



ROLE OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN CHEATING BEHAVIOR: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS IN THE EDO STATE POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Over the years, the Nigerian educational ecosystem has witnessed a growing trend of cheating in various educational tests. However, the prevalence, patterns, and correlates of cheating have received significant research attention. It is essential to continue explorations of the psychosocial underlying variables. The present study examined moral disengagement as a factor that could correlate with cheating behavior among students in the post-primary education of Edo State, Nigeria. Two hundred and thirty-seven undergraduates participated in the study. The students were conveniently pooled from different schools in the third term of the 2022/2023 session. They completed self-report measures of the Moral Disengagement and Cheating Behavior Scales. The data were analyzed using a Pearson-moment correlation. The finding revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior, $r(235) = .44, p < .001$. Importantly, moral disengagement explained 12.6% of the variation in cheating behavior. The finding has implications for educational and institutional development.

Keywords: moral disengagement, cheating behavior, secondary school, students.

Introduction

Education is an important institution that aims to offer students improved information. It gives people a way into the workforce (Kromydas, 2017). As a result, education provides a unique opportunity for personal growth and high-quality choices for improving overall achievement equity. It is a platform that prepares people for various life requirements and societal concerns (Feday, 2017). A well-managed, focused, and expanding education system is critical for producing talented and well-trained individuals for today's economy and national growth. Education provides endless opportunities for social mobility and economic development, from offering training for direct professional application to developing stages of learning complexity toward post-graduate courses and research. It has the authority to deliver high-quality education to bring about much-needed change.

Transitioning from primary to post-primary education is considered the most challenging educational transition students face (Johnson et al., 2021). Students' personal, social, and emotional development has become a priority in post-primary education (O'Toole et al., 2022). However, cheating has become one of the most devastating and conspicuous forms of indiscipline in the Nigerian education system (Jekayinfa et al., 2011). However, education is vital to improving students' knowledge, attitudes, and ethical behaviors without learning dishonesty (Azulay Chertok et al., 2014). However, there is a growing alarm about the prevalent unethical behaviors relative to cheating among undergraduates in tertiary institutions.

Cheating behavior is a rampant and troubling phenomenon in the educational sector (Krou et al., 2021), encompassing cheating, plagiarism, and falsifying data or citations (Hamlin et al., 2013). It is common and establishes a concern in higher education (Finchilescu & Cooper, 2018). Indeed, intimations suggest that most students perceive cheating as a pathway to success and a competitive concept (Muhney et al., 2008). Cheating behavior describes students' dishonest attitudes regarding academic exams and practices. It denotes an educational activity that violates established evaluation standards and other institutional policies, regulations (Bayaa et al., 2016). Cheating behavior occurs when students indulge in actions intended to obtain undue benefit relative to evaluation (Guthrie, 2009). It is regarded as unprincipled and fraudulent intellectual larceny capable of denting an institution's reputation and jeopardizing societal development (Maina et al., 2014). Accordingly, Faucher and Caves (2009) referred to the phenomenon as behaviors aimed at exchanging academic information through unauthorized channels and evading the standard evaluation procedures in an educational context.

Cheating is a global problem that affects both developed and developing countries (Arhin & Jones, 2009; Chapman & Luptone, 2004; Denisova-Schmidt, 2016; Ogunji, 2011; Smith, 2010; Tadesse & Getachew, 2011). Most significantly, there is ample evidence that academic cheating is widespread in higher education across the



world (Aaron & Roche, 2013; Adzima, 2020; Brimble, 2016; Elahi et al., 2013; Farisi, 2013; Feday, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Linn & Wen, 2007; Mustapha et al., 2017; Radulovic & Uys, 2019). Nonetheless, according to Olutola (2016), the rate at which university students participate in different acts of dishonesty has long been a source of worry for academics and university administration.

Previous studies have underscored the pattern and prevalence of cheating behavior in the Nigerian educational context (see., Achibong, 2013; Buraimo et al., 2020; Chukwuemeka, 2013; Okoroafor et al., 2016; Olabisi, 2009; Olasehinde-William, 2006; Omonijor et al., 2014; Onu et al., 2021; Osisioigu & Maman, 2017; William & Aremu, 2019). For example, Maina (2014) investigated students' awareness and indulgence in plagiarism and their perception of punishment for cheating behavior. The research used data from 200 tertiary institution students in Nigeria's Gombe State. The results indicated that 90% of students had previously plagiarized, 68% had inserted textbooks and other sources in the bibliography of assignments, and 50 percent had authored books they had never read. Furthermore, the survey found that students who were only somewhat aware of plagiarism (63%) and those who were entirely ignorant (20%) were more likely than those who were fully aware (17%). The study showed that most students plagiarize from the internet (90%), and when asked whether it would be fair to discipline plagiarists, 42% disagreed. The study provides insight into the harm accruing from cheating behavior.

