

# Perceptions Regarding the Seriousness of Academic Dishonesty amongst Students – A comparison Between Face-to-Face and Online Courses

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the current situation with regard to ethical perceptions amongst students in higher academic institutions and to examine the differences in perceptions regarding the seriousness of academic misconduct according to course type (face-to-face vs. online), gender and ethnicity. The research sample consisted of 153 participants from three Israeli academic institutes in Northern Israel. The results showed that the academic misconduct perceived as being most serious was "Copying from someone else during a test", while the least seriously perceived unethical academic behavior was "Not contributing to the group's work in a group assignment". Furthermore, significant differences were found in the perception of the seriousness of academic misconduct amongst students according to course type (face-to-face vs. online), gender and ethnicity. The importance of the current research increases given that today's undergraduate students are the employees of tomorrow and that the ethics they adopt and adhere to as undergraduates shape their behavior in the future. Therefore, there is a need to understand and address the ethical perceptions of current students' before they enter the work arena.

**Keywords:** distance learning, misconduct seriousness, academic dishonesty.

## Introduction

There are various definitions of Academic dishonesty. In order to construct a basis for a theoretical framework, this work is based on Pavela's (1997) definition of academic dishonesty. (1) *Cheating* – intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise; (2) *Fabrication* – Intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise; (3) *Facilitating Academic Dishonesty* – intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to violate any provision of this Code and (4) *Plagiarism* – intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise.

The rapid development of IT has created a problematical situation, as ethical standards in this area are still evolving and it is still not clear whether IT ethics essentially differ from 'regular' ethics and whether more traditional ethical issues apply to IT behavioral intentions (Moor, 1985; Tavani, 2002). Others suggest that students' perception of what is considered as cheating has changed. For instance, working together on a "take home" exam is considered "postmodern learning", and text-messaging answers is not considered cheating by some students (Anitsal, Anitsal & Elmore, 2009). Molnar et al. (2008) stated that people can barely manage to learn new technologies before they are changed or replaced by newer technologies. Thus, they often pay little attention to the consequences of their use. It is not, therefore, surprising that there

appears to be an ongoing dissonance between students' ideas of what is ethical in terms of their personal ethics or character and their actions in terms of intellectual property violations.

Since most previous research was conducted in the traditional, in-class, face-to-face environment, researchers have totally neglected to investigate the impact of technology on students' ethical behavior (Lau et al., 2012). Consequently, it is important to examine the ethical issues in the academic learning environment where the use of technology is built in and inseparable from the learning process, such as in e-learning teaching. Moreover, there is a suspicion amongst college instructors that technology may increase the ease and creative methods used for cheating and that cheating behavior and tolerance towards cheating increases with the increasing use of technology. Some scholars even believe that the excessive use of technology in higher academic education may erode the ethical nature of participating students (Lau et al., 2012). There is, however, limited research to support this idea (Kitahara, Westfall & Mankelwicz, 2011).

With regard to cheating through the use of IT, Muir (2006) reported that students believed that stealing software from a store is a serious offense, but that only 40% of them perceived downloading pirated software from the Internet as illegal misconduct. In their research Molnar et al. (2008) showed that undergraduate students tend to think that cheating using IT is more acceptable than cheating without the use of IT. Furthermore, whilst in 1999, 10% of students admitted to cut-and-paste plagiarism from the Internet, by 2005 almost 40% admitted to doing so, and a majority of students (77%) perceived such cheating as not very serious (McCabe, 2005). Payne and Nantz (1994) reported that students perceive cheating on exams as blatant cheating, while plagiarism is perceived as not really cheating although it is an act of academic dishonesty. According to Wood (2004), the reason for this perception, is that students do not consider cut-and-paste copying from the Internet as plagiarism as they have grown up in the world of the Internet with easy access to information.

Based on the above, we decided to investigate the current perception of ethics amongst students in higher academic institutions and to examine the differences in the perception regarding the seriousness of academic misconduct according to course type (face-to-face vs. online), gender and ethnicity.

