies described in the literature by June Tangney (1999) such as shame- and guilt-proneness. Affective tendencies represent the propensity to feel some emotions across a range of specific situations. Individual differences in students' anticipation of and experience of moral or self-reflexive emotions such shame and guilt have an important role in determining moral behavior in social situations. Other reactions in embarrassing social situations could be externalization and detachment. They could play a neutralizing role of the emotional consequences of the unpleasant or embarrassing social situations.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine some individual aspects related to the academic cheating behavior (affective tendencies – shame- and guilt-proneness in embarrassing social situations; externalization, and detachment – coping strategies to manage the moral emotion-eliciting situations). The following objectives were addressed: a) to explore the relationship between academic cheating behavior and shame, guilt, externalization, and detachment; b) to verify if detachment is the mediator of the relationship among externalization and detachment. The hypotheses of the study were:

H₁ – There is a positive relation between academic cheating, externalization, detachment, and a negative relation with shame and guilt;

H₂ – The relationship among externalization and academic cheating behavior is mediated by detachment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A number of 230 adolescents (students in nine to twelve grades, in two high-schools from Bucharest) participated at the research. There were 138 girls and 92 boys, whose mean age ranged from 15 to 19 years (Mean = 16.95, SD = 1.23).

2.2. Measure

In order to measure the academic cheating behavior it has been elaborated a 7-item Likert-type scale. Answers were rated on a five-point scale (from 1 - *never* to 7 - *very frequently*). The scale was elaborated taking into consideration the meanings of the psychological construct of cheating, described by Stephens (2008), such as plagiarism, helping others to engage in academic dishonesty, fabrication of information, references, or results.

Each item is rated to indicate the participants' perception of the amount of how much experiencing cheating in academic settings. Some of the used items in this scale were: (“*I provided false excuses to miss assignments*”, “*I used cheat sheets during a test*”, and “*I copied word for word another's work without proper attribution*”). Checking the reliability of the scale, it was obtained a coefficient Cronbach α of .78.

The *Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Adolescents* (TOSCA-A, Tangney *et al.*, 1991) was used to measure affective tendencies in embarrassing social situations such as shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, or neutralizing mechanisms such as detachment or externalization. The test consists of 15 scenarios encountered in daily life, followed by affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses, that have to be rated on a five-point scale, emphasizing the probability of their responding to the similar situation (1 – *not likely* to 5 – *very likely*). Fifteen items were summed across the situations to yield indices of shame-proneness, another fifteen for guilt-proneness, ten items for detachment and fifteen for externalization. The internal consistency for the Romanian version of the TOSCA-A was good (Cronbach α = .67). I received the written permission from the Dr. June Tangney to use this test in the research developed on a sample of Romanian adolescents.

2.3. Procedure

The purpose of the research was discussed in general terms with the participants who accepted to respond to the survey packet. They were encouraged to look over the questionnaires before participating. The packet consisted of an informed consent form, a demographic information sheet, the test of self-conscious affect for adolescents, and academic cheating behavior questionnaire. All participants were informed that the data would be kept confidential, being used for research purposes only.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was computed using SPSS 16 and Sobel test. Bivariate correlations were performed to check the association between research variables. Linear regression was realized to model the relationship between independent and dependent variables included in the mediation model. A Sobel test verified if detachment has a mediating role in the relationship between externalization and academic cheating behavior.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Mean scores for the academic cheating behavior was slightly above the midpoint ($M = 23.03$, midpoint – 21), for shame-proneness under the midlevel ($M = 35.37$, midpoint – 45), for guilt-proneness above the midlevel ($M = 55.73$, midpoint – 45), for detachment slightly above the midlevel ($M = 32.14$, midpoint – 30), and for externalization under the midpoint ($M = 33.80$, midpoint - 45). The shape of distribution approximate normality, and scores were variable, as demonstrated by standard deviations.

Table 1 – Mean and standard deviation of the research variables

	Mean	Standard deviation
Academic cheating behavior	23.03	4.63
Shame-proneness	35.37	3.19
Guilt-proneness	55.73	4.93
Detachment	32.14	3.69
Externalization	33.80	4.63

3.2. Psychological correlates of academic cheating behavior

Performing a bivariate correlational analysis, it was obtained a negative but not significant correlation among the academic cheating behavior and shame-proneness (as seen in the table 2; $r = -.18$). Pearson correlation coefficient among the academic cheating behavior and guilt-proneness showed a significant negative relation ($r = -.32$; $p < .01$).

Table 2. Correlations between academic cheating behavior, shame and guilt

	1	2	3
Academic cheating	–		
Shame-proneness	-.18	–	
Guilt-proneness	-.32**	.45**	–

Table 3. Correlations between academic cheating, externalization and detachment

	1	2	3
Academic cheating	–		
Externalization	.19**	–	
Detachment	.24**	.34**	–

As predicted, academic cheating behavior positively related with externalization ($r = .19$; $p < .01$) and detachment ($r = .24$; $p < .01$). According to Kotrlik and Williams (2003), the size effect confirmed the moderate correlation between academic cheating behavior and guilt-proneness (*Cohen's d* = .10), and a small but significant correlation between academic cheating behavior and externalization (*Cohen's d* = .03) detachment (*Cohen's d* = .05).

