

## **The Relationship Between Self-Interest vs. Other-Interest and Business Students' Perceptions of Cheating Ethics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

College cheating is an epidemic that has received considerable attention in the education and psychology literature. The current study examines the relationship between students' self-interest vs. other-interest and their perceptions of different cheating actions. A sample of 350 business students indicated that students scoring higher on self-interest perceived cheating actions as less unethical compared to those scoring higher on other-interest. Since business students represent future business professionals, it is imperative for instructors to sensitize business students to the pitfalls of self-interest and increase their awareness of other-interest.

*JEL Classifications: A200, I240, M100*

*Keywords: college cheating, self-interest, other-interest, business ethics*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Significant research examined the prevalence of cheating in higher education institutions. Jones (2011) found that 92% of surveyed college students reported that they cheated at least once during their college years. Research also showed that the type of class makes a difference in whether cheating can easily occur. For example, students taking online classes reported that cheating on exams and homework was easier compared to those taking face-to-face classes (King and Case, 2014). In addition, students had different perceptions of the ethics of different cheating actions. For example, Rawwas et al. (2004) compared students' perceptions of the ethics of in-class cheating (e.g. cheating on an exam) vs. out-of-class cheating (e.g. plagiarism) and found that in-class actions were viewed more negatively than out-of-class actions.

The current study specifically examines the ethics of cheating actions among business students. Nonis and Swift (2001) discovered that business students who admitted to cheating during their college years were more likely to commit unethical actions in their workplace. This correlation is an important motivating factor for this study, especially when managers have indicated the importance of business ethics when recruiting entry-level employees (Sigurjonsson et al., 2014). The study also examines whether the psychological variables of self-interest vs. other-interest make a difference in a student's perception of cheating ethics. A business student's preoccupation with self-interest was weakly correlated with a lower perception of unethical behavior compared to a higher perception of other-interest which was weakly correlated with a higher perception of unethical behavior.

The paper is organized as follows: Following this introduction is a literature review of the college cheating epidemic, its psychological determinants and its prevalence among business students. This will be followed by an explanation of the study's methodology, sample selection and statistical tests used to analyze the data. The results are presented followed by conclusions and implications for business instructors and employers.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. College Cheating and Business Students

College cheating has been defined as "a violation of intellectual property that goes against a university's academic integrity policy" (Molnar and Kletke, 2012, 202). Cheating in college is now considered an epidemic due to its widespread occurrence across institutions. In a recent study, Burgason et al. (2019) found that almost 70% of students indicated they engaged in behavior normally defined as "cheating". Blau et al. (2017) conducted a survey of business school faculty who believed cheating was widespread in their classes. In the last two decades, the college classroom has become more technological-advanced than other times in history. Cheating has evolved from copying someone's homework and using cheat-sheets to more sophisticated schemes such as texting answers and consulting online test banks (Molnar and Kletke, 2012). Parks et al. (2018) reported that some social media accounts are set up for the sole purpose of facilitating cheating among students. The proliferation of online classes also introduced a new type of academic dishonesty: Ghost students. Hollis (2018) explained this

phenomenon as a student hiring someone to take an online class on behalf of the student. Such schemes can be dangerous to the academic quality of an institution. King and Case (2014) reported that 74% of surveyed students felt it was easy to cheat in an online exam. Arnold (2016) reported that most students taking online classes engaged in academic dishonesty at least once during the exams.

The incident of academic dishonesty has also been extensively studied among business majors. In fact, several studies found that business students were more likely to cheat compared to other students. Friere (2014) found that Economics and Business majors were more likely to cheat compared to students from other majors. Lau and Haug (2011) found that English and Modern Language students were least tolerant of cheating while business students were the most tolerant. A more concerning stream of literature correlated business students' college cheating perception with workplace unethical behavior (e.g. Nonis and Swift, 2001). Practicing managers noted the importance of business graduates entering the workplace with well-established ethical standards (Sigurjonsson et al. 2014). However, a recent survey by Bernardi et al. (2016) found that only 64% of business students viewed college cheating actions as unethical. This disconnect between the business and academic worlds provides the basis for the current study examining business students' ethical perception of cheating.

### **B. Psychological Determinants of Cheating Perceptions**

Significant research investigated several psychological factors as potentially related to ethical perception of cheating. Rawwas et al. (2004) found that students who were more detached, relativistic, less religious, opportunistic and negative were more likely to believe that academic dishonesty was ethical compared to other students. Payan et al. (2010) concluded that collectivist business students were more tolerant than of academic dishonesty compared to individualist students. Williams et al. (2010) related the dark triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy) with the likelihood of self-reported cheating. Burton et al. (2011) found that more religious students were less likely to engage in unethical classroom actions compared to less-religious students. Yaniv et al. (2017) provided surprising results that higher-achieving students were bigger cheaters. Stiles et al. (2018) noted that students scoring high on academic entitlement had a more lenient perception of cheating actions compared to other students. The current study extends the literature on psychological determinants of cheating by examining the psychological variables of self-interest and other-interest.

