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The role of basic need fulfillment in academic dishonesty: A self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

The sharp rise in academic dishonesty is prompting increased concern in educational institutions. Based on the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we posited that frustration of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy (endorsing one's actions at the highest level of reflection), competence (feeling capable in one's pursuits), and relatedness (feelings of belonging and connection with others) underpins the likelihood of academic deception. We tested this hypothesis in two studies. Study 1 ($n = 121$) utilized an experimental design in which need fulfillment was manipulated by providing different instructions about accomplishing a task to a sample of undergraduate students. Results showed that participants in the need-frustration condition were more likely to cheat, whereas those in the need-satisfaction condition were least likely to cheat. Those in the neutral condition scored in between the other two groups. In Study 2, we investigated whether autonomous motivation mediated the effect of need fulfillment on academic dishonesty in a sample of junior high school students ($n = 115$). A mediation analysis showed that perceived need fulfillment in learning activities was positively associated with autonomous motivation, which, in turn, was inversely related to self-reported academic dishonesty. Implications for promoting needs-supportive educational strategies are discussed.

1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty has become a ubiquitous issue in institutions of secondary and tertiary education (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002). Academic dishonesty involves any form of fraud within an educational setting, ranging from plagiarism and fabrication to deception and bribery (Jurdi, Hage, & Chow, 2012). Evidence throughout the last century points to a consistent increase in rates of academic dishonesty. In the early 1940s, Drake (1941) reported a cheating rate of 23%, while studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s found cheating rates of 38% and 49%, respectively (Goldsen, Rosenberg, Williams, & Suchman, 1960). In addition, research indicates that from the early 1960s through the 1990s, cheating increased (Baird, 1980; McCabe, 2005; Schab, 1991). According to a more recent study on higher education institutions, close to 82% of a sample of college graduates confessed to committing academic fraud as university students (Yardley, Rodriguez, Bates, & Nelson, 2009). Another recent study by Wangaard and Stephens (2011) reported that 95% of all students admitted to cheating at some point in their high school career.

A great deal of research has been devoted to understanding this growing phenomenon and to identifying factors associated with student cheating (e.g. Whitley, 1998). Among these factors are students' demographic characteristics, attitudes toward cheating, personality variables, situational context, and expected rewards. However, several related problems limit the utility of these studies. First, some of these factors are amenable to manipulation and thus leave little leverage for intervention. Second, a great deal of the research on academic dishonesty has been correlational in nature, making it difficult to disentangle important factors such as situational context from potential covariates such as motivation (e.g., McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Third, these studies often rely heavily on self-report data, thus raising questions about accuracy, especially for a sensitive topic like academic dishonesty. Fourth, the relatively small number of laboratory experiments frequently used artificial tasks, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results (e.g., Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). Finally, although a few of these studies were grounded in theories of motivation, moral development, or social deviance, most have been a-theoretical, thus hindering the construction of a systematic, progressive body of scholarship.

To address these limitations, we conducted both experimental and correlational studies with self-report and academic performance-based measures of cheating. The theoretical background draws on concepts and research in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT focuses on how environmental contexts facilitate

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or undermine people's fulfillment of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which subsequently affect the quality of their motivation (i.e., autonomous motivation). Because academic dishonesty is by nature a motivational issue (Murdock & Anderman, 2006), and the evidence seems to suggest that academic dishonesty is mostly a function of contextual factors (McCabe & Treviño, 1997), the SDT framework may help clarify the contextual factors that enhance or hinder academic dishonesty and how these factors shape the motivational processes behind it.

1.1. Conceptualization of basic needs in self-determination theory

The Self Determination Theory comprises five mini-theories, each of which explains a different set of motivationally based phenomena (see Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010 for review). Together, SDT is a powerful framework for studying motivation in various areas, including education (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). SDT assumes that all students possess innate growth tendencies toward psychological integration and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). That is, people are naturally curious creatures who enjoy learning and who desire to internalize knowledge and seek coherence. These innate tendencies provide the motivational foundation for high-quality academic engagement and functioning (Reeve, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, SDT recognizes that not all students display curiosity and engagement all the time; sometimes students display a lack of self-motivation or dissatisfaction.

