




Rationalizing the Decision to Cheat: An Empirical Analysis to Determine Whether Social Rational Orientation Can Predict Academic Dishonesty

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty is a wide-spread issue in educational institutions, including higher education. This study determined if there was a correlation between social rational action orientations and the likelihood of engaging in academically dishonest acts. The relationship between course value and academic dishonesty was also examined. The researchers obtained data from 357 undergraduate students at a large public university in the Southwest. The instrument included a scale that was created to determine student social rational orientation membership. To measure potential academic dishonesty behaviors, vignettes were created and manipulated to portray either low or high perceived course value. Overall, this study found that social rational orientation and perceived course value predicted the likelihood of engaging in academically dishonest acts. This study uncovered new variables that can be used to predict academic dishonesty by elucidating how students rationalize their decision to cheat.

Academic dishonesty plagues many if not most educational institutions. Hensley, Kirkpatrick, and Burgoon (2013) found that more than 50% of the college students they surveyed engaged in cheating behaviors within six months prior to completing the survey. A cheating culture is created within higher education as

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students continue to seek out cheating as a means to increase their grade (Crittenden, Hanna, & Peterson, 2009). Academic dishonesty is not a new problem. Research conducted in prior decades found that cheating was normalized among college students (Baird, 1980; Swift & Nonis, 1998).

Previous studies have profiled student cheaters based on demographics (Eastman, Eastman, & Iyer, 2008; Hensley et al., 2013) and examined whether an academically ethical worldview impacted cheating (Pino & Smith, 2004; Rau & Durand, 2000), but there has not been a study to determine a single variable or set of variables that strongly predict academic dishonesty. This study will address the gaps in the research concerning student cheating. First, an investigation on the relationship between students' rationalization and academic dishonesty will be explored. Second, perceived course value and its association with academic dishonesty will be examined.

The literature review will examine three areas that may inform cheating behaviors: academic dishonesty, rationality, and course value. Variables used to predict academic dishonesty will provide a basis and rationale for investigating other possible variables. Max Weber's process of rationality will be examined as a potential variable to explain academic dishonesty in addition to social rational orientation, which is an individual difference variable that is viewed as a more stable trait for this study. Finally, perceived course value will be evaluated as another potential variable to elucidate academic dishonesty in higher education.

Literature Review

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty takes many forms within the educational arena. Cheating behaviors can include unauthorized collaboration with a peer on an assignment, falsifying a bibliography, copying another student while taking an exam, or bringing unauthorized notes to an exam (Finn & Frone, 2004, p. 115). Advances in technology have expanded students' opportunities and resources to cheat. With most smartphones able to connect to the Internet in a matter of seconds, students can also search for answers during examinations (Bain, 2015a; Johnson & Martin, 2005). In addition, the Internet can provide students with papers to purchase and sources where students can copy and paste sections that are applicable to their assignment (Bain, 2015b; Boehm, Justice, & Weeks, 2009).

In the search to find a student cheater profile, researchers have analyzed gender (Hensley et al., 2013; Jurdi, Hage, & Chow, 2012), classification (Pino & Smith, 2003; Straw, 2002), major (Eastman et al., 2008; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), grade point average (GPA; Finn & Frone, 2004; Hensley et al., 2013), Greek membership (Pino & Smith, 2003; Straw, 2002), and peers (Jurdi et al., 2012). In terms of gender, prior studies have discovered that men self-reported more cheating behavior (i.e., test cheating, plagiarism, and false excuses) compared to women (Hensley et al., 2013) and held more lenient definitions of academic dishonesty (Jurdi et al., 2012). Straw (2002) discovered that first- and second-year undergraduates were more likely to perform academic dishonest acts compared to third- and fourth-year undergraduates. However, Pino and Smith (2003) found that older college students had a higher propensity to cheat. Some researchers have also ascertained that students majoring in science, technology, engineering, math, or business performed the majority of cheating behaviors on campuses (Williams et al., 2010), while others have found opposite results: nonbusiness majors performing more academic misconduct (Eastman et al., 2008). Thus, mixed results exist regarding the influence of students' classification and academic major on academic dishonesty. In addition, students who were low achievers were more likely to perform

cheating behaviors (Finn & Frone, 2004; Pino & Smith, 2003). Researchers have also concurred that Greek pledges/membership has a significant positive relationship with academic dishonesty (Pino & Smith, 2003; Straw, 2002). Finally, students who witnessed their peers cheat were less likely to classify cheating behaviors as academic dishonesty, normalizing the behavior (Jurdi et al., 2012).

