

# THE EFFECT OF PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS ON BUSINESS STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHEATING

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## ABSTRACT

*Cheating is a common problem among college students. Research shows that business students cheat more often than other students and that this cheating was correlated with future unethical workplace behavior. The current study examines some psychological determinants of business students' cheating perception. A survey was administered to 474 undergraduate business students in two universities. The levels of Individualism/Collectivism and the Protestant Work Ethic were measured for each respondent as well as his/her perception of various questionable cheating actions. The results indicated that high Collectivists and those with a high Protestant Work Ethic were more likely to view cheating actions as more unethical than Individualists and those with a lower work ethic. The results have implications for college instructors in their attempt to reduce the likelihood of cheating.*

College students' cheating is a widespread problem. Research shows that up to 70% of undergraduate students admitted to cheating at least once during their college years (Whitley 1998). Significant research has investigated the circumstances surrounding students' cheating as well as the demographic and psychological factors contributing to cheating.

The current study draws on the psychology literature and investigates if the personality characteristics of Individualism/Collectivism and the Protestant Work Ethic were related to students' perception of cheating. Using two multicultural universities in a large urban area, students' cultural dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism were measured. Individualism focuses on the maintenance of personal identity with the self being the basic unit of survival while Collectivism emphasizes a set of common beliefs and practices (Markus and Kitayana 1991). These cultural dimensions have been related to ethical perception in several studies. In addition, the Protestant Work Ethic measures the importance of hard work for each person and has also been found to correlate to ethical perception. The current study relates these two psychological dimensions to business students' cheating perception.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the next section contains a literature review of business students' cheating as well as cultural dimensions and the Protestant Work Ethic. This is followed by an explanation of the research methodology and the results. Finally, conclusions are presented along with implications and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### College Students and Cheating

Cheating in college is very common. Statistics regarding the frequency of cheating among college students range from 60% (Simkin and McLeod 2010) to 86% (Burton et al. 2011). Regardless of the percentage, it is clear that college students' cheating is a serious and common problem. In the last two decades, cheating has evolved from simply copying homework and exam answers to more sophisticated schemes involving texting and electronic plagiarism (Liebler 2012). In order to determine an appropriate strategy to minimize this problem, researchers have studied the factors that motivate students to cheat and the circumstances surrounding cheating. Demographic, situational and psychological factors have been found to determine the perception of cheating.

Several studies found that female students were less likely to cheat than male students (e.g. McCabe and Trevino 1997) and Williams et al. (2010). Tibbetts (1999) examined gender differences in cheating and concluded that females tended to feel more shame regarding cheating while males tended to exhibit less self-control. Age has also been an important determinant of cheating with younger students being more likely to cheat than older (nontraditional) students (Rawwas et al. 2004). Schuhmann et al. (2013) also found that the probability of cheating was positively related to lower GPA, alcohol consumption and having cheated in high school.

Research has also examined the situational circumstances surrounding cheating. Lau et al. (2011) noted that students tended to cheat more in major classes compared to non-major classes. In addition, students were more likely to cheat if they observed others cheating or perceived that it is commonplace (Genereux and McLeod 1995) and less likely to cheat if they were aware of the penalties involved, especially with gradable cheating such as cheating on homework and exams (Molnar and Kletke 2012). Students enrolled in an honor system university were less likely to cheat than others and were more likely to report cheating behavior (Schwartz et al. 2013). Overall, only 2.5% of students reported ever getting caught cheating during their college years (Diekhoff et al. 1996).

Significant research has examined psychological determinants of cheating. Simkin and McLeod (2010) compared cheaters and non-cheaters and found that "desire to get ahead" was the most motivating factor for cheaters while non-cheaters' presence of a "moral anchor" was the most important determining factor. Burton et al. (2011) found that more religious students were significantly less likely to engage in unethical test taking practices compared to nonreligious students. Bloodgood et al. (2010) examined the effect of Machiavellianism (i.e. the focus on one's self-interest) on students' likelihood of cheating. They found that students scoring higher on Machiavellianism were more accepting of cheating in general. The authors also examined the effect of taking an ethics course on cheating perception. They found that taking an ethics course did not affect cheating perception, especially among those scoring high on Machiavellianism.

### Business Students and Cheating

Some studies have examined differences in cheating perception based on the student's major. The prevalence of corporate fraud scandals in the last decade has focused the public's attention to the possible relationship between business students' cheating and workplace cheating. Lau and Haug (2011) compared several majors' cheating perception in a mid-size university and found that English majors had the least tolerant attitudes toward cheating while business majors had the most tolerant attitudes. Similar results were achieved by Simha et al. (2012) who found that business students had more lax attitudes toward cheating compared to other students.