According to the SDT mini-theory of Basic Psychological Needs, people's innate tendencies toward integration and intrinsic motivation are sustained by satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). *Autonomy* refers to the need to experience one's behavior as emanating from and endorsed by the self rather than feeling controlled or pressured. *Competence* refers to the need to feel that one can engage with one's environment in an efficient and effective manner and that one has the ability to pursue one's interests. *Relatedness* refers to the need to establish close and caring relationships with others.

SDT posits that these three basic psychological needs are not independent or conflicting but rather are interrelated and complementary (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These covariances may occur because need-supportive elements may satisfy more than a single need (Reeve, 2012; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). For instance, teachers' provision of a meaningful rationale for a task, rather than simply an instruction to do it, may not only help students grasp the value of the activity (autonomy support) but also concurrently furnish the structure for its performance (competence support). Also, it may seem more caring to students (relatedness support). Similarly, frustration of one of the three psychological needs can undermine the others. For instance, a teacher's active suppression of students' choices (autonomy frustration) may be interpreted as an indication that the teacher does not care enough (relatedness frustration).

Despite the considerable body of literature supporting the importance of need fulfillment for psychological growth and functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2012; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010), the possible links between need fulfillment and academic dishonesty have received little attention. Nevertheless, the literature does provide some indirect evidence to support the potential role of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (or lack thereof) in academic dishonesty.

Competence-related concepts, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectancy beliefs, have been linked to cheating behaviors. For example, correlational studies report an inverse relation between academic self-efficacy and cheating among both middle school students (Murdock, Hale, & Weber, 2001) and college students (Finn & Frone, 2004). In experimental studies with high school and college students, cheating was more likely when teachers exhibited poor pedagogical competence (i.e., confusing presentations of material, unclear explanations of concepts) such that students estimated that their chances of success were low even if they worked hard (Murdock, Miller, & Goetzinger, 2007; Murdock, Miller, & Kohlhardt, 2004).

Other works have found a relationship between a frustrated need for relatedness and academic fraud. For instance, teachers' lack of interpersonal caring has been linked to students' cheating behavior and their subsequent justifications (Calabrese & Cochran, 1990; Murdock et al., 2001, 2004).

Lastly, when the need for autonomy is frustrated, for instance by pressuring students to excel or limiting their choices, cheating behaviors are more likely. For example, contingent incentives were shown to increase cheating in laboratory studies with 10- to 12-year-olds (Lobel & Levanon, 1988) as well as college students (Covey, Saladin, & Killen, 2001). In a similar vein, a controlling (autonomy-suppressive) parenting style that imposes strict rules was associated with higher rates of adolescent lying behavior than in families with an autonomy-supportive parenting style (Bureau & Mageau, 2014; Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

1.2. Self-determination theory's perspective on autonomous motivation

The concept of need support provides the foundation in SDT for understanding how the environmental context can shape people's motivational orientations toward subsequent engagement in activities. That is, people's reasons for engaging in and maintaining their behaviors may differ based on the extent to which their environment satisfies all of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In defining a person's motivational orientation toward various behaviors, SDT delineates a continuum ranging from most to least autonomous motivations.

According SDT's mini-theory of Organismic Integration, people are naturally inclined to internalize and integrate representations of themselves and their world. *Internalization* refers to one's taking in of values, attitudes, or regulatory structures. *Integration* refers to the further transformation of these regulations into one's own sense of self. When one's basic needs are fulfilled, internalization and integration will function effectively; thus, expectations that were once external can transform into personally endorsed values that are fully accepted as one's own, such that one can be self-determined or autonomous while enacting them (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). When needs are thwarted, people are less effective at internalizing and integrating and thus their motivation is less autonomous (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Kanat-Maymon, Roth, Assor, & Reizer, 2015).

At the higher end of the autonomous motivation continuum is *intrinsic* motivation. It is considered to be the prototype of autonomy as it refers to engagement in an activity of one's own volition because it is interesting and/or enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, not all behaviors are undertaken because people are inherently interested or intrinsically motivated; some behaviors are performed to accomplish some outcome separable from the activity itself, and thus motivation is considered extrinsic. More specifically, SDT distinguishes between four types of extrinsic regulations reflecting differing levels to which a behavioral regulation has been internalized and integrated.

The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*. Integration occurs when the value served by a particular behavior fits coherently with other values and goals of the self. Next on the continuum is *identified regulation*. In this form of regulation, people value or identify with the activity and thus