Academic dishonesty is also related to the extent to which a student has an academic ethic—a learned behavior where students place “their studies above leisure activities; study on a daily basis or near-daily basis; and study in a disciplined, intense, and sober fashion” (Rau & Durand, 2000, p. 23). The four key dimensions that comprise an academic ethic are “academic locus of control, class attendance, resistance of partying and drinking, and rejections of the GPA perspective” (Pino & Smith, 2003, p. 491). Jurdi et al. (2012) found that students who had an academic ethic were stricter on their definitions of what was considered academically dishonest behavior. As a result of having an academic ethic, students usually had higher GPAs, which decreased their likelihood of engaging in academic dishonesty (Pino & Smith, 2003).

Academic Dishonesty Interventions

Given the complexity of academic dishonesty, a variety of interventions have been proposed to address multiple facets of cheating beliefs and behaviors. Clark and Soutter (2016) argued for a broad character approach addressing cheating culture both at the class and school level. Likewise, Tang (2010) found that an ethics intervention embedded in a business management course led to a significant decline in likelihood of abusing resources. In response to the growth of online courses, online tutorials have been crafted to address cheating behaviors (Greer et al., 2012; Sendag, Duran, & Fraser, 2012). While Greer et al. (2012) found that the online intervention had a broad reach in the university population, Sendag et al. (2012) found that an online tutorial did not have a significant effect on online dishonesty behaviors.

In-class interventions focused on plagiarism have shown mixed results. McKay (2014) examined a teaching intervention focused on plagiarism using lecture, tutoring, a plagiarism declaration, and a formal test. The intervention resulted in lower instances of plagiarism compared to the previous year. In contrast, Smedley, Crawford, and Cloete (2015) found that, despite an overall increase in self-reported understanding of plagiarism, students aged 20–24 reported feeling less confident about their knowledge of plagiarism following the intervention. Using a first-day intervention focused on definitions and examples of both academic dishonesty and plagiarism, Azulay Chertok, Barnes, and Gilleland (2014) discovered that students demonstrated more knowledge and appropriate ethical attitudes about academic integrity immediately after the intervention. Using a longer discussion-based approach, Morgan and Hart (2013) researched academic dishonesty more broadly. The intervention led to increased support of policies but no significant behavioral changes. Finally, Spangenberg and Obermiller (1996) asked students to predict their intention to cheat, with a yes/no response, prior to being offered an opportunity to cheat. Results showed that students who were asked to predict future cheating behavior were less likely to cheat compared to their peers who were not asked to make the same prediction. Past research studies have shown a varying degree in the effectiveness of academic dishonesty interventions that may vary in focus, length, and scope of the intervention components. Lastly, current interventions tend to focus on learning policies, definitions, and skills to prevent academic dishonesty, overlooking the potential motivations and rationalizations behind decisions to cheat.

Although this study is not testing an intervention specifically, it can inform interventions by discerning the connection between students’ rationality, perceived course value, and their likelihood to perform academic dishonesty. For instance, if perceived course value is found to be a significant predictor

of academic dishonesty, future studies could investigate how students come to value a course. The results of those findings could then be used to create an intervention to alter students' valuation of courses in a direction that would decrease the likelihood of academic dishonesty. Additionally, understanding the relationship between social rational orientation and academic dishonesty can inform interventions by potentially introducing and manipulating a variable that students' internalize. This study is a first step to understand the association between social rational orientation and academic dishonesty; thus, future research will be needed to uncover how students come to rationalize their behavior, especially behavior considered unethical. These findings can then be used to create interventions to alter how students rationalize their decisions to cheat as a means to ultimately deter academic dishonesty.

Rationality

This study forwards a new potential avenue for research on cheating: rationality and course value. *Rationalization* is a process described by Weber (1968) that resulted from the creation of bureaucratic rule. In the Western world, with the creation of modernity, capitalism, and bureaucracy, standardization replaced the power of tradition (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2003). During this transition, life that was originally motivated around ethics and religion became rationally oriented and detached from the value sphere (Hedoin, 2009; LaPierre, 2013). The process of rationalization led to practices that were based on efficiency rather than traditional customs (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2003).