### **C. Self-Interest vs. Other-Interest**

The concept of self-interest has been studied extensively in the psychology literature. Gerbasi and Prentice (2013, 496) defined self-interest as "the pursuit of gains in socially valued domains, including material goods, social status and academic or occupational achievement". Duska (2018) related the concept of self-interest to the development of capitalism and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith (1999) recognized that the business cycle consists of people working out of self-interest. Such self-interest guides "the invisible hand" in a free-market economy (Smith, 1999). However, if a person forgets giving others their dues, self-interest becomes selfishness and greed (Duska,

2018). The concept of other-interest was also introduced by Smith (2009). He argued that people can also behave in the interest of others in addition to their own.

Several studies have examined the consequences of self-interest vs. other-interest on an individual's behavior. Haynes et al. (2015) concluded that managerial greed (i.e. an extreme form of self-interest) leads to short-term decision-making while altruism (i.e. an extreme form of other-interest) produces a focus on long-term performance. Managerial greed can lead to unethical behavior while altruism can lead to an increase in corporate citizenship (Haynes et al. 2015). Hirschi (1969) argued that self-interested individuals were self-absorbed and concerned about themselves while those with other-regarding preferences had closer attachments to others. The latter group would be less likely to commit crime since crime would result in harming others (Hirschi, 1969). This theory was recently tested and confirmed by Paternoster et al. (2017) who found that those with other-regarding preferences were less likely to report driving while drunk while self-interested individuals were more deterred by the threat of sanctions (Paternoster et al. 2017). In an interesting study, Bocian and Wojciszke (2014) found that selfish individuals judged others' unethical actions more leniently but only if the selfish individuals benefited from such actions. The current study examines the concept of self-interest and other-interest in an academic environment in the context of cheating.

#### **D. Hypotheses Development**

Gerbasi and Prentice (2013) argued that self-interest behavior is highly mindful and deliberate. That means individuals analyze how their self-interest is served by different courses of action and they make a conscious decision to act based on that analysis. Specifically, Cui et al. (2018) found that individuals lied more often when the lie benefited them personally compared to benefiting others. Academic dishonesty in college is equivalent to lying in order to obtain an unfair advantage over other students (Parks et al. 2018). Academic dishonesty represents an ideal setting to test the concepts of self-interest vs. other-interest. In the context of self-interest, College students cited "the desire to get ahead" as the most important motivating factor for cheating (Simkin and McLeod, 2010). Ehrlich and Fu (2013) found that students cheated to maintain an advantage over other students especially when they observed other students cheating. Parks et al. (2018) attributed cheating in high school to the increasing competition for admission to prestigious universities and cheating in college to competition for appointments to coveted jobs. However, many students fail to understand that cheating can also significantly affect other-interest and is not a victimless crime (Bloodgood et al. 2010). For example, Bing et al. (2012) found that increased cheating damages an academic institution's prestige and reduces the value of its diplomas. Callahan (2004) argued that increased cheating can result in stricter standards and less flexibility offered to all students as faculty gradually begin to distrust all students. Cheating also reduces the effectiveness of business ethics education as students discover that academic dishonesty rewards cheating students, which contradicts the message offered in ethics education courses (French, 2006).

The current study examines whether business students with higher levels of other-interest would be more likely to perceive cheating as unethical compared to those with higher levels of self-interest. The following hypothesis is tested in the null form:

*H1: Business students with a higher orientation to other-interest would perceive cheating actions as equally unethical compared to those with a higher self-interest orientation.*

The current study also examines demographic factors such as age, gender, class grade and GPA as potentially related to self-interest and other-interest. Although major is included in the survey, some majors had small sample sizes and therefore, this variable is not included in the current analysis. Little, if any, research has examined these demographic factors in the context of self-interest. Grossman et al. (2012) found that as individuals get older, they tend to use reasoning strategies that take others' interest into account. However, this study did not address College students. Due to the limited research regarding demographic factors in this context, the following hypothesis is tested in a nondirectional form:

*H2: Demographic factors such as gender, age, class grade and GPA are not related to business students' self-interest and other-interest orientation.*

### III. STUDY METHODOLOGY

#### A. Sample Selection

A survey containing scales relevant to this study was developed and administered to a total of 350 undergraduate and graduate business students. The students were in a large AACSB-Accredited public university located in a large metropolitan area on the West Coast. The survey was administered in several different business courses taught by different instructors. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. Table 1 presents a description of the sample used in the study. As indicated in the table, only juniors, seniors and graduate students were selected in the study. The purpose of this selection is to present a profile of business students that are close enough to graduation and entering the job market. By this stage in their education, they are committed to their business major and have fully adjusted to the college environment. The sample was equally split between males and females. The accounting major is the largest in the College of Business and therefore represents the largest major in the study. A copy of the survey is presented in the Appendix.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics (N=350)

<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>			
<b>Gender</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>#</b>
Male	171	< 25 years old	234
Female	179	25 years old or >	116
<b>Class grade</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>#</b>
Junior	93	Accounting	151
Senior	192	Management	72
Graduate	65	Marketing	50
		CIS	26
		Finance	33
		General Business	18

