The Moral Puzzle of Academic Cheating: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Decisions

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CHAPTER 5

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Our research on academic integrity began with two puzzling facts. First, cheating is common. The vast majority of students cheat during their academic careers (McCabe et al., 2012; Stephens, 2018; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). Second, to most people, cheating is wrong. Nearly everyone agrees that academic cheating is unfair, dishonest, harmful, and morally bad (see, for example, Gert, 2004; Green, 2006; Miller et al., 2011). Hence the puzzle: How can cheating be at once so common and so universally condemned? How can there be such an apparent gap between actions and judgments? One possibility is that moral judgments have little bearing on decisions about cheating. This is indeed what many scientists have concluded. In reviewing the literature, McCabe (1997) concluded that “morality does not seem to be a major influence on student decisions to cheat or not to cheat” (p. 444). Another possibility, advocated by this chapter, is that moral judgments do play a crucial role in students’ decisions about cheating, and that the gap between judgments and actions is far smaller than often assumed.

We propose that a key to the puzzle of cheating lies in recognizing that perceptions, evaluations, and decisions about cheating vary dramatically from one situation to another (Dahl and Waltzer, 2018; Miller et al., 2007; Rettinger, 2007; Rettinger and Kramer, 2009; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). Simply put, in most situations, students accurately perceive cheating, judge that cheating is wrong, and decide to refrain from cheating (Kohlberg, 1971; Levine et al., 2010; Rundle et al., 2019; Turiel, 2003). In some situations, however, students cheat because they either perceive cheating inaccurately, deem that cheating is acceptable, or decide to prioritize other pressing concerns over their concerns with academic integrity. This chapter proposes that students’ judgments about cheating closely align with their decisions about cheating and that the gaps between judgments and actions are small, rare, and predictable.
We begin this chapter by defining cheating and reviewing alternative theoretical accounts of the cheating puzzle. After considering some limitations of these accounts, we will introduce our account of situational perceptions, evaluations, and decisions about cheating. We will review evidence for how each of these three steps shapes student cheating. In the concluding section, we consider how perceptions, evaluations, and decisions about cheating develop and how they may be targeted by interventions that strengthen academic integrity (Bertram Gallant, 2011; Bretag, 2020).

ACADEMIC CHEATING: WHAT, WHEN, AND WHY?

WHAT IS CHEATING?

We define academic cheating as a violation of academic rules that is intended to yield an academic advantage to persons involved. This distinguishes cheating from other school violations such as student conduct violations (e.g. violence, underage drinking), which are not intended to yield academic advantages. Of course, a given act of cheating may fail to yield an academic advantage, for instance because the cheater is caught. Still, what matters for our definition is that the student completed the cheating act with the expectation—however misguided—that they would be better off academically than if they had not completed that act.

Note that we do not define cheating as an unfair or otherwise immoral action (for alternative definitions, see Green, 2006; Murdock et al., 2016). This is because we seek a psychological definition for an empirical research agenda (Dahl and Waltzer, 2018). Terms such as “unfair” or “morally wrong” are not empirical concepts that can be measured with scientific methods. They are instead evaluative concepts over which psychologists have no special authority. Insofar as we discuss notions of “morally wrong” or “unfair” in this paper, we are referring to what certain individuals consider to be morally wrong or unfair. It is true that most people consider cheating and dishonesty to be generally wrong, but—as we will see—there are also situations in which most people judge cheating or lying to be okay (e.g. Freeman et al., 1999; Perkins and Turiel, 2007).
When Does Cheating Happen?

The variability in definitions of cheating and in the academic rules violated can make it difficult to measure how often students cheat. Still, there is no doubt that a large majority of students—likely more than 90 percent—cheat at least once during their academic careers (Curtis and Vardanega, 2016; McCabe et al., 2012; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). At the same time, it appears that most students also refrain from cheating on most of their assignments (Levine et al., 2010; Rundle et al., 2019). In one unpublished survey from our lab, undergraduates ($N = 227$) reported that they had cheated on less than 5 percent of their recent assignments (operationalized as being at least 50 percent confident that they had cheated, Waltzer et al., 2019). This fits with research on non-academic dishonesty, which suggests that people lie—on average—one or twice a day, a vanishingly small number considering the countless interactions they have daily (DePaulo et al., 1996; Levine et al., 2010; Serota et al., 2010). Like getting married, academic cheating has a high lifetime prevalence but a low daily frequency for any one individual. It is common at the level of individuals, yet rare at the level of situations.