Previous research has considered academic dishonesty to be equivalent of business wrongdoing (Burton and Near 1995). They argued that cheating on a paper was the college equivalent of misreporting time worked. They also equated exchanging fake papers for higher grades with a business person exchanging forged reports for a promotion. Nonis and Swift (2001) confirmed this link and

found that college cheating was a predictor of workplace cheating. Due to the importance of this link, the current study examines cultural dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism and the Protestant Work Ethic as determinants of cheating perception. Demographic and situational variables are not examined in this study and are part of another ongoing study.

### Individualism/Collectivism

Hofstede (1980) introduced the concept of Individualism/Collectivism as a cultural dimension that is unique to each individual in an ethnic group. It represents the relationship between an individual and his/her fellow individuals. Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family (Hofstede et al. 2010). Collectivism stands for a society in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout a person's life tend to protect him/her in return for unquestioned loyalty (Hofstede et al. 2010). Chao and Moon (2005) noted that the United States has become more multicultural and therefore individuals exhibit a variety of cultural values reflecting their ethnic groups as well as the large dominant society.

Extensive research has been conducted on the consequences of these cultural dimensions on ethical perception with mixed results. For example, Smith (2009) showed that students in Marketing classes scoring higher on collectivism had an inclination toward less ethical behavior regarding plagiarism. Williams and Zinkin (2008) found that in countries with high Individualism ratings, the respondents were more likely to punish bad corporate behavior. On the other hand, Yoo and Donthu (2002) found that Collectivist Marketing students had higher Marketing ethics compared to Individualists. In addition, Swaidan (2012) also found that Collectivist consumers rejected questionable business practices more often than Individualists. Due to the conflicting results achieved by previous research, the current study tests the following hypothesis in the null form:

H1: There is no relationship between the cultural dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism and business students' ethical perception of questionable cheating actions.

### Protestant Work Ethic

About a century ago, Max Weber introduced the concept of the Protestant Work Ethic. He proposed a relationship between the Protestant Work Ethic and the development of capitalism in western societies. Central to this thesis is the idea that wealth accumulation and economic success are a blessing from God. The validity of this the-

sis has been debated for the last century especially with the observation that economic success is more prevalent among Christian fundamentalists (e.g. Ghorpade et al. 2006). On the other hand, Becker and Woessmann (2009) concluded that religious beliefs were just a veil and that human capital formation and not Protestantism was the reason for economic success. The current study does not attempt to resolve the root causes or even the existence of a Protestant Work Ethic. Rather, it follows the approach used by Ghorpade et al. (2006) who argued that the Protestant Work Ethic represented the desire of people to work hard and place work at or near the center of their lives. Students who score high on the Protestant Work Ethic spent more time studying, achieved higher GPAs, and were less likely to engage in leisure activities on the weekend (Poulton and Ng 1988). Ghorpade et al. (2006) argued that this work ethic, although still called Protestant Work Ethic, is not unique to Western societies. Karakitapoglu et al. (2008) found that Turkish university students had higher scores on the Protestant Work Ethic compared to U.S. students.

Several studies have attempted to measure the effect of the Protestant Work Ethic on ethical perceptions. Furnham (1987) found that those who scored higher on the Protestant Work Ethic ranked responsibility higher in their values hierarchy than those who scored lower on the work ethic scale. Mudrack (1993) found evidence that business students who endorsed the Protestant Work Ethic were more critical of questionable business actions than those with weak scores on the work ethic scale. Jones et al. (2005) found that business students scoring higher on the Protestant Work Ethic had more negative perceptions of questionable organizational actions than students who scored lower on the scale. Based on previous research findings, the current hypothesis is tested:

H2: Business students who score higher on the Protestant Work Ethic scale would be more likely to view questionable cheating actions as unethical compared to those scoring lower.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Sample Selection

The sample for this study consisted of undergraduate business students in two universities on the West Coast (One large public university and one medium private university). A survey was developed and administered in several classes containing a variety of business majors. After disregarding surveys with missing answers, the useable sample consisted of 474 students (333 in one university and 141 in the other one). The survey was completed during class

time and anonymity was guaranteed. A comparison of responses between students in both universities was conducted and no significant differences were found. Therefore, both samples were combined in future statistical analyses.

### Scale Measures

In order to measure cheating actions, the scale developed by Rawwas et al. (2007) was used. In their study, they classified cheating actions into "clearly unethical actions" and "questionable actions". The current study uses only the seven statements representing questionable actions in order to avoid social desirability bias. If students perceived actions as clearly unethical, they would be quick to reject them. However, questionable actions such as "brown-nosing your professors to receive a higher grade" allow for a variety of perceptions and allow for a better measure of the study's variables. Each student reported his/her perception on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly ethical) to 7 (strongly unethical). Rawwas et al. (2007) found the reliability of these seven statements to be .65. In the current study, it was measured at .73.

