Academic cheating, which is the deliberate or attempted use of illicit documents and/or information in work submitted for academic credit (Pavela 1997), is widespread, with roughly 90% of college students engaging in it (Brown and Choong 2005). Regardless of venue or mode, cheating undermines the educational process because it compromises the integrity of student assessments and impedes learning. Students who cheat repeatedly are ill-prepared for advanced study, and ultimately, employment.

Many studies on cheating intentions focus on psychological factors. These studies show that positive correlates of cheating intentions include presence of high aggression characteristics, perceived pleasure from cheating, and lack of self-control (Chapman et al. 2004; Tibbetts 1999). In contrast, negative correlates of cheating intentions include anticipated shame and threat of severe punishment (Tibbetts 1999). Other studies show that situational and personal factors can influence student cheating. For example, cheating proliferates when alienation and the pressure to achieve good grades are high, the detection rate and penalty for cheating are low, and cheating is believed rampant (McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield 2001; Whitley 1998).

Because ethical factors should also influence student cheating, we conducted a survey-based study to examine such factors. We found that perceived moral intensity and personal moral philosophy work simultaneously to drive moral choice in cheating contexts. Moral intensity is “the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation” (Jones 1991, p.372). For cheating, we operationalized moral intensity as the magnitude of consequences if detected and beliefs about other students’ willingness to cheat. Personal moral philosophy, which we operationalized as idealism and relativism, provides a standard for assessing the ethicality of intentions and consequences in various contexts (Forsyth 1980). Idealism is the tendency to abide by accepted moral principles when making moral
judgments and decisions (e.g., not cheating because such behavior is universally unacceptable). Relativism is the propensity to repudiate universal or accepted moral rules when making ethical judgments and decisions (e.g., focusing on personal and/or group gains accrued to cheaters rather than the immorality of cheating) (Forsyth and Nye 1990).

The results of our study are noteworthy in two ways. First, students who tend toward ethical idealism consider the consequences of cheating and how other people view cheating. Specifically, more ethically idealistic students tend to perceive greater consequences for cheating and deem that cheating is socially unacceptable, which in turn reduces their cheating intentions. Second, students who tend toward ethical relativism disregard consequences pertaining to the sum of harms to the parties affected by a cheating decision and are more likely to cheat for personal and/or group gain. Such students tend to disregard the consequences of cheating and surmise that in some situations cheating is appropriate, which in turn increases their cheating intentions.

Thus, business faculty could curb cheating by enhancing their students’ ethical idealism and reducing their students’ ethical relativism. For example, to amplify students’ concerns about potential negative consequences of cheating, a standing ethics committee comprised of faculty and students could be established. Students charged with acting unethically would be required to face this committee. To avoid this unpleasant prospect, students may choose to act more ethically. Also, stressing how the harm caused by cheating can damage the student (e.g., receiving a failing grade) and the institution (e.g., lower-valued degrees) should decrease cheating intentions (Weber 1996).

Business faculty can encourage an ethical idealistic perspective and discourage an ethically relativistic perspective through case studies, presentations by moral exemplars (i.e., role models), and pedagogical methods such as experiential learning. Universities could organize ethics workshops that students must attend throughout their program of study. In addition, if people’s morality is an acquired characteristic, then faculty can help develop their students’ sensitivity to ethical dilemmas—in other words, boost the moral intensity of cheating—by establishing and reinforcing written and unwritten codes of ethical conduct via course syllabi, learning contracts, and the like (Brown and Choong 2005).
References