Why Study Cheating? Its Practical and Theoretical Significance

When cheating does happen, it has major consequences for students and their institutions. Students who cheat are at risk of missed learning opportunities, inadequate preparation for future work, failing grades, and even barred enrollment (Bertram Gallant and Stephens, 2020; Cizek, 2003; Russell, 2014). Cheating can make it harder for non-cheating students to get good grades, especially in classes that grade students on a curve. In the aggregate, cheating can also undermine trust in academic degrees and heighten the workload, and frustrations, of instructors and administrators (Bertram Gallant, 2011; Chace, 2012). For these reasons, many students, instructors, administrators, and educational scholars have sought ways to reduce cheating.

Cheating has also been a focus in research on moral development and moral psychology (Ariely, 2012; Drake, 1941; Hartshorne and May, 1928; Kohlberg, 1971; Stephens, 2018; Zhao et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021). Cheating has been particularly theoretically significant because it is widely condemned, very common, and relatively easy to elicit in laboratory studies with both children and adults. It has thus become a notorious illustration of the so-called “judgment-
action gap”: Most people judge cheating to be wrong, yet sometimes decide to cheat (Blasi, 1980; Stephens, 2018). In the words of Stephens (2018), “[t]here is often a divide between that which we say we ought do—or not do—and that which we do. Many students, for example, cheat, even when they believe it is wrong to do so” (p. 2). This apparent gap has led many scholars to conclude that moral judgments do not guide actions around cheating or other moral issues (e.g. Brown, 2002; Haines et al., 1986; Houston, 1976, Lee et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2012).

Prior Theoretical Approaches to Cheating and the Judgment-Action Gap

In the literature on academic cheating, two responses to the judgment-action gap stand out. One response proposes that people readily disregard, or neutralize, their moral principles against cheating. In the words of Haines and colleagues (1986), students use neutralization techniques “before, during, or after deviant behavior to deflect the disapproval of others and self” (p. 344; see also Bandura, 2016; Stephens and Nicholson, 2008). Hence, it is proposed, moral principles against cheating have little bearing on whether people decide to cheat, since these principles can readily be neutralized to avoid feeling bad about one’s actions. The second theoretical approach begins with the assumption that moral principles do not reliably keep people from cheating; instead of assessing moral judgments, this approach seeks to predict cheating from characteristics of individuals or their institutions, such as personality traits, academic performance, or the presence of honor codes. We will briefly discuss these two theoretical approaches before introducing our own view.

Neutralization Accounts of Cheating. Many scholars have explained the judgment-action gap by proposing that students neutralize, or rationalize, their acts of cheating (Haines et al., 1986; McCabe et al., 2012; for related accounts, see Ariely, 2012; Bandura, 2016). Neutralization and rationalization refer to techniques by which students render otherwise wrong actions acceptable so that they can engage in those actions without feeling bad. Denial of responsibility or appeals to higher loyalties are but two examples of neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Haines and colleagues (1986) wrote that neutralization techniques “free the individual to deviate without considering himself or herself a deviant, thus eliminating or reducing the sense of guilt or wrongdoing” (p. 346; see Bandura, 2016). That is, according to neutralization approaches, students neutralize their cheating not because they genuinely think cheating is acceptable, but, for instance, because they want to cheat without feeling bad about it.
How do we distinguish neutralization from genuine moral reasoning? That is, when are students neutralizing their cheating acts to avoid feeling bad about themselves and when are they reasoning that cheating would be okay regardless of their personal involvement? It turns out that this question has received very little attention in research on neutralization and related concepts (Dahl and Waltzer, 2018, 2020). It is often assumed that any acceptance of cheating must involve neutralization. However, virtually everyone thinks it is sometimes okay to violate a general moral principle to uphold something more important (Turiel and Dahl, 2019). Most people judge, for instance, that it can be okay to sacrifice the life of one person to protect the lives of others (Dahl et al., 2018). Freeman and colleagues (1999) found that most physicians thought it was okay to lie to insurance companies if such deception was necessary to get coverage for life-saving surgery. (By contrast, physicians rarely accepted deception to cover non-essential procedures like cosmetic surgery.) Many other studies have shown that children, adolescents, and adults think it is sometimes okay to lie, for instance to protect one’s welfare or rights (Gingo, 2017; Jensen et al., 2004; Perkins and Turiel, 2007). Thus, the finding that students think cheating is sometimes okay does not by itself demonstrate neutralization.

