Documenting Passive Cheating in College Students

This experiment examined passive cheating in male and female college students. Thirty-two student volunteers participated. Before they completed a test of riddles, the experimental group overheard a male and a female confederate discussing the answers to the test. Participants in the control group did not overhear the discussion. Participants in the experimental group had significantly more answers that corresponded to the confederates’ discussion. Passive cheating exists and is equally likely to be engaged in by college men and women.

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According to Brickman (as cited in Barnett & Dalton, 1981), society has recognized cheating as a social problem for most of recorded history. Today, cheating is a major concern for colleges and universities; academic dishonesty seems to plague the university system (Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986). Studies conducted during the 1990s indicate that between 40% and 60% of the college students surveyed admitted to cheating on at least one examination (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995). When other forms of academic dishonesty are taken into account, the percentage of cheaters soars even higher. For example, Sims (1995) reported that 91% of the participants admitted to some form of academic dishonesty.

Even though students and faculty tend to agree on what can be defined as cheating, their views on the severity of different cheating methods do not always agree (Livosky & Tauber, 1994). Graham, Monday, O’Brien, and Steffen (1994) found that “faculty rate . . . [cheating] behaviors as significantly more severe than students” (p. 257), and tend to view all cheating behaviors as severe. Students, on the other hand, view cheating behaviors they initiate as worse than someone cheating off their work (Graham et al., 1994).

Students cheat for many reasons. According to Graham et al. (1994) the top three reasons why students cheat are: (a) they need a better grade, (b) they did not have time to study, and (c) they saw an opportunity and just took it. Sex differences also seem to play a part in whether a person will cheat. Male college students tend to report higher instances of cheating than female college students (Barnett & Dalton, 1981; Davis et al., 1992). Men admitted to cheating on more types of tests and to using a greater variety of cheating methods than women (Baird, 1980; Genereux & McLeod, 1993). Women were more likely to feel guilt over their own cheating and do something about an incident when confronted with another’s cheating; men were more likely to do nothing. Men also seem to be greatly influenced by their friends (Genereux & McLeod, 1993). Sex role socialization theory (Hendershott, Drinan, & Cross, 1999), which is based on the belief that women are programmed to not deviate from the rules or to give into temptation, may account for these differences.

Awareness of cheating in colleges has grown over time (Baird, 1980), but so have the pressures involved
in college life (Barnett & Dalton, 1981). Students feel more pressure to get higher grades, and faculty feel the need to be judged more favorably in order to receive tenure or promotion. These situations make it more likely that students will cheat and less likely that teachers will take strong action to combat cheating (Livosky & Tauber, 1994).

Hetherington and Feldman (1964) examined three different cheating situations and defined four types of cheating behavior: (a) independent-opportunistic cheating which is unplanned and impulsive, (b) independent–planned which involves planning ahead of time to cheat, (c) social (active) cheating which involves two or more people with the cheater initiating the academically dishonest behavior, and (d) social (passive) which involves two or more people with the cheater taking a passive role. This experiment examined passive cheating in male and female college students. Passive cheating, for the purpose of this study, involves situations in which a test taker overhears comments about the test and then uses those comments to respond in the same manner (Schmidt, 1999). For example, if a teacher gave the same test to two different sections of the same class, students in the second class could inadvertently hear students from the first class discussing the answers.

Method

Participants

Sixteen men and 16 women enrolled in Introduction to Psychology courses at Emporia State University volunteered to be participants. The students signed up for assigned testing times in pairs (one woman and one man). We randomly assigned the pairs to the experimental group (8 pairs) or the control group (8 pairs). Each student received credit toward fulfilling a course requirement.

Materials

All participants completed a 20-item multiple-choice test of riddles. Each item had four answers; B was never the correct answer. Participants indicated their academic classification and sex on the riddles test.

Procedure

Participants waited on a bench outside the testing room before entering for their assigned session. While the participants in the experimental group were waiting, an undergraduate male confederate and an undergraduate female confederate left the testing room. As the confederates passed by, the participant pair overheard them apparently discussing the test they had just completed. The dialogue went as follows:

Confederate 1 (woman): “How do you think you did?”

Confederate 2 (man): “I answered B on almost all of the questions.”

Confederate 1 (woman): “Me too!”

After the confederates had passed by, one of the experimenters asked the participant pair to come into the testing room to complete the riddles test.

Participants in the control group received the same treatment except they did not hear the confederates discussing the test. Therefore, participants in the experimental group were sensitized to the possibility of B answers being correct, whereas participants in the control group were not sensitized to this possibility.

Results and Discussion

We recorded the number of B answers for each participant and subjected these data to a 2 (sex) × 2 (group: experimental vs. control) analysis of variance (ANOVA). This analysis yielded significance, $F(1, 36) = 4.84, p = .035$, for the groups factor. Participants in the experimental group ($M = 2.625, SD = 1.495$) answered B more often than participants in the control group ($M = 1.625, SD = .927$). Omega squared indicated that group membership accounted for 10.70% of the variance.

Previous reports (e.g., Davis et al., 1992; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; Haines et al., 1986; Jendrek, 1989) have established the prevalence and seriousness of academic dishonesty in contemporary American colleges and universities. In addition to the more popular techniques, students have developed and implemented numerous nefarious schemes designed to unacceptably raise their grades. Teachers have reacted to this rising tide of cheating by developing and implementing countermeasures, such as careful monitoring during tests, administering different forms of the test, separating the students by a desk, and giving all essay tests (Davis et al., 1992). Unfortunately, these countermeasures are not capable of thwarting passive cheating.

The present data indicate that students will take advantage of any opportunity to acquire information about an examination that presents itself. In this experiment the confederates’ passing comment that the test appeared to contain a number of B answers significantly increased the number of times participants selected this alternative (i.e., passive cheating).
These results indicate that instructors who teach multiple sections of the same course also need to be concerned with information that passes inadvertently from one class to another. One technique for combating passive cheating of this nature is to administer a different test to each class and make sure that the students are aware that this practice is in effect.

References