In order to measure the cultural dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism, the scale developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998) was used. They identified several dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism in horizontal and vertical orientations. Horizontal Individualists want to be self-reliant but are not necessarily interested in achieving higher status or comparing themselves to others. Vertical Individualists see themselves as independent and compete with others for status. Horizontal Collectivists experience a sense of community but do not like to yield to authority while Vertical Collectivists make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the group and are aware of their place in the hierarchy of the group (Vodosek 2009). The scale consisted of 12 statements (three for each factor) and respondents recorded their agreement with each statement on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Factor analysis was conducted in the current study and factor loadings ranged from .59 to .68 for all four factors of Individualism/Collectivism.

In order to measure the Protestant Work Ethic, the scale developed by Ghorpade et al. (2006) was used. Many studies have used the scale developed by Mirels and Garrett (1970). However, recent research (e.g. McHoskey 1994) has criticized the single-dimension nature of this scale. Ghorpade et al. (2006) modified the original Mirels and Garrett scale and developed an 11-item scale that yielded two factors: Success (measuring the desire to succeed and the importance placed on success) and Hard Work (measuring the enthusiasm for hard work and its importance) as well as a total Protestant Work Ethic score. Factor load-

ings achieved in the current study were .72 for success and .69 for hard work.

### STUDY RESULTS

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for all measured variables. In general, business students judged the questionable actions as slightly to moderately unethical. The results also revealed a large standard deviation indicating significant differences of opinions regarding these questionable actions. The results also revealed that students were neutral regarding the importance of success in life but slightly agreed that hard work was a moral commitment. Overall, they slightly agreed with the Protestant Work Ethic. Regarding the cultural dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism, the students scored higher on Horizontal Individualism compared to Vertical Individualism and higher on Vertical Collectivism compared to Horizontal Collectivism.

Table 1 also presents the results of statistically significant correlation results linking cheating perception and different variables. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between the dedication to hard work and the Protestant Work Ethic in general and the perception of cheating ethics. Students who felt that that hard work is a moral commitment and who scored higher on the Protestant Work Ethic were more likely to view questionable cheating actions as unethical. Therefore H2 was supported. Significant correlation also existed between the factors of the Protestant Work Ethic and the total score indicating the high inter-reliability of the scale.

There was also a significant negative relationship between Individualism and cheating perception and a significant positive relationship between Collectivism and cheating perception. Students who scored higher on Horizontal and Vertical Individualism were more likely to view questionable actions as ethical. Students who scored higher on Horizontal and Vertical Collectivism were more likely to view the cheating actions as unethical. Therefore H1 was rejected.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results generally indicate the importance of personality factors in the perception of cheating. Students generally attached more importance to hard work compared to success in life and generally had a modest work ethic. Instructors need to intensify their effort to increase students' work ethic. This work ethic will result in higher grades, a better education and a more productive future workforce. The results regarding Individualism/Collectivism and cheating perception are consistent with significant previous research who found that Collectivists view

ethics more positively than Individualists (e.g. Swaidan 2012). The current study does not recommend instructors to attempt changing Individualist students into Collectivists since culture dimensions are a function of many factors beyond the instructor's control such as family background, and society's norms, especially in multicultural societies. However, it is important for business instructors to be aware of the different ethical perception of Individualists and Collectivists and to emphasize classroom ethical actions to all students. Individualists could benefit from an in-depth discussion of the effect of cheating on other students and on society in general.

The current study examines only the perception of cheating and not actual cheating behavior. A student's decision to engage in cheating behavior begins with perception of cheating but is more complex than just a perception. The decision to cheat includes demographic, situational and opportunistic factors beyond cheating perception that are not measured in this study. However, they could be the subject of an interesting future study.

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**TABLE 1**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND**  
**CORRELATION ANALYSIS**

Panel A: Descriptive Statistics (N=474)				
	Mean (SD)			
Cheating Perception	5.35 (1.32)			
Success	4.78 (.92)			
Hard Work	5.37 (.93)			
Total Work Ethic	5.05 (.75)			
Horizontal Individualism	5.78 (1.06)			
Vertical Individualism	5.24 (1.14)			
Horizontal Collectivism	5.14 (1.03)			
Vertical Collectivism	5.78 (1.07)			
Panel B: Correlation Analysis of Cheating and Work Ethic				
	Success	Hard Work	Total Work Ethic	
Cheating	...	.09**	.07*	
Success	...	.31***	.84***	
Hard Work	...	...	.77***	
Panel C: Correlation Analysis of Cheating and Culture				
	Horizontal Individual	Vertical Individual	Horizontal Collective	Vertical Collective
Cheating				
Horizontal Individual	-.09*	-.15***	.10**	.07*
Vertical Individual	...	.31***	...	...
Horizontal Collective	...	...	.06*	.12***
Notes: Cheating Scale: 1 (Strongly Ethical) and 7 (Strongly Unethical) Other scales: 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree) *** P<.01; ** P<.05 and * P<.10				

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