A second limitation of neutralization approaches is that they do not readily explain why acts of cheating and dishonesty are rare compared to acts of academic integrity and honesty (Levine et al., 2010; Rundle et al., 2019). If students can neutralize cheating whenever it suits their self-interest, why do they cheat on so few assignments and, as we will note, primarily when they face strong situational pressures? Moreover, even when students do cheat, they often feel conflicted and guilty about their actions (Dahl and Waltzer, 2018; Stephens and Nicholson, 2008). Contrary to the neutralization account, we will propose that judgments about right and wrong play a decisive role in student cheating.

**Individual and Institutional Accounts of Cheating.** Instead of examining the psychological processes that lead students to cheat in specific situations (e.g. moral judgments or neutralization), other approaches have sought to predict rates of cheating from individual and institutional characteristics. For example, McCabe and colleagues (2001) wrote that “both individual and contextual factors influence cheating […] In addition, an institution’s academic integrity programs and policies […] can have a significant influence on students’ behavior” (p. 219). This body of research has found correlations between rates of cheating and student characteristics such as GPA (Bunn et al., 1992; Whitley, 1998), gender (Teixeira and Rocha, 2010), international student status (Beasley, 2016; Bertram Gallant et al., 2015), orientations toward academic mastery/performance (Anderman and Midgley, 2004), and conscientiousness (Giluk and Postlethwaite, 2014; Lee et al., 2020). At the institutional level, scholars have predicted rates of cheating based on academic major or use of honor codes (Baird, 1980; McCabe et al., 2012).
These approaches have advanced our knowledge about the individual and institutional conditions under which cheating is more likely. Still, by definition, general individual and institutional characteristics cannot account for situational variability in cheating, since the same student within the same institution will decide to cheat on one assignment but not another. Even students in “high risk” groups refrain from cheating on many, if not most, assignments. And even students in “low risk” groups still cheat (Galloway, 2012; Jordan, 2001; Rettinger and Jordan, 2005).

We are not the first to call for a psychological account of why students cheat in some situations and not others (Bertram Gallant and Stephens, 2020; Bretag, 2020; Hodgkinson et al., 2016; Ogilvie and Stewart, 2010; Rettinger, 2007). Miller and colleagues (2007) wrote that “instead of asking ‘who cheats?’ perhaps we should ask ‘when and why do some students cheat?’” (p. 29). More recently, Lee and colleagues (2020) called for research on “the same students across semesters where the situational influence of within person differences in academic work load and extracurricular demands could be examined” (pp. 1051-1052). In the following sections, we outline the core tenets and key evidence of a situational and moral-psychological account of why students cheat.

A Situational and Moral-Psychological Account of Academic Cheating: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Decisions

To examine the relation between situated judgments and decisions about cheating, this chapter takes a new approach to the moral puzzle of cheating. Our approach draws on advances in research on moral psychology and moral development (Killen and Dahl, 2021; Turiel and Dahl, 2019). We build our approach from three key insights.

First, perceptions of facts—for instance, about whether a teacher has in fact prohibited collaboration on a given assignment—shape evaluative judgments about right and wrong (Wainryb, 1991; Wainryb et al., 2004). Such perceptions, sometimes called informational assumptions, determine how individuals apply moral or other principles to a situation under evaluation. For instance, in one study, people who believed that corporal punishment is detrimental for a child’s healthy development tended to judge corporal punishment as wrong (Wainryb, 1991). But when the same people were asked to imagine that corporal punishment
had been beneficial for children’s development because it helped them learn, participants’ evaluations became more positive. This work illustrates how judgments about right and wrong build on perceptions about matters of fact.