Academic dishonesty is a complicated activity driven by various situational, contextual, and individual factors (Fields, 2003). For example, research has linked dishonesty among students to gender and study level (Ampunni et al., 2020), sensation seeking and self-control (Portnoy et al., 2019), pressure for a high score, and time scarcity (Bachore, 2016). Business and Research (2020) investigated characteristics impacting cheating behavior among 391 Malaysian accounting students using a quantitative manner. According to the study, the study predicted cheating conduct by impression management, motivation, and personal attributes, but not by peer behavior or university regulations. The study also discovered that cheating behavior differed considerably by gender and CGPA.

Similarly, in a study of 390 Polish undergraduate students, Baran and Jonason (2020) investigated the influence of psychopathy, achievement objectives, and self-efficacy as predictors of cheating behavior. According to their findings, the disinhibition element of psychopathy and mastery-goal orientation predicted the frequency with which students engaged in cheating activity. Furthermore, mastery-goal orientation moderated the link between psychopathy's disinhibition, meanness, and dishonesty. Peled et al. (2019) also evaluated motivation, students' attitudes, personality characteristics, and cultural backgrounds as determinants of cheating behavior in higher education traditional and distance-learning courses. The study used structural equation modeling to survey 2475 students in six educational institutes. They found that the variables predicted cheating behavior. The participants tend to engage less in cheating in online courses than face-to-face lessons. The studies acknowledged risk factors and potential mechanisms leading to students' academic dishonest behavior. However, research examining the relationship between moral disengagement and cheating behavior remains scarce, hence the justification for the present study.

Individuals, in accordance with the moral self, establish norms of good and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for their acts. They engage in activities that enrich their lives and make them feel more valuable to themselves. They refrain from acting in ways that go against their moral standards because they know that doing so will lead to feelings of guilt within themselves. These positive and negative self-restrictions help maintain one's behavior following ethical principles. Regardless, many people consistently engage in a moral contradiction, participating in destructive behavior and still maintaining peace with themselves. They can achieve this by disengaging moral self-sanctification from their damaging practices. Moral disengagement works at the level of the individual as well as the level of the social system.

Moral disengagement occurs when an individual or community stops adhering to the norms of ethical behavior and begins to rationalize the adoption of previously unacceptable practices by appealing to exceptional circumstances. It describes a series of psychological mechanisms that detach deviant behavior from the self-restrictions that keep behavior in line with moral norms (Kavussanu et al., 2015). These cognitive techniques, which include moral rationalization, polite labeling, gainful comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, misrepresentation of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame, assist in turning impermissible behavior into acceptable behavior in order to maintain the behavior in accordance with moral standards (Gómez Tabares & Landinez-Martinez, 2021). Moral disengagement has been identified as an explanation for several disruptive behaviors, such as drug abuse and delinquency (Passini, 2012). Antisocial



behaviors (Boardley et al., 2020; Hyde et al., 2010; Kavussanu et al., 2015; Risser & Eckert, 2016; Wang & Chen, 2016)

Moral disengagement and cheating behavior

Morality is a vital component of educational development. Several studies have considered morality a good predictor of cheating behavior (Farnese et al., 2011; Fida et al., 2018; Marat et al., 2015). Specifically, moral disengagement has been identified as the critical predictor of cheating behavior in an educational context. Using unethical methods to enhance academic activities is a severe concern in education worldwide. Understanding the mechanisms behind cheating in academia becomes critical because previous studies have highlighted a worrisome tendency toward doping in adolescent athletes. For instance, Gabbiadini et al. (2014) reported increased cheating in individuals with high moral disengagement. The report suggests that morally disengaged students engage in dishonest acts without feeling guilty about their behavior. Similarly, (Cava, 2000) noted that students who relied more heavily on moral disengagement were expected to report less guilt when they cheated.

Moral disengagement is a social cognition people use to engage in wrongdoings even when they know it is wrong (Gülseven et al., 2023). Observation suggests that many students believe it is morally unacceptable to engage in dishonest behavior. However, a majority of these same students have engaged in academic cheating. This condition is assumed in this study to be potentiated by moral detachment. Given the prevalence of cheating behavior in Nigeria's academia, researchers have begun to explore the role of self-regulatory processes in such conduct. The present study focused on secondary school students because their potential academic misconduct may affect their higher education. The growth of education at the secondary level and beyond may be in danger if a cheating student who uses dishonest shortcuts to pass prior tests is seen as equally prepared as any other honest student. The present paper examined the effects of moral disengagement on cheating behavior in post-primary education in Edo State, Nigeria.

