Abstract

Academic dishonesty is becoming increasingly prevalent in recent years, with multiple consequences at social level, affecting not only universities, but society as a whole. The aim of this study was to construct a set of questionnaires designed for investigating the phenomenon of academic dishonesty, in order to identify some of the underlying factors and mechanisms that make this phenomenon ever more spreading. The results show that our instruments generally have good internal consistency, although further refinement is necessary. We also gained insight into student’s motivations for cheating and their easily accessible beliefs regarding behavioural results, normative referents and behavioural control.

Keywords: academic dishonesty; theory of planned behaviour; academic orientation; academic climate; moral obligation; justification, motivation for cheating.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity is considered one of the fundamental values in education, promoted by university ethical codes and by the Copyright law. Nonetheless, academic dishonesty is an inherent part of the educational process, as student’s dishonest academic behaviours raise progressively starting with elementary school, reaching values of 70% in high-school (Schmelkin, Gilbert, & Silva, 2010), while at university level three out of four students cheat occasionally on exams (Wowra, 2007). A study conducted in Romanian universities by Teodorescu, Andrei, Tusa, Herteliu, and Stancu (2007) showed that only 12.3% of the students never cheated on an exam. The results are more than alarming, as they question the integrity of the degrees offered by educational institutions and the values that we foster in modern society. Moreover, a series of studies show that academic dishonesty can be a good predictor for dishonest decisions in later professional practice (for example, Harding, Carpenter, Finelli, & Passow, 2004). If, indeed, academic integrity is one of the most important values promoted by education, how can we explain the inefficacy of the educational system and of the social system in general, in diminishing and discouraging dishonest academic behaviours? One possible answer is related to the complexity of this phenomenon and to the multiple underlying factors involved, as well as to the lack of consistency in defining dishonest academic behaviours and in applying punitive measures. Another difficulty in preventing academic dishonesty is related to the fact that it is a multidimensional concept, whose prevalence and determinism differs according to the category of dishonest academic behaviour: cheating on exams, plagiarism or falsification (Marsden, Carroll, & Neill, 2005). These authors also mention three variables that are negatively associated to cheating: the probability of being detected, verbal reminders about cheating and the existence of honour codes. The importance of honour codes is highlighted by other authors as well (for example McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999).

In recent years there has been quite some interest from researchers in the underlying factors that influence academic dishonesty. As a result, we have been able to identify quite a wide range of individual and situational/contextual variables that might exert a stronger or lesser influence over this type of behaviour. The factors that impact academic dishonesty are quite numerous, and only a few studies have tried to explain the mechanism that lays behind these behavioural manifestations. Perhaps the most widely used theory in the field is the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which is based on a structural model of attitudes (Ajzen 1985, 1991, 2001). According to Ajzen (1985), the majority of human behaviours are goal oriented and can be described as following the directing line of some more or less formulated plans. Actions are then influenced by intentions, though not all the intentions are carried out—some are abandoned, while others are reviewed in order to fit with the new circumstances. Intentions, in turns, are influenced by attitudes, by the perceived social norms and by the

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perceived behavioural control, which are based on a series of easily accessible beliefs. Thus, starting from these beliefs and measuring attitudes, perceived social norms and perceived behavioural control, we can predict the behaviour. Previous research in academic dishonesty has showed that this model has a good predictive validity (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), while more recent studies bring a modified version of the TPB. Harding, Mayhew, Finelli, and Carpenter (2007) and Mayhew, Hubbard, Finelli, Harding, and Carpenter (2009) add to the theory a new component: moral obligation and moral reasoning, respectively the stage of moral development, the latter study showing that moral obligation has a significant predictive value for the intention to cheat ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$). Stone, Jawahar and Kisamore (2009) suggest another modification of TPB, adding the justifications students have for academic dishonesty in an attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance they might feel as a result of this behaviour. The authors show that intentions and justifications explain $33\%$ of the variance in dishonest academic behaviour.