Second, people form *evaluations* by incorporating multiple and sometimes competing principles, such as principles about protecting rights, promoting welfare, and being honest (Dahl et al., 2018; Nucci et al., 2017; Waytz et al., 2013). For instance, when evaluating whether it is okay to harm another person, children and adults consider not only the immediate harm and rights of that person, but also further ramifications, such as how the act may save others (Dahl et al., 2018; Fiske and Rai, 2014; Jambon and Smetana, 2014; Nucci et al., 2017). Under some circumstances, most people judge that it is okay to harm others to prevent a greater harm (Dahl et al., 2018).

Third, such evaluations guide, but do not fully determine, *decisions* about what to do (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005; Lee et al., 2021; Turiel, 2003). Research on attitudes has shown that attitudes about specific situations, say, whether it is good to cheat under some specified circumstances, predict actions in those situations (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005). Of course, positive and negative evaluations do not fully determine actions. Occasionally, people act in ways they judge to be wrong. Still, instances of judgment-action contradictions appear to be the exception, rather than the norm. In the case of cheating, we propose that individuals make such exceptions when they believe cheating is only a little wrong or that refraining from cheating will have unbearably high personal costs.

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**FIGURE 1**

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Below, we discuss evidence for the role of situated 1) perceptions, 2) evaluations, and 3) decisions in student cheating (Figure 1). Each of the three components responds to situational features, undergoes developmental change, and creates opportunities for interventions aimed at strengthening academic integrity. Jointly, these psychological components help explain why most students think cheating is wrong and refrain from cheating on most assignments, yet cheat at least once in their academic careers.

1) **Perceptions: Some Acts of**
Cheating are Unintentional

To refrain from cheating, students need to know what cheating is (Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). Imagine a take-home assignment on which the instructor has said students are not allowed to collaborate. If a student wrongly believes they are permitted, or even encouraged, to collaborate on the assignment, the student has no reason to decline a peer’s suggestion to work together. Similarly, if the student tries to avoid collaborating but does not know what entails collaboration in that class, they can still end up unintentionally cheating. To explain why the student decided to cheat, it is essential to consider the student’s failure to perceive collaboration as cheating.

Students’ perceptions shape decisions to cheat because students generally evaluate cheating as wrong and they typically decide to avoid it, as we will see more in the subsequent sections. For instance, students are far more likely to judge an act as wrong if they perceive it as cheating (Waltzer and Dahl, 2021; Waltzer et al., 2018; Modi et al., 2021). One study found that when students perceived a text as plagiarized, they judged it as wrong 90 percent of the time, compared to 6 percent for texts not perceived as plagiarism (Waltzer and Dahl, 2021).

Despite the likely role of perceptions in many cheating decisions, little past research on cheating has considered students’ perceptions. Often, researchers assess cheating by asking students whether they have cheated or by observing behaviors that the researchers perceive as cheating (for discussions, see Ashworth et al., 1997; Barnhardt, 2016). Neither of these approaches assesses whether research participants share instructors’ or researchers’ perceptions of which acts constitute cheating.

There is growing evidence that many acts of cheating happen because students fail to perceive those acts as cheating. Several studies have shown that students and instructors often disagree widely in their perceptions of cheating (Childers and Bruton, 2016; Roig, 1997, 2001; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). In one study, approximately half of students did not think paraphrased passages of text without citations counted as plagiarism, even though professors agreed that they were plagiarized (Roig, 1997). Similarly, interviews with students about their own past experiences with cheating suggest that many students are unaware or uncertain about whether they are cheating (Ashworth et al., 2003; Modi et al., 2021; Power, 2009; Stephens and Nicholson, 2008; Waltzer et al., 2018). In research with engineering and social science students, we asked students to describe a prior situation in which they had cheated (Modi et al., 2021; Waltzer et al., 2018). Less than half of students said they had known they were cheating at the time of the action, suggesting that perceptions play a crucial role in student cheating.
It is possible, of course, that students sometimes falsely claim they did not realize they were cheating so that they can present themselves favorably to researchers. Still, this is unlikely to explain all of the cases in which students report that they did not know they were cheating. First, if students merely wanted to present themselves in a positive light, they could have simply said they did not cheat. In contrast, we have found that most students readily describe prior acts of cheating (Waltzer et al., 2018; Waltzer et al., 2019). Second, as we saw, studies of cheating perceptions have revealed considerable disagreement among teachers and students about what constitutes cheating (Roig, 1997, 2001; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). Given such disagreements, it is inevitable that students will sometimes cheat without perceiving their acts as cheating.