***Hypothesis:** Moral disengagement would positively correlate with cheating behavior in post-primary education in Edo State, Nigeria.*

Method

The population comprised students in the post-primary education in Edo State, Nigeria. The participants are male and female secondary school students aged 13-20. They were conveniently pooled from different secondary schools in the Benin post-primary education zone during the final term of the 2020/2023 session. Data collection was made more accessible with the help of research assistants. The appropriate heads of the public and private tertiary institutions chosen for the study gave their permission. The students were approached and informed about the purpose of the study. Those who consented were given the research instrument to fill on the spot. A total of 280 questionnaires were distributed to the pupils. However, only 237 scales were adequately completed, and statistical analysis was performed.

Measure

Bandura (1996) developed the moral disengagement scale based on eight dimensions to measure a person's moral disengagement. This scale consists of 32 items, and every dimension consists of 4 items. An example of the items is a statement: "Fighting to defend a friend is normal." The Likert scale is 1 to 5, while 1 =extremely disagree and 5 = extremely agree. The Alpha Cronbach internal consistency is 0.845.

The Cheating Conduct Scale assessed cheating behavior (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). The scale is a 12-item questionnaire that evaluates dishonesty among university students. Respondents were asked to rate the frequency they had engaged in certain behaviors on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never = 0 to many times = 5. "Copying from someone else during a test without their consent" and "assisting others in cheating on a test" are two examples." The cheating behavior score runs from 12 to 60, with 12 indicating no self-reported cheating and 60 showing regular cheating. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.794, according to McCabe & Trevino (1997). Indeed, many authors have made use of the scale. For example, Onu et al. (2021) adapted the scale to Nigerian culture and obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 on the scale. Higher scores on these measures imply a higher level of engagement in academic dishonesty.

Result



To test the research assumption that moral disengagement positively correlates with students cheating behavior. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 23). Pearson's product-moment correlation was conducted to ascertain the correlation between moral disengagement and cheating behavior. Two hundred and thirty-seven participants were recruited. Analyses revealed that the relationship is linear, both variables were normally distributed as calculated by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), and there were no observed outliers. Indeed, there was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior, $r(235) = .44$, $p < .001$. Importantly, moral disengagement explains 12.6% of the variation in cheating behavior.

Table 1 shows the correlation between the main variables.

| Variables | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Cheating behavior | 3.29 | 0.34 | .12** | |
| 2. Moral disengagement | 4.71 | 0.42 | .33 | .44** |
| <i>R</i> ² | .12.6 | | | |

Note. $N = 237$, ** = $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Discussion

The current study examined the correlation between moral disengagement and cheating behavior in post-primary education in Edo State, Nigeria. It was assumed that moral disengagement would positively correlate with cheating behavior among the students. The data were subjected to Pearson moment correlation. The finding showed a significant positive correlation between moral disengagement and cheating behavior. Thus, the expectation that moral disengagement will significantly correlate to students' academic dishonest behavior was affirmed. Notably, the R^2 indicates that the independent variable accounted for a 12.6% variance in cheating behavior. The finding of this study shows that the cognitive restructuring occasioned by the pronouncement and thoughts of examination might potentiate the appearance of ethical disregard that could lead to cheating in exams. The study's result corroborates previous studies that found a positive correlation between moral disengagement and academic cheating (Fida et al., 2022; Pulfrey et al., 2018; Touloupis, 2022). For instance, a similar study by Marat et al. (2015) established a correlation between moral disengagement and cheating in an academic context. Hence, the result impacted knowledge regarding unethical behaviors in tertiary institutions.

The current finding could be explained in line with the understanding that fear of failure, school environment, teacher's pedagogical knowledge, poor study habits, and previous experience could trigger the state of anxiety and prompt survival motives. Research suggests that negative self-talk during preparation for an exam is also related to feelings of anxiety during assessments (Encandela et al., 2014). The current finding confirms that exam anxiety correlates to dishonest behavior in academics. Thus, the study attempts to understand contributory factors in dishonesty and a possible control direction.

Conclusion

In any setting for teaching and learning, academic integrity is essential. However, growing concerns about student dishonesty on exams and other assessments have prompted researchers to look into the correlates of cheating in the education ecology. Although the trend is prevalent across all educational levels, the study focused on post-primary education because it is among the building paths to education development. The result indicates that the propensity to disengage morally could significantly influence students' ethical behavior. Thus, the study suggests a link between moral disengagement and cheating behavior in the post-primary education of Edo State, Nigeria. The findings contribute to the literature by revealing moral disengagement as a psychological concern that could motivate cheating in academic engagements, including examinations, presentations, and debates. However, the study is challenged with certain limitations. For instance, caution is advised in generalizing the result due to the sampling method. Also, the data collection was based on self-report. Hence, the issue of common method variance becomes a concern. Nevertheless, the study recommends that school management adopt simulation test exercises to prepare the students for exams and provide a robust enlightenment intervention. Future researchers should expand the samples to include students at all levels and explore cause-effect relationships to broaden our knowledge of the relationship between exam anxiety and cheating behavior.



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