



Academic confidence and psychopathy as factors in academic dishonesty