3.3. The mediating role of the detachment in the relation between externalization and academic cheating behavior

To check the second hypothesis, a mediation analysis was performed. The mediation model involves that the independent variable (externalization) significantly predicts the mediator variable (detachment) which in turn predicts the dependent variable (academic cheating behavior). Taking into consideration the three requirements for mediation mentioned in the literature by Baron and Kenny (1986), it has been noticed that all of them were satisfied. First, externalization significantly predicted academic cheating behavior ($\beta = .19$; $se = .03$, $p < .001$). Second, externalization significantly predicted detachment ($\beta = .34$; $se = .04$, $p < .001$). Third, detachment significantly predicted academic cheating behavior ($\beta = .24$; $se = .05$, $p < .001$). The next step was to explore the mediation effect using a Sobel test. The mediation effect was significant ($Z = 4.17$; $p < .001$). The results showed that there was a partial mediation (not complete) because the measured effect changes upon fixing the mediator (detachment), but remains significantly different from 0. The direct and indirect effects of externalization on academic cheating behavior were significant. The results showed that the detachment mediates the relation between externalization and academic cheating behavior.

3.4. Discussion

Because it is accepted in the literature that morally relevant self-reflexive emotions of shame and guilt have as consequences painful experiences, it has been assumed in this research that those students with high level of shame-proneness and guilt-proneness have low levels of academic cheating behaviors. The findings of this research confirmed the hypotheses, excepting the relation among academic cheating behavior and shame-proneness (Pearson correlation coefficient showed a not significant correlation). One explanation could be related to the idea that this self-reflexive emotion is elicited more by the negative self-evaluation and concern of other's evaluation rather than misconduct or dishonesty (wrong moral behavior). Guilt reflects a more relational than private aspect, being generated by the bad behavior rather than other's evaluations. In this research it was

obtained a negative relation among academic cheating behavior and guilt-proneness. This result is in same line with the previous findings that emphasized that guilt, but not shame seems to have an inhibitory function on the moral rules transgression (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). The results certified that academic cheating behavior is positively related with externalization and detachment. Analysis of the mediation model showed that the relation between externalization and academic cheating behavior was mediated by the detachment. Those students, who have the tendency to use externalization in the embarrassing social situations, could experience also detachment, which in turn contribute to the academic cheating behavior. Although students agree that cheating is morally wrong, they find many ways to neutralize the guilt feeling or personal blame, by externalizing the cause of behavior. It seems to be feasible that the tendency to externalization allow cheaters to preserve a positive self-image. Murdock *et al.* (2008) pointed out that cheaters justify dishonesty more than did non-cheaters.

4. Conclusions

Academic cheating behavior is explained by the various individual aspects (students' level of moral development, capacity to feel guilt or shame in the context of moral norms transgressions, lack of school engagement, low academic self-efficacy, or performance achievement orientation) and contextual factors (peer norms, low teachers' attention during the exams, competition pressure). Proneness toward externalization and detachment could serve to diminish or avoid self-recrimination when the students behave breaking moral rules, such as academic cheating behavior. It is necessary that educational practitioners design strategies to diminish the gap between the moral judgments (students' beliefs of wrongness of cheating) and moral behavior (likelihood of cheating). School culture of integrity would mitigate the probability of cheating. Promotion of academic integrity involves students' understanding and concern for core academic values, such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect. Future studies might include external variables related to the cheating behavior.

References

- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173–1182.
- Cizek, G. J. (2003). Detecting and preventing classroom cheating: Promoting integrity in assessment. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.
- Jensen, L. A., Arnett, J. J., Feldman, S. S., & Cauffman, E. (2002). It's wrong but everybody does it: Academic dishonesty among high-school and college students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 27, 209–228.
- Kotrlík, J. W., & Williams, H. A. (2003). The Incorporation of Effect Size in Information Technology, Learning, and Performance Research. *Information Technology, Learning and Performance Research Journal*, 21, 35–42.
- Murdock, T. B., Beauchamp, A. S., & Hinton, A. M. (2008). Predictors of cheating attributions: Does classroom context influence cheating and blame for cheating? *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 23(4), 477–492.
- Murdock, T. B., Hale, N. M., & Weber, M. J. (2001). Predictors of cheating among early adolescents: academic and social motivations. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26, 96–115.
- Stephens, J. M. (2008). Cheating. In N. J. Salkind (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology* (pp. 136–142). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Tangney, J. P. (1999). The self-conscious emotions: Shame, guilt, embarrassment, & pride. In T. Dalgleish & M. J. Power (Eds.), *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion* (pp. 541–568). New York: John Willey & Sons.
- Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral Emotions & Moral Behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 345–372.
- Tangney, J. P., Wagner, P. E., Gavlas, J., & Gramzow, R. (1991). *The Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Adolescents (TOSCA-A)*. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University.
- Urdan, T. (2004). Predictors of academic self-handicapping and achievement: Examining achievement goals, classroom goals structures, and culture. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 251–264.