## **Method**

*Participants:* The sample consisted of 153 participants from three Israeli academic institutes in Northern Israel (the technological background of the students in these three academic institutes is similar and there were no differences among the institutes in the perception regarding the seriousness of academic misconduct). Fifty seven participants' questionnaires were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete data or careless completion, yielding a final data set of ninety six (N=96) participants. Of these 96 participants, 50% were women and 50% were men. The age ranged from 19 to 60 (mean is 30.20 years). Fifty percent of the participants were freshmen, 34% – sophomores, 11% – juniors, 3% – seniors, and 2% were graduate students. 65% were Jews, 30% were Muslims and 5% were Christians. Fifty six percent of the participants studied in face-to-face courses and 44% – in online courses.

*Survey Instrument:* The method of measurement used in the current research was the ranking method, according to which respondents were requested to rank academic unethical behaviors presented to them in a questionnaire from the most serious to the least serious misconduct based on their perception. Participants were given a questionnaire with 16 academic unethical behaviors and each participant was asked to rank the seriousness of these misconducts in

ascending order. The list of unethical behaviors was based on the academic dishonesty questionnaires: Academic Integrity Inventory (Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar, 2007) and the Academic Dishonesty Scale (McCabe & Trevino, 1997).

*Procedure:* The sample was collected using convenience sampling. The questionnaire was administered during 2012. In order to encourage the participants to think within the framework of a specific course type, we administered a printed version of the survey instrument in the traditional face-to-face courses and an online version of the survey instrument in the online courses using the Formlogix platform. The three academic institutes that the survey was administered at have both face-to-face and online courses.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the results of the ranking of unethical academic behaviors.

**Table 1. Students' ranking of unethical academic behaviors**

Unethical academic behavior	Ranking	Mean	SD
Copying from someone else during a test	1	6.45	5.17
Taking an exam for another person	2	6.93	5.01
Submitting an assignment that was written by someone else	3	6.98	4.29
Using technology to answer exam questions during the exam	4	7.31	4.54
Using un-authorized material in an exam	5	7.92	4.02
Reproducing an exam questions for the purpose of selling them	6	8.11	4.91
Copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work	7	8.27	4.41
Invented or falsified information for the bibliography of a paper	8	8.35	4.18
Allowing another person to copy from me during an exam	9	8.48	4.42
Copying material from a published source without giving credit	10	9.04	4.21
Writing an assignment for a friend who submitted it as his work	11	9.04	4.71
Collaborating on an assignment when asked for individual work	12	9.15	4.32
Reproducing an exam questions and sharing them with friends	13	9.23	4.23
Obtaining questions from a previous exam	14	9.48	4.43
Inventing a family crisis in order to get an extension on an exam	15	9.80	4.29
Not contributing to the group work in group assignment	16	10.10	5.28

N=96; 1 representing the most serious misconduct, 16 representing the least serious misconduct.

Our findings show that copying from someone else during a test is perceived by the students as the most serious unethical academic behavior, whereas failure to contribute in a group assignment is perceived as the least serious academic misconduct.

The results of Independent Sample T-test analyses and Cohens' *d* showed that there were statistically significant differences in the seriousness perception of the following unethical academic behaviors between students attending face-to-face vs. online courses: "Taking an exam for another person" [ $t_{(94)}=2.72, p<.01, d=.56$ ], such that students studying in face-to-face courses perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=5.74, SD=4.79$ ) than students studying in online courses ( $M=8.45, SD=4.92$ ); "Inventing a family crisis to get an extension on an exam" [ $t_{(94)}=2.29, p<.05, d=.47$ ], such that students studying in online courses perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=8.69, SD=4.48$ ) than students studying in face-to-face courses

( $M=10.67$ ,  $SD=3.97$ ). The differences in the following academic unethical behaviors were found as statistically marginally significant: "Copying from someone else during a test" [ $t_{(94)}=1.78$ ,  $p=.078$ ,  $d=.36$ ], such that students studying in face-to-face courses perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=5.63$ ,  $SD=4.74$ ) than students studying in online courses ( $M=7.50$ ,  $SD=5.55$ ); "Copying material from the net and submitted it as my work" [ $t_{(94)}=1.67$ ,  $p=.099$ ,  $d=.34$ ], such that students studying in online courses perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=7.43$ ,  $SD=4.32$ ) than students studying in face-to-face courses ( $M=8.93$ ,  $SD=4.40$ ).