From this process of rationalization, Weber distinguished between two types of social rational action based on the social actor's intention: value rational action and instrumental rational action. Weber (1968) described *value rational action* as action "determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success" (p. 24). Instead of performing actions that are governed by an absolute value system, the motivation behind *instrumental rational action* is based on the realities in life and determines the most efficient means to react to the difficulties they present (Kalberg, 1980). Instrumental rational action is grounded upon the assessment of costs and benefits incurred to the actor. Value and instrumental rational action both are rational means; however, the ends for value rational action are authorized by a value system, thus, they are not independently chosen by the actor based on calculation (Takayama, 1998).

Numerous studies have found that the decision to engage in academic dishonesty rests within the student's personal value system (Allmon, Page, & Roberts, 2000; Rawwas, Al-Khatib, & Vitell, 2004). Students who value learning or mastering a subject are more likely to act in a value rational manner and continue their efforts to learn without performing cognitive short cuts in order to obtain a desired grade (Jordan, 2001). Students with a value rational orientation prize mastery over grades; therefore, they may be less likely to engage in cheating practices, a phenomenon that we explore in this present study.

Not all students value mastery in learning. In contrast, some students define higher education as a consumer-driven marketplace for social advancement where college is an economic transaction rather than a learning experience (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Flacks & Thomas, 1998). With this view, students hold cheating as acceptable because it has the potential to raise their grade point averages, resulting in increasing their competitiveness within the job market (Bunn, Caudill, & Gropper, 1992). *Performativity*, defined as "the capacity to deliver outputs at the lowest costs," has become the dominant criterion for measuring worth within academia (Crook, Pakulski, & Waters, 1992, p. 31). As a result, outputs become the measure of knowledge rather than truth or mastery. Students who engage in academic dishonesty make a conscious decision based on their assessment that the benefits of cheating are greater than the costs of

being caught (Williams & Hosek, 2003). Students who are motivated by grades or career opportunities rather than learning the course material are more likely to act on an instrumental rational orientation, performing academically dishonest acts in order to obtain desired grades (Jordan, 2001).

Studying rationality provides a new approach to researching possible influences of academic dishonesty. By understanding how students rationalize their decisions, college administrators and faculty can use this information to inform their practices. Postsecondary personnel can use the increasing consumerism view of academia held by students to their advantage by presenting content in a manner that students can see the importance of learning because it will benefit them in the future. Researchers can also use the information garnered from this study to further unpack the multidimensional phenomenon that is academic dishonesty by looking at how students perceive cheating, thus providing researchers another angle for examining how students rationalize behavior

Course Value

Course value is the perceived usefulness, interest, and enjoyment a student experiences from a course. Students generally value courses that they consider interesting, meaningful, challenging but achievable, important, relevant, and/or fulfilling (Boyanton, 2011, p. 228). Floyd, Harrington, and Santiago (2009) observed that perceived course value was negatively correlated with using surface learning strategies, which are survival techniques where students use minimal effort to pass a course in lieu of genuinely learning the material. Students who used surface learning strategies were more likely to endorse and engage in academic dishonesty compared to those who used deep cognitive processing strategies (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998; Norton, Tilley, Newstead, & Franklyn-Stokes, 2001).

Similar to perceived course value is the concept of *task value*, which Eccles and Wigfield (1995) described as the value that a student places on a task based on the task's attributes, emotional memories of similar prior tasks, and whether the task is in accordance with the student's values and goals. Tasks that are valued have a higher likelihood for engagement. The researchers found that students value a task when they believe they are competent at completing it and devalue a task when they perceive it as difficult (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995).

The relationship between task value and academic dishonesty has been researched extensively, yet the association between perceived course value and cheating is scarce. Within mathematics courses, students' task value was negatively related to academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Pavlin-Vernardic, Rován, & Pavlovic, 2017). Specifically, students who believed the task was important, useful, or enjoyable were less likely to self-report cheating. Although task value research has been conducted within the academic dishonesty literature, students may have different value evaluations for the overall course that influence their cheating behaviors. Thus, understanding how course value perceptions can influence the propensity to cheat is important for postsecondary staff and faculty who can promote practices to illustrate how their courses are of value to students.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Shifting the focus to how different social rational action orientations and perceived course value can increase the likelihood of cheating may help institutions in creating interventions to encourage a positive learning environment rather than an economic transaction, where efficiency is valued over knowledge. Our

main research question is the following: What are the main effects of social rational orientation and perceived course value on students' likelihood to cheat in hypothetical situations? Therefore, this study will test the main effects of social rational orientation and perceived course value on the likelihood of cheating. It should be noted that while the hypotheses are stated in terms of what we expected to find, non-directional inferential statistical tests were used to test these hypotheses because whether the results would be in the expected direction remained an open question. Based on the aforementioned literature, we forward the following hypotheses:

H_1 : Students clustered into the instrumental rational orientation group will indicate a higher likelihood to cheat across both high- and low-course value hypothetical situations compared to those clustered into the value rational orientation group.

H_2 : Students will indicate a higher likelihood to cheat in low-course value hypothetical situations compared with high-course value hypothetical situations.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

To test the hypotheses, a survey was constructed that contained 39 questions and took respondents an average of 15 minutes to complete. The survey structure contained eight vignettes (with three questions each) that manipulated course value, eight questions that measured a student's rational orientation, and seven demographic questions. Following IRB approval, the survey was distributed in classrooms at a large public university in the southwestern United States, using a convenience sample of 357 undergraduate students during the spring 2015 semester (see Table 1). The survey was administered during the second week of the spring semester in six classrooms: a computer course in agriculture and five business courses (three introductory computer courses, a finance course, and a statistics course).

The gender and racial composition of the sample closely represented the undergraduate population at the university where the study took place. The classification and major distributions of the sample, however, were not representative. First-year undergraduates and seniors were under-represented (sophomores and juniors were over-sampled), and a majority of the students sampled had their majors located within the College of Business Administration. In addition, members or pledges of fraternities and sororities were oversampled: While fraternity and sorority members comprised 6% of the student population, roughly one in six of the sample indicated that they were members of (or pledging) a fraternity or sorority.

Measures

Demographic variables included classification, gender, college that encompassed student's major, age, ethnicity, self-reported GPA, and whether a student was currently a member or pledging to a sorority or fraternity.

To measure instrumental rational orientation, items from Pino and Smith (2003) were used ($\alpha = 0.66$), while items from Pino and Smith (2009) and Pino, Martinez-Ramos, and Smith (2012) measured value rational orientation ($\alpha = 0.66$). Specifically, questions measuring the instrumental rational orientation were answered on a Likert scale from 1 indicating strongly disagree to 5 indicating

strongly agree. The questions included “I avoid teachers who are tough graders,” “It is a smart move to drop a course if the teacher turns out to be a tough grader,” “It is wise to drop a class if there is a lot of work to do, even if the class seems interesting,” and “I would rather learn little in a course and get an A than learn a lot and get a C.” These statements are indicative of an individual who is instrumental rational because he or she is more concerned with the potential for grade success than intellectual gains.

To measure the value rational orientation, the questions used from Pino and Smith (2009) and Pino et al. (2012) were answered on the same Likert scale from 1 to 5 and included “I will take an interesting course even though I may not receive a good grade,” “I seek out courses that involve a lot of reading, writing, and independent thought,” “It is very important for me to work on improving my intellectual skills even if this does not bring direct improvements in my academic performance,” and “I prefer to take intellectually demanding courses even when few students earn A’s in them.” These statements are indicative of a value rational orientation because they are focused on increasing knowledge for the sake of learning rather than for a desired grade.

Because cheating is a sensitive topic and may lead to social desirability bias, fictional vignettes were created to test the relationship between social rational orientation and academic dishonesty. Vignettes are short stories about a person or social situation which contain precise details of what are thought to be important for the decision making process of the respondent (Alexander & Becker, 1978). Vignettes create distance between the character and the respondent, which can decrease the biasing effect since respondents are answering questions based on hypothetical situations rather than from a personal experience (Bendelow, 1993; Hughes & Huby, 2002). While vignettes are not measuring actual behavior, several studies have found that vignette responses reflect how an individual would act in reality (Carlson, 1996; Rahman, 1996).

Given that course value is a relatively new research topic, there are only a few studies that have created instruments to measure course value and the effects course value has on learning outcomes; these previous studies did not utilize vignettes to do so (Boyanton, 2011; Hulleman, 2007). Eight original vignettes were created, with half depicting high course value, and the other half depicting low course value. Vignettes were manipulated to create two different situations: either the character in the vignette perceived the course she or he attended to have a high value or low value. To establish face and content validity, we had content experts in student motivation and deviance check that the vignette appeared to measure low or high course value and made suggested revisions in order to strengthen the validity.