Students’ confusion about what constitutes cheating can arise from differences in academic cultures and traditions. For instance, different academic disciplines conceptualize plagiarism differently (Bidgood and Merrill, 2017; Borg, 2009) and views on authorship and originality can vary across cultural communities and educational backgrounds (Ashworth et al., 2003; Chou, 2010; Pennycook, 1996). This may place international students, for example, at particular risk for unintentional cheating (Hayes and Introna, 2005; Park, 2003).

Even more directly, instructional experiences likely contribute to students’ ability to perceive cheating accurately. Students often rely on their instructors as a primary source of information on what constitutes academic integrity (Gullifer and Tyson, 2014; Husain et al., 2017; Sun and Hu, 2020). However, some research suggests that teachers rarely discuss cheating or integrity in their classrooms, and what rare discussions they do have mostly focus on threats of punishment (Bareket-Shavit et al., 2018). With widely varying expectations across institutions, disciplines, and even classes, and few explicit conversations about what is allowed in a particular class, students are often left to rely on their own assumptions of what is allowed. This could make it difficult to bring everyone onto the same page about what academic integrity means in each classroom.

In summary, perceptions play an essential role in decisions to cheat. People incorporate their beliefs about facts of the world to evaluate actions and decide what to do (Wainryb, 1991). Students can only choose to refrain from cheating if they first perceive an act as cheating. In many cases, far from instantiating a “judgment-action gap,” students do not even believe they are cheating. Still, researchers and educators easily overlook the perception step, based on the assumption that students already know what counts as cheating. Next, we turn to the question of how students evaluate acts they do perceive as cheating.

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2) Evaluations: People Deem
Cheating Acceptable in Some Circumstances

To understand the role of evaluations in academic cheating, we consider two concurrent points. First, nearly all students judge that cheating is generally wrong. Second, most people evaluate cheating and other forms of dishonesty as okay under some circumstances. We will discuss evidence for each point in turn.

Numerous studies now show that students generally care about academic integrity and think cheating is wrong (Ashworth et al., 2003; Davis et al., 1992; Modi et al., 2021; Stephens, 2018; Waltzer et al., 2021). In a large internal survey of undergraduates at our university ($N = 1,110$), 83 percent of students said academic integrity was “important” or “very important” to them. Similarly, studies tend to find over 90 percent of students say cheating is wrong (Davis et al., 1992; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). Common reasons students give for why they think cheating is wrong include concerns about learning, fairness, and intellectual property (Modi et al., 2021; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021; Waltzer et al., 2018). Thus, contrary to some suggestions, most students do not generally view cheating as a moral “gray area” (McCabe et al., 2012, p. 8). Students’ concerns for academic integrity thus generally provide a motivation for refraining from cheating.

At the same time, students judge cheating to be more acceptable under certain circumstances. Some opportunities to cheat pit concerns with academic integrity against morality, loyalty, or other important concerns. Students are sometimes asked by a peer to share their homework answers (Waltzer et al., 2018). If the peer is unable to complete required homework on their own, the student faces a dilemma that pits academic integrity against concerns with both loyalty and their friend’s academic survival in the class. We have found that students evaluate hypothetical acts of cheating that involve such realistic, competing concerns more positively than straightforward acts of cheating, in which such concerns are absent (Samuelson et al., 2021). For instance, if a hypothetical student faces unfair treatment by the instructor or family obligations that prevent them from completing the assignment, participants tend to judge that it is far more acceptable to cheat (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2002).

Studies of students’ evaluations of hypothetical acts of cheating offer crucial insights because, in these studies, students face no pressure to defend their actions. Some scholars have suggested that students may evaluate their own violations positively to maintain a positive self-image (e.g. Bandura, 2016). But this explanation cannot account for why students also think that it is okay for other people to cheat in hypothetical events involving unfamiliar individuals. Findings
on evaluations of hypothetical events involving unfamiliar others thus suggest that students genuinely deem cheating as acceptable in some situations.

