Psychology Through Ecology: Academic Motivation, Moral Aptitudes, and Cheating Behavior in Middle and High School Settings

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Project Summary

After three decades of steady growth (Schab, 1991), cheating among high school adolescents has become normative behavior. Steinberg (1996), for example, found that during the past academic year, two-thirds of students reported cheating on a test and nearly 9 out of 10 indicated that they had copied someone else's homework. At the same time, most students believe that cheating is wrong but many report doing it anyway (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998; Jordan, 2001). What accounts for this troubling paradox? What "links" are missing or broken in the chain that would otherwise connect moral judgment with moral conduct? What other psychological or ecological factors might explain the observed incongruity between students' beliefs and behaviors related to academic integrity? Why do students cheat, even when they think it's wrong?

The proposed study seeks to answer these questions by not only attending to the "components" (cognitive, motivational, and regulatory) of moral functioning encompassed in most contemporary developmental models of moral behavior (see Bergman, 2002, for a review), but also by accounting for the norms and expectations of the academic and social environment in which students are enmeshed. In doing so, this study hopes to yield a richer, more complete understanding of why students cheat even when they think it is wrong to do so. Such an understanding is critical to the development and implementation of intervention strategies aimed at ameliorating the widespread problem of academic cheating during adolescence.

A Person-in-Context Model of Academic Conduct

How students think, feel, and act in school settings is product of numerous psychological and ecological factors. Aspects of both are important and neither stands alone in producing behavior. The person-in-context model proposed here posits that the academic and social-moral climates of the schools, and more immediately the classrooms, in which students are nested interact with and influence the personal academic and social-moral goals of students. The product of these interactions is academic conduct, honest and dishonest.

This person-in-context model of academic conduct provides the conceptual framework through which the following "key research questions" of this Missing Links grant are to be addressed:

- Why do students cheat (or refrain from doing so)? Do the reasons and motivations change with age and educational level? What can moral and cognitive development theory contribute to our understanding of the motivations for and against academic dishonesty? [More specifically, are the moral and motivational patterns associated with cheating different for middle and high school students?]

- How do institutional policies and practices influence student cheating and plagiarism? [More specifically, how do the curricular policies and pedagogical practices of teachers influence student cheating and plagiarism?]
What effect does peer culture have on acts of dishonesty? [More specifically, what effect does peer disapproval of cheating and peer engagement in cheating behavior have on student cheating and plagiarism?]

The proposed study will combine quantitative and qualitative research methods to address these research questions. Specifically, surveys and interviews will be used to help procure a broad understanding of personal and contextual factors related to academic cheating. Variable-centered data analytic techniques (such as regression analyses) will be used to examine how students' academic and social-moral values, goals, and judgments are associated with academic cheating. And person-centered data analytic techniques (such as cluster analyses) will be used to identify and form several different subgroups of students based on a configuration of motivational and moral, psychological and contextual, variables. Student interview data will be used to enrich, and perhaps qualify, results from quantitative analyses.

References


Biosketch:

Jason M. Stephens is a doctoral candidate in educational psychology at Stanford University. He has been a research assistant at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching since 1998, where he has worked on the Political Engagement Project and the Project on Higher Education and the Development of Moral and Civic Responsibility. In addition to the role and impact of higher education on undergraduates' moral, civic and political development, his research interests include academic motivation, achievement and dishonesty among secondary students. His dissertation, *Just cheating? Motivation, morality, and academic (mis)conduct among adolescents*, used both variable- and person-centered data analytic techniques to examine how high school students' academic motivation and moral cognitions were associated with cheating and, for many students, the incongruous relationship between their moral judgment about cheating and their self-reported cheating on schoolwork. He is co-author of *Educating citizens: Preparing America’s undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility* (2003) and several related articles. He is a graduate of the University of Vermont (1991) and holds an M.Ed degree (1994) from Vanderbilt University. He will complete his Ph.D. work at
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