The vignettes were randomly ordered. High perceived course value was produced in the vignettes by the characters taking pleasure in learning the course material, stating that the course was interesting or that the course benefited the characters in increasing their intellectual skills. Low perceived course value was invented in the vignettes by the characters stating that the course was a waste of time, the course did not benefit their major or professional career, or that the course was required for their major, but did not benefit them. All the characters in both situations decided to partake in academically dishonest acts, such as purchasing a paper online, copying off a peer, and copying and pasting from sources without proper citation. Given the fact that the word *cheating* may invoke strong emotions within students because they are aware that this behavior is not acceptable within the university, the vignettes did not specifically state that the characters were cheating. After each vignette, students were asked (a) how likely the typical college student is to perform this same action, (b) how justified the character is in performing this action, and (c) how likely they were to perform the same action if they were in the same situation. Responses to the vignette’s questions were answered on a Likert scale from 1, indicating very likely or completely justified, to 5, indicating very unlikely or completely unjustified. These questions were designed to measure the

likelihood of academic dishonesty with perceived course value manipulated to determine if course value had an additional impact on the likelihood to cheat.

Data Analysis

To test the relationship between social rational orientation, perceived course value, and academic dishonesty, bivariate and cluster analyses were utilized. Bivariate analysis includes conducting a Mixed ANOVA to determine main effects. Mixed ANOVA was used because social rational orientation cluster groups had a between subjects design while potential cheating score for each perceived course value had a within subjects design. Cluster analysis was used to create a dichotomous variable for social rational orientation to determine the orientation to which each student belonged.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

In order for a student to be assigned a social rational orientation, an orientation score must be created. Exploratory factor analysis was utilized to ensure that the eight questions created to measure a student's rational orientation were correctly measuring only two constructs, value and instrumental. The scree plot elbowed at two components and the Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation converging in three iterations. The factor loadings confirmed that questions designed to measure value rational orientation loaded together, and questions designed to measure instrumental rational orientation also loaded together. The four questions measuring instrumental orientation were then reverse coded so that all eight questions were on the same continuum with instrumental oriented responses representing a 1 and value oriented responses representing a 5 on a Likert scale. An orientation score was created from the eight questions by adding the responses from each question together and creating a continuous variable. The orientation score is a marginally adequate reliable measure of social rational orientation ($\alpha = 0.67$) with a mean of 23.13 and a standard deviation of 4.43.

In order to test our hypotheses, we needed to assign respondents to a social rational orientation. Cluster analysis (K-means cluster in SPSS) was used on the orientation score to form two clusters. A variable was created that distinguished the higher cluster as a student who is value oriented and the lower cluster as a student who is instrumental oriented. As indicated from [Table 2](#), the mean orientation score of the higher cluster, value orientation, was 4.03 with a standard deviation of 0.83. The mean of the lower cluster, instrumental orientation, was 3.49 with a standard deviation of 0.94. Although the variable mean differs slightly among the clusters, the analysis indicated two distinct clusters. We ensured that the clusters were different in terms of the outcome variable, potential cheating score, performing an independent t-test ($t = 5.45$, $p < 0.001$) (see Bergman, Magnusson, & El Khouri, 2003; Fong, Acee, & Weinstein, 2016). The cluster analysis divided the sample into two orientation groups with 138 students in the value orientation group and 195 students in the instrumental orientation group.

The likelihood to cheat in hypothetical situations—referred to in this study as *potential cheating score*—was created by averaging the Likert scale responses for each respondent from the question of whether the respondent would perform the same action as the character in the same situation from each of the eight vignettes (four low value and four high value scenarios). The vignettes were reliable in measuring the likelihood of cheating within courses perceived to have low value ($\alpha = 0.8$) and high value ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Table 1