The aim of the present study was to construct a set of questionnaires for measuring the variables we believe to have the highest predictive potential for academic dishonesty, as highlighted by the literature in the field: academic climate, moral obligation, justifications and student’s motivation to cheat, as well as to pilot an initial variant of the ACIQ questionnaire. According to the methodology proposed by Ajzen (2006), the initial variant of the ACIQ is required in order to explore student’s easily accessible beliefs about cheating, which will then be used for constructing more specific items in the final version of the questionnaire. The questionnaires will enable us to conduct further research in this direction in Romanian universities, which might shed more light on the underlying factors and mechanisms that are critical for the intervention and prevention of this phenomenon. Taking into account the multidimensionality of the concept, for more clarity, we chose to focus this research on cheating behaviours, more specifically, on cheating on an exam. This set of questionnaires, however, can easily be adjusted for studying other forms of academic dishonesty as well.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants in this research were 60 undergraduate students attending a Romanian university, out of which 52 (86.7\%) were women and 8 (13.3\%) were men. The average age was 19.90 years old, with a standard deviation of 1.49. The structure of the sample according to faculty major is as follows: one student from Journalism (1.7\%), two students from Philology (3.3\%), three students from Psychology and Educational Sciences (5\%) and 54 students from Economical Sciences and Business administration (90\%). The criteria for choosing the sample was the availability of the teacher to allow the completion of the entire set of questionnaires during school hours and the availability of students to participate in the research.

2.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this research were: an Academic Cheating Intent Questionnaire (ACIQ), based on the TPB (Ajzen, 2006), a Learning Orientation and Grade Orientation questionnaire (LOGO II—Eison, Pollio, & Milton, 1983), a mixed questionnaire that included four scales targeted to measure the Academic Climate, Moral obligation, Justifications and students’ Motivation for performing academic dishonest behaviours, and a questionnaire used for collecting demographics.

The ACIQ questionnaire was constructed according to the methodology suggested by Ajzen (2006): We first defined the investigated behaviour in terms of Goal, Action, Context and Time: “Cheating on an exam during this semester or in the coming semester, so as to be able to pass it or to get a good grade, when I haven’t studied enough.” Afterwards we constructed a pilot questionnaire, which contained two types of measurements—direct standardized measurements and items with open answers that require the respondents to write easily accessible beliefs about the results of the behaviour (3 items: disadvantages of cheating, advantages of cheating, other thoughts about cheating), the normative beliefs (4 items: persons who approve of cheating, persons who disapprove, students who might cheat, students who might not cheat) and the perceived behavioural control (2 items: factors that facilitate cheating, factors that discourage cheating). The questionnaire contains 5 sections, each targeted at one specific dimension of the TPB: attitude towards the behaviour, perceived social norms, perceived behavioural control, intention and previous behaviour. All items were measured using bipolar adjective scales in seven points (1–7). Table 1 shows an overview of the scales with direct standardized measures.
Table 1. Direct standardized measures of Theory of Planned Behaviour components in the ACIQ questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Bipolar adjective rating scales</th>
<th>Example of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the behaviour (5 items)</td>
<td>Positive/Negative; Probable/Improbable; Good/Bad; Pleasant/unpleasant; Exciting/Boring</td>
<td>“Cheating on an exam during this semester or in the coming semester, so as to be able to pass it or to get a good grade, when I haven’t studied enough would be:”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived norm (2 items)</td>
<td>Agree/Disagree; Likely/Unlikely</td>
<td>“Most of the people who are important to me agree that I should cheat on exams during this semester (…)?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived behavioural control (2 items)</td>
<td>True/False; Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>“Copying in an exam during this semester (…) is up to me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention (1 item)</td>
<td>Likely/Unlikely</td>
<td>“I intend to cheat on exams during this semester (…)?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous motivation (1 item)</td>
<td>True/False</td>
<td>“In the last academic year I cheated on exams when I did not manage to study enough.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LOGO II is a questionnaire constructed by Eison (1981; 1982), which measures two types of learning motivation: intrinsic orientation, towards learning experiences and extrinsic orientation, towards grades, the latter being directly associated with dishonest academic behaviour (r=.37, Rettinger & Jordan, 2005). The questionnaire consists of 32 items and is divided in two equal parts that measure academic attitudes, respectively behaviours that can be directly observed. The first eight items in each part contain items that refer to learning experiences (LO), while the last eight items refer to grade orientation (GO). All answers are rated using five point Likert scales ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree” (for the items that measure attitudes) and from “Never” to “Often” (for the items that measure behaviours). This questionnaire was translated from English into Romanian and administered as such.