Complementing these findings on judgments about hypothetical cheating, findings on students’ judgments about their own acts of cheating reveal similar processes of evaluation. Students sometimes judge that the circumstances, such as exceptional pressures, rendered their acts of cheating more acceptable, and they often express conflict and guilt about their cheating actions (Dahl and Waltzer, 2018; Modi et al., 2021; Waltzer et al., 2018). For example, in one study, participants who copied in a lab task reported increased guilt afterward (e.g. “[t]aking credit for someone else’s work made me feel guilty,” Waltzer et al., 2018). These expressions of guilt and conflict point to students’ deep and persistent concerns with academic integrity, even in situations when they decide to cheat (Turiel and Dahl, 2019).

In summary, students overwhelmingly think cheating is wrong, and this negative evaluation provides one compelling reason not to cheat. Still, a concern for honesty and integrity is not the only evaluative consideration at work. Some situations pit concerns for academic integrity against competing concerns (e.g. loyalty, others’ welfare), forcing students to prioritize one concern over another. In some such conflicted situations, students may choose cheating as the “lesser of two evils” (Hallborg, 1997). In the next section, we will discuss how evaluations guide decisions about cheating.

3) Decisions: Under Certain Pressures, Students Sometimes Cheat Despite Judging Cheating as Wrong

Like the prior section on evaluations, this section on decisions will make two points that exist in some tension. Our first point will be that evaluations exert a heavy pressure on decisions about cheating, leading students to act in accordance with their evaluations most of the time. Our second point will be that, when faced with certain pressures and high personal stakes, students sometimes decide to cheat even when they judge cheating to be wrong.

In most situations, students act in accordance with their judgments against cheating. In nearly all cases, students evaluate cheating as wrong and, accordingly, refrain from cheating (Curtis and Vardanega, 2016; Levine et al., 2010; Rundle et al., 2019; Waltzer et al., 2019). As mentioned, students appear to cheat on fewer
than 5 percent of assignments (Waltzer et al., 2019; see also Karlins et al., 1988). Moreover, when students do cheat, they are more likely to do so in situations where they evaluate cheating more positively. Students’ own estimates of how likely they are to cheat in a situation are strongly correlated with their evaluations of cheating in that situation (DeBernardi et al., 2021). Moreover, as noted in the prior section, students are more likely to deem cheating acceptable in the kinds of situations in which they tend to cheat, for instance when faced with exceptional pressures (Samuelson et al., 2021; Waltzer et al., 2018).

Of course, evaluations are not the only forces that shape students’ decisions to cheat. In addition to their concern that cheating is simply wrong, students also refrain from cheating out of concerns for their own learning, risks of consequences, and a belief that it is feasible to complete the assignment without cheating (Waltzer et al., 2019; see also McLeod and Simkin, 2010; Miller et al., 2011; Rundle et al., 2020).

Occasionally, however, students do decide to act against their evaluations by cheating despite evaluating the act as wrong. We propose that these situations are rare (compared to the number of situations in which students refrain from cheating), and predictable. The factors that predict such situations seem to resemble the factors that predict students’ positive evaluations of cheating, such as thinking they do not have enough time, not knowing how to pass the assignment without cheating, or feeling pressured to help someone else (McLeod and Simkin, 2010; Modi et al., 2021; Stephens and Nicholson, 2008; Waltzer et al., 2018). Moreover, students are more likely to cheat when performance outcomes (e.g. obtaining a top score) are emphasized over learning and mastery (Jordan, 2001; Lang, 2013; Murdock et al., 2004). Other scholars have noted that higher-pressure contexts, such as competitive majors, push students to cheat more (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; McCabe and Treviño, 1995).

In short, it seems that students typically act in accordance with their evaluations of cheating. Most of the time, students view cheating as wrong and, accordingly, refrain from cheating. In some situations, for instance when facing exceptional pressures, students deem cheating as more acceptable and decide to cheat. In a small number of situations, students face conflicts that involve high personal stakes (e.g. feeling desperate for a certain grade); these conflicts can lead them to cheat despite judging that cheating is wrong. Since these situations are so infrequent, they do not undermine our claim that evaluations generally align with decisions about cheating. Still, students’ decisions to cheat, whenever they happen, can have major consequences for individuals and institutions, and hence warrant the kind of scientific examination that we have proposed in this chapter.
CONCLUSION

We started this chapter with the puzzle of why cheating is at once very common yet widely condemned. We propose that a psychological account of students’ perceptions, evaluations, and decision-making can help explain why and when students cheat, as well as why and when they refrain from cheating. When analyzed at the level of situational decision-making, the evidence suggests that moral judgments play a major role in whether students cheat (Killen and Dahl, 2021; Waltzer and Dahl, 2021). We argued that students act in accordance with their judgments most of the time, either by refraining from cheating when they think cheating is wrong or cheating when they think cheating is okay.