Frequency Tables for Demographic Variables (n = 357)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	167	47.7
Female	182	52.0
Other	1	.3
	350	
Age		
18–20	207	59.0
21–23	102	29.1
24–26	22	6.3
27–29	7	2.0
30+	13	3.7
	351	
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	192	55.8
African Am./Black	32	9.3
Am. Indian/Native Am.	4	1.2
Asian Am./Asian/Pacific Islander	8	2.3
Hispanic/Latino	95	27.6
Multiracial/Multiethnic	9	2.6
Other	4	1.2
	344	
Classification		
Freshman	63	17.9
Sophomore	100	28.4
Junior	114	32.4
Senior	75	21.3
	352	
College major located		
Applied arts	40	11.4
Business admin.	279	79.3
Education	5	1.4
Fine arts and communication	2	0.6
Health professions	11	3.1
Liberal arts	6	1.7
Science and engineering	4	1.1

(continued)

Table 1

(Continued)

University college	5	1.4
	352	
Self-reported GPA		
3.5–4.00	82	23.4
3.0–3.49	130	37.1
2.5–2.99	106	30.3
2.0–2.49	22	6.3
1.5–1.99	6	1.7
< 1.5	2	0.6
N/A	2	0.6
	350	
Greek membership/pledge		
Yes	65	18.5
No	286	81.5
	351	

Table 2

Summary of Mixed ANOVA Results

	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Orientation	52.57	0.00	0.07
Course value	5.33	0.02	0.01
Orientation*course value	0.02	0.90	0.00

Note. *R squared* = 0.081 (*Adjusted R squared* = 0.076).

The variable was reverse coded such that a higher potential cheating score represented higher academic honesty. The potential cheating score means, standard deviations and standard errors for the overall sample, as well as each social rational orientation and each level of perceived course value can be found in [Table 3](#).

Primary Analyses

The hypotheses were tested by utilizing a Mixed ANOVA to evaluate the main effects ([Table 2](#)). Results indicated there were significant main effects of orientation and course value supporting both hypotheses.

Table 3

Potential Cheating Score Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Social Rational Orientation and Perceived Course Value

	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error
Overall	356	3.72	0.93	0.05
Value rational	138	4.03	0.83	0.07
Instrumental rational	195	3.49	0.94	0.07
Low course value	356	3.81	1.03	0.05
High course value	356	3.63	0.95	0.05

Note. Potential cheating scores are reverse coded, thus a higher score would indicate a lower likelihood to potentially cheat.

Table 4

Potential Cheating Score Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Social Rational Orientation-Course Value Pairings

Orientation	Course value	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error
Value	Low	138	4.12	0.92	0.08
	High	138	3.94	0.86	0.07
Instrumental	Low	195	3.57	1.05	0.08
	High	195	3.40	0.96	0.07

Note. Potential cheating scores are reverse coded, thus a higher score would indicate a lower likelihood to potentially cheat.

According to the ANOVA pairwise comparisons, there was a significantly higher likelihood to cheat in hypothetical situations for instrumental rational individuals compared to value rational individuals ($M_{\text{diff}} = -0.55$, $SE = 0.08$, $CI = -0.70$ to -0.40 , $p < 0.001$). In addition, the main effect of course value indicated that a course perceived to be of high value had a higher likelihood of students engaging in academic dishonesty in hypothetical situations compared to courses perceived to be of low value ($M_{\text{diff}} = -0.17$, $SE = 0.08$, $CI = -0.32$ to -0.03 , $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that students who are value oriented are less likely to engage in academic dishonesty compared to instrumental oriented students. The potential cheating score means, standard deviations, and standard errors for each social rational orientation-course value pairings can be found in [Table 4](#).

Discussion

This study investigated the effects of social rational orientation and perceived course value on the likelihood of academic dishonesty in hypothetical situations among undergraduates. It was found that

social rational orientation predicted the likelihood to engage in cheating practices, with value oriented students less likely to cheat compared to instrumental oriented students. This finding is supported by numerous studies that have found the decision to cheat lies within students' personal value system (Allmon et al., 2000; Rawwas et al., 2004).

Our study also considered whether course value impacted the likelihood to cheat, and we found, contrary to the findings of Anderman et al. (1998), Floyd et al. (2009), and Norton et al. (2001), that the likelihood of engaging in academic dishonesty was higher in courses perceived as high value. This finding may bolster Boyanton's (2011) assertion that course value is directly related to how serious a student takes his or her learning. Students may feel the need to engage in academic dishonesty in a high value course but might decide that the consequences of getting caught are not worth the risk in a low value course. Perceived course value was also measured within each social rational orientation to determine if social rational orientation solely predicted academic dishonesty or if course value had an additional effect on the likelihood to cheat. The parametric analysis suggested that the interaction effect was not significant.