Overall GPA mean (SD) was 3.10 (.44)

## **B. Study Measures**

There were two measures used in this survey: Cheating perception and self-interest vs. other-interest. In order to measure the perception of cheating ethics, the questionnaire developed by Simha et al. (2012) was used. It consists of 16 statements presenting the student with 10 situations involving in-class cheating actions and 6 situations of outside-class cheating actions. The student records his/her impression of the ethics of each action on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (highly ethical) to 7 (highly unethical). In the current study, factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. Two factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 were obtained. The first factor consisted of 10 statements and was termed "In Class Cheating" (Factor Loading range of .52 to .74) and the other factor consisted of 6 statements and was termed "Outside Class Cheating" (Factor Loading range of .53 to .77). Due to the difficulty of measuring ethical behavior in the ethics literature because of social desirability bias (Edwards, 1957), students were only asked about the ethics of each action rather than whether they would do it or not. Simha et al. (2012) and Elias (2017) used this questionnaire and found that in-class actions were viewed as more unethical than outside-class cheating actions.

In order to measure self-interest and other-interest, the questionnaire developed by Gerbasi and Prentice (2013) was used. In developing their questionnaire, the authors measured self- and other-interest through respondents' own eyes (Gerbasi and Prentice, 2013). They presented respondents with a total of 18 statements designed to measure their pursuit of their own and others' interest (9 statements each). The respondent records his/her agreement with each statement on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the current study, factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted and two separate factors for self-interest (Factor loading range of .51 to .76) and other-interest (Factor loading range of .55 to .81) were obtained with eigenvalues greater than 1. The study makes no assumptions about the relatedness of these factors (Gerbasi and Prentice, 2013).

## **IV. STUDY RESULTS**

The first step in analyzing the data is to calculate means and standard deviations for all variables. These means are presented in Table 2, Panel A. The data showed that students viewed in-class cheating actions as more unethical than outside-class cheating actions. Overall, the students viewed all actions with a Mean of 6.02 indicating a very unethical perception of the actions. The data also revealed that business students scored above average on their own perception of self-interest (Mean 5.50/7.00) indicating slight to moderate agreement that they have a self-interest orientation. In addition, their mean score on other-interest was 4.91/7.00 indicating neutral to slight agreement that they care about others' interest.

**Table 2**  
Cheating Ethics and  
Self-Interest Vs. Other Interest (N=350)

<b>Panel A: Variable Means</b>			
	<b>Mean (SD)</b>		
In-class cheating*	6.33 (.93)		
Outside-class cheating*	5.84 (.81)		
Total cheating perception*	6.02 (.81)		
Self-Interest**	5.50 (.87)		
Other-Interest **	4.91 (1.02)		
GPA	3.10 (.44)		
<b>Panel B: Correlation between Self-Interest vs. Other-Interest and Cheating Perception</b>			
	<b>In-Class Cheating</b>	<b>Outside-Class Cheating</b>	<b>Total Cheating</b>
Self-Interest	-.13+++	-.08++	-.09++
Other-Interest	.09++	.13+++	.12++
<b>Panel C: Demographic Factors and Other-Interest (only Grade was statistically significant)</b>			
<u>Grade</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>		
Junior	4.97 (.94)+		
Senior	4.97 (1.02)+		
Graduate	4.63 (1.11)+		

\* Higher scores indicate higher perception that action is unethical (seven-point scale)

\*\* Higher scores indicate higher orientation toward self-interest or other-interest

+ p<.10, ++ p<.05, +++ p<.01

The next statistical test involved using correlation analysis to analyze the relationship between self-interest vs. other-interest and ethical perception of cheating actions. The results are presented in Panel B. Correlation analysis showed a statistically significant, but weak, negative relationship between self-interest and ethical perception of cheating actions. That means that business students who were more focused on self-interest viewed the cheating actions as more ethically acceptable. On the other hand, there was a positive statistically significant, but weak, relationship between other-interest and ethical perception of cheating actions. Business students who cared about others' interest viewed the cheating actions as more unethical.

Panel C presents an analysis of the effect of demographic factors on self-interest vs. other-interest. One-way ANOVA was used to analyze these relationships. Regarding self-interest, gender, class grade and age were not significant. Regarding other-interest, only class grade was statistically significant. Undergraduate students showed higher levels of other-interest orientation compared to graduate students.

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the self-interest vs. other-interest orientation and business students' perception of cheating ethics. Previous research theorized that self-interested students would be more lenient to cheating while those with an other-interest orientation would view the cheating actions as more unethical. The current study empirically supported this relationship. These results are useful to business instructors and especially business ethics instructors. For example, Accounting instructors focus the students' attention on the students' responsibility to financial





- \_\_\_\_\_ I keep an eye out for other's interests
- \_\_\_\_\_ The success of my friends is important to me
- \_\_\_\_\_ I look out for ways for my friends to have more money
- \_\_\_\_\_ It is important to me that others are happy

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