Our framework raises key questions for future research on why students cheat. More research is needed on how students learn to perceive cheating, under which circumstances they evaluate cheating as acceptable, and when they decide to cheat despite judging that cheating is wrong. In addition, further research is needed on the development of cheating across adolescence and early adulthood. The frequency of cheating peaks early in college and decreases in later years, according to both self-report and other measures (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Haines et al., 1986; Olafson et al., 2014; Whitley, 1998). Such changes in cheating rates likely reflect developmental changes in students’ perceptions, evaluations, and decision-making about cheating. These changes occur, in part, through encounters with peers, teachers, and traditions at different academic institutions. Children do not enter school with knowledge of norms about ownership and integrity, but must develop such norms over time (Olson and Shaw, 2010). In moving beyond individual-level questions about “who cheats” to questions about when and why cheating happens, it will be important to study both situational variability and developmental change in cheating.

Our proposed situational model of student cheating also points to multiple paths for intervention. Since decisions about cheating involve multiple components, interventions may need to be similarly multi-pronged (see also Dawson, 2021; Rundle et al., 2020). By analogy, reducing serious traffic accidents requires, first, an understanding of why serious traffic accidents happen and, second, interventions on the biggest culprits: Is it bad brakes, bad airbags, bad roads, high speed limits, or bad driver education? To reduce cheating, interventions may target the many factors that influence perceptions, evaluations, and decisions.

Because many cases of cheating are unintentional, and explicit discussions of cheating are rare, strengthening academic integrity education would likely be impactful (Blum, 2009; Brown and Janssen, 2017; Curtis et al., 2013). Educators can strengthen students’ perceptions of cheating by providing consistent,
standardized, and concrete guidelines on what students are allowed to do and, conversely, what they are not allowed to do. And, because students sometimes evaluate cheating as okay in certain circumstances, as when facing high pressures, educators may adjust the nature or framing of assignments to reduce the likelihood of these circumstances. At the decision step, to prevent students from believing that they have no choice but to cheat, educators can provide resources to navigate time management or split large assignments into several smaller assignments with lower stakes (e.g., Lang, 2013; Lederman, 2021).

In this chapter, we refrained from defining cheating as immoral. In the same vein, we refrain from insisting that educators must necessarily adopt every strategy that reduces cheating. Educators, like students, balance multiple concerns in their academic lives. Academic integrity is one major concern, but so is time-management, academic rigor, and validity of assessments. As academic integrity researchers, we see our role as that of advancing the scientific knowledge of why students cheat and, ultimately, how educators and institutions may promote academic integrity and reduce cheating. Insofar as such knowledge helps students, educators, educational institutions, and our broader society—as we believe it will—the science of academic integrity will continue to play a key role in the coming decades.

REFERENCES


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Figure 1

Candidate act of cheating

Perception ➔ Evaluation ➔ Decision ➔ Likely outcome

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<tr>
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Perceives as cheating ➔ Evaluates as wrong ➔ Decides to follow evaluation ➔ Refrains

Perceives as non-cheating ➔ Evaluates as not wrong ➔ Decides against evaluation ➔ Cheats

Note: By candidate act of cheating, we mean an act that (a) an individual is otherwise motivated to carry out that (b) would, if completed, meet the criteria for cheating. The vertical axis represents the cumulative probability of actions. The height of each box is meant for illustration only. If the probabilities were as depicted in this graph, this would represent a situation with unusually high risk (30%) of cheating (10% chance of failed perception, 10% chance of evaluating cheating as wrong, and 10% chance of deciding to cheat despite evaluating it as wrong). The graph illustrates a high degree of correspondence between perceptions and evaluations, and between evaluations and decisions. For instance, there is only a 10% chance the person will act against their evaluation and a 90% chance the person will act in accordance with their evaluation. Lastly, each link in the model is probabilistic, not deterministic: There are cases, for instance, in which students evaluate cheating as okay and nevertheless decide to refrain from cheating because of other concerns, such as fear of being caught. These further factors are not represented in this schematic figure.