In addition, the results of Independent Sample T-test analyses, indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the seriousness perception of the following unethical academic behaviors between men and women: "Copying from someone else during a test" [ $t_{(92)}=2.67$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $d=.55$ ], such that male students perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=5.15$ ,  $SD=4.94$ ) than female students ( $M=7.91$ ,  $SD=5.10$ ); "Copying material from the net and submitted it as my work" [ $t_{(92)}=2.60$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $d=.54$ ], such that female students perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=7.09$ ,  $SD=4.02$ ) than male students ( $M=9.40$ ,  $SD=4.60$ ); "Allowing another person to copy from me during an exam" [ $t_{(92)}=2.57$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $d=.53$ ], such that male students perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=7.32$ ,  $SD=4.26$ ) than female students ( $M=9.62$ ,  $SD=4.42$ ).

Finally, the results of Independent Sample T-test analyses, pointed out a statistically significant difference in the seriousness perception of an unethical academic behavior – "Inventing or falsified information for the paper's bibliography" – between Jews and Arabs [ $t_{(90)}=2.26$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $d=.49$ ], such that Jews perceived this misconduct as more serious ( $M=7.09$ ,  $SD=4.18$ ) than Arabs ( $M=9.12$ ,  $SD=4.05$ ).

## Discussion and conclusion

The results of the current research showed that the three most seriously perceived academic misconducts were "Copying from someone else during a test", "Submitting an assignment that was written by someone else" and "Taking an exam for another person", while the least seriously perceived unethical academic behaviors were "Obtaining questions from a previous exam", "Inventing a family crises in order to get an extension on an exam" and "Not contributing to the group work in group assignment". The most common type of AD behavior was cheating (Pavela, 1997). One of the reasons for the students choosing the specific behavior of "copying from someone else during a test" as the most serious academic misconduct could possibly be connected to the code of ethics common in academic institutions. Desplaces, Beauvais, Melchar and Bosco (2007) found that codes of ethics and how students perceive these codes can affect their perception of the overall ethical culture of the institution. Furthermore, one of the most effective predictors of student cheating was found to be the probability of being caught and penalized (Buckley, Wiese & Harvey, 1998). Copying on a test is known to be the most frequently punishable academic misconduct in higher education, thus, it is not surprising that this unethical behavior was ranked as the most serious amongst students.

In addition we found significant differences in the seriousness perception of the various unethical academic behaviors, such as "Taking an exam for another person" and "Inventing a family crisis to get an extension on an exam", between students attending face-to-face or e-learning courses. In order to understand the underlying reasons for these differences further research should be conducted.

Interesting and significant differences were found in various unethical academic behaviors, such as "Copying from someone else during a test" and "Copying material from the net and

submitted it as my work", between male and female students. In terms of differences between men and women regarding ethics, there is a notion that men are more willing than women to behave unethically and women are significantly more likely than men to view certain questionable acts as unethical (Beu, Buckley & Harvey, 2003). In general, the ethics literature suggests women are more ethical than men due to them being sensitive, emotional, not very competitive and not particularly goal-oriented. On the other hand, men are less ethical than women due to their strong sense of independence and competitiveness (Grimshaw, 1999).

Finally, our findings showed a significant difference based on ethnicity in the following academic misconduct: "Inventing or falsified information for the paper's bibliography". This result is not surprising, because different cultures have different ethical values (Tsalikis & Nwachukwu, 1988), and the different value systems observed among diverse cultures have an effect on ethical beliefs (McClelland, 1961). For instance, Introna, Hayes, Blaire & Wood (2003) found attitudinal differences between Chinese and British students, with Chinese students perceiving plagiarism as being less serious unethical academic misconduct offence than British students.

The importance of the current research increases, given that today's undergraduate students are the employees of tomorrow and that the ethics they have as undergraduates shape their behaviors in the future. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between academic dishonesty and unethical behavior in the work environment (Anitsal et al., 2009). Consequently, there is a need to understand and address current students' ethical perceptions before they enter the working arena (Molnar et al., 2008).

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