Limitations

This exploratory study had various limitations. First, convenience sampling resulted in a non-representative sample (classification and predominately business students) that limited the generalizability of the results. Under-sampling first-year undergraduates and seniors and over-sampling sophomores and juniors limit our ability to further understand students who are beginning and ending their undergraduate experience. Consequently, the results may not capture naïve and experienced students' beliefs about cheating.

Additionally, business majors have been historically focused on external results and are exceptionally competitive; thus, business students tend to believe that unethical behaviors, including academic dishonesty, are socially acceptable compared to non-business students (Klein, Levenburg, McKendall, & Mothersell, 2007; Smyth & Davis, 2004). Therefore, a certain type of individual may be drawn to major in business, or the content within business courses may alter students' beliefs about academic dishonesty. Oversampling business majors could confound the findings of the present study limiting the generalizability.

Second, our measures for instrumental rational and value rational orientation are only moderately reliable. In spite of these limitations, this study provided a theoretical contribution, focusing on how students rationalize their decision to cheat. Rather than relying on demographic variables that produce inconclusive results, we presented additional variables that could aid in predicting academic dishonesty—social rational orientation and perceived course value. While our use of vignettes to measure the relationship between social rational orientation and academic dishonesty can be a limitation owing to the fact that we are not measuring actual behavior, the previous research cited above has found that responses to vignettes reflect how individuals would act in reality.

Implications

Current technologies allow students to use their electronic devices to search the Internet, e-mail, text message, use camera abilities, and programmable calculators to cheat within the classroom (Bain, 2015a; Johnson & Martin, 2005). Outside of the classroom, students can easily use the Internet to copy information, find cheating websites, social media to share information, and purchase papers, instructor solution

manuals, and test banks (Bain, 2015b; Boehm et al., 2009). Depending on how coy students are with their cheating practices, it may become hard if not impossible to detect the presence of academic dishonesty. Thus, if detection practices are not used or are not capable of discovering the various cheating practices employed by students, it becomes imperative that other interventions that are focused on students' internal regulation systems are utilized to decrease instances of academic dishonesty. Hence, multiple interventions on both the classroom and institutional level have been created in order to combat academic dishonesty through different mediums, scope, and focus (Clark & Soutter, 2016; Smedley et al., 2015).

The findings of this study can be used to assist in creating effective interventions aimed at decreasing academic dishonesty within postsecondary education. On the classroom level, understanding how the value placed on courses can influence students' intentions to cheat, faculty can develop value statements within their syllabi and overall course structure to potentially alter students' course valuations. In addition, faculty can illicit students' valuations of courses and determine how students come to value their courses and then use that information to adapt their course accordingly. Moreover, social rational orientation can be used for both the classroom and institutional level to aid cheating interventions. More research is needed to uncover how students' rational orientations are developed first, rather than just discussing the negative effects and ethics behind cheating. Such information can be used to improve interventions by altering how students rationalize cheating.

Future Directions

First and foremost, future researchers can replicate and expand upon this avenue of research. Instead of concentrating on cheating in general, more studies could focus on the difference between types of cheating, collaborative versus individualistic cheating practices, and how these practices may alter the decision process to cheat. Classroom contexts should also be considered when conducting research on academic dishonesty, such as classroom atmosphere, perceived savvy or intelligence of the professor, and professor demographics. Future studies could also utilize different methods to test the relationship between course value and academic dishonesty. This study only used key words to manipulate course value, but future studies could determine what factors lead to particular evaluations of course value, such as topic, assigned readings, and presentation by the professor. Furthermore, the criterion that determines whether or not a course is considered valuable to a student may depend on that student's social rational orientation.

Concluding Remarks

This study provided new avenues to look at academic dishonesty via social rational orientation and perceived course value. The findings are important because they offer another angle in predicting academic dishonesty by helping professionals understand academic dishonesty that is related to how students view their courses and their systems of rationalization. Future studies should determine how students come to value or devalue a course in order to create course-based interventions to help shift students' valuations. Additionally, researchers should continue to study social rational orientation in regards to cheating practices because this will aid in advancing the literature in comprehending college student character development. This information can be used to create institution-based interventions to help cultivate a value rational orientation within students and decrease academic dishonesty. Higher education is important and required for certain professions; thus, if cheating continues, students bypass these controls set in place to protect everyone involved.

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