The scales included in the mixed questionnaire were designed to measure four of the aspects involved in academic dishonesty that we believe to be critical. The Academic climate scale measures how relaxed or how controlling the academic climate is in relation to exam cheating behaviours. The items were built starting from the items suggested by Jackson, Levine, Furnham, and Burr (2002). The Justifications scale measures the justifications that students use in order to explain their cheating behaviour in an attempt to neutralize its negative impact and reduce the cognitive dissonance, since most of the students agree that cheating is wrong, and yet they engage in such behaviours. The items were constructed starting from the justifications suggested by Stone et al. (2009), as well as from the justifications identified in a previous qualitative research we conducted in order to explore the phenomenon of academic dishonesty. The Moral obligation scale measures the beliefs and the personal responsibility to perform or not to perform the cheating behaviour. The items were adapted from the items proposed by Mayhew et al. (2009) and Harding et al. (2007). All items were measured on five point Likert scales. The LOGO II questionnaire also included an item with an open answer in which we asked the respondents to list what would determine them to cheat on an exam. Table 2 shows an overview of the scales included in the mixed questionnaire.

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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
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<th>Example of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic climate (6 items)</td>
<td>Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>“It is relatively easy to cheat on an exam or on a written assignment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifications (17 situational items)</td>
<td>Likely/Unlikely</td>
<td>“Please rate how likely you are to engage in academic behaviours such as cheating on an exams, in each of the following situations: (1) when I want to get a good grade etc.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral obligations (4 items)</td>
<td>Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>“Cheating on exams is against my moral principles.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to cheat (1 item)</td>
<td>Open answers</td>
<td>“Please list any reasons that could determine you to cheat for exams during this academic evaluation session of during the coming academic year.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Procedure

The set of questionnaires was administered to a sample of 57 students during school hours. Each student received a set of questionnaires that were numbered on each page, in order to keep the integrity and traceability of the scales. All questionnaires were filled in anonymously. Out of the 57 administered questionnaires, 56 were retained as valid, one of the students refusing to finish the completion of the questionnaire. Another four questionnaires were filled in electronically, according to the availability of the students’ to participate in this research. In total we retained as valid 60 complete questionnaires. The administration of the questionnaires was followed by the quantitative analysis of the data: Cronbach’s alpha for determining the internal consistency of the scale—in SPSS 17, and content analysis (frequencies) for the items with the open answers—in NVivo 10. We also calculated percentages for each type of behavioural beliefs, based on the number of registered answers for each item (r.a.).
3. RESULTS

The overall internal consistency for the ACIQ questionnaire was $\alpha = .83$, which indicates a very good internal consistency. We obtained a similar result for the Attitudes scale ($\alpha = .80$). For the remaining scales the results are inconclusive, due to the small number of items included in each scale. This questionnaire was, however, an initial exploratory one, intended, first of all, to collect the necessary information for constructing the items. We will address this issue in the final variant of the questionnaire. For the scales of the LOGO II questionnaire, Cronbach’s $\alpha$ values were quite low as compared to the English variant of the questionnaire: $\alpha_{en} = .76/\alpha_{ro} = .59$ for LO, and $\alpha_{en} = .73/\alpha_{ro} = .53$ for the GO scales. We also noticed that whereas Cronbach’s $\alpha$ values for the attitude subscales were quite similar and even higher, ($\alpha_{LOen} = .52/\alpha_{LOro} = .52; \alpha_{GOen} = .62/\alpha_{GOro} = .68$), the Cronbach’s $\alpha$ values for the behaviour subscales were smaller for the Romanian version as compared to the English version ($\alpha_{LOen} = .76/\alpha_{LOro} = .70; \alpha_{GOen} = .73/\alpha_{GOro} = .60$). This could partly explain the lower Cronbach’s $\alpha$ values obtained for the LO and GO scales. Regarding the mixed questionnaire, for the Academic climate scale the internal consistency was satisfactory ($\alpha = .68$), although it does not reach the threshold of .70. For the Moral obligation scale Cronbach’s $\alpha$ value is good ($\alpha = .73$), after deleting an item that was formulated in the negative (“It would not be morally wrong to cheat on an exam.”). As for the Justifications scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha$ value was excellent ($\alpha = .92$).

The quantitative analysis of the open answers revealed the following: When it comes to student’s motivations for cheating, the students mention the following reasons: no reasons (22.95%); the subject is too difficult (22.95%); insufficient time for study (14.75%); various obstacles (13.11%); a higher grade (11.48%); keep my free of tuition seat (6.56%); to get a scholarship (4.92%) and because teachers allow it (3.28%).

For the Attitudes scale, the beliefs about cheating point out that students perceive more factors that facilitate cheating (54.20% r.a.), as compared to factors that make cheating difficult (22.95%); insufficient time for study (14.75%); various obstacles (13.11%); a higher grade (11.48%); keep my free of tuition seat (6.56%); to get a scholarship (4.92%) and because teachers allow it (3.28%).

Regarding the students’ easily accessible beliefs about the behavioural results, they seem to see more advantages in cheating (39.59% r.a.), than disadvantages (30.83% r.a.), while 29.58% r.a. were related to other thoughts about cheating. For behavioural beliefs there seem to be more people who approve of cheating (33.18% r.a.), as compared to those who disapprove of it (20.28%), and also more students who might cheat (24.88% r.a.), as compared to those who might not cheat (21.20% r.a.).

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4. CONCLUSIONS

The data collected during this research offer sufficient information so as to allow us to build the final variant of the ACIQ questionnaire, using the readily accessible beliefs provided by the participants. However, it seems clear for us that the LOGO II questionnaire needs to be revised and adapted to the Romanian students’ population and to modern times, as learning behaviours suggested by Eison (1981, 1982), might no longer be applicable to current student practices. The Academic climate scale needs revision as well, and new items need to be added to the scale, after a more careful conceptualization of the variable. The results also suggest that students tend to cheat despite the fact that they see more disadvantages in cheating, as compared to advantages, most likely due to the fact that students seem to perceive more referents who approve of cheating and more peers who might engage in dishonest academic behaviours, at the same time perceiving more factors that facilitate cheating. It is very well possible that student’s motivations to cheat also play a role in performing this behaviour, although we need further research in order to test this hypothesis.

Considering the readily accessible beliefs of the students, one of the things that academic institutions could do, is to increase the punitive and screening measures against cheating behaviours during exams, so as to change students’ perceptions about the ease of cheating and to reduce the number of referents students might perceive as engaging in similar dishonest behaviours. Ethical education could also help reduce this phenomenon, by increasing the sense of moral obligation and by increasing the number of referents who might disapprove of cheating, thus creating a double bind: acting on the environment and acting on student’s ability to take a moral decision. These conclusions are supported by earlier findings that highlighted the importance of the probability of detection (Marsden et al., 2005) and the existence and implementation of honour codes within universities (McCabe et al., 1999).

The present study also has several limitations: the rather small dimension of the sample which participated in the research, the homogeneous structure of the sample from point of view of gender and academic major, as well as the fact that the methodology for the construction of the items for the Academic climate and Moral obligation scales is not based on a rigorous methodology, but on scales and items with similar content.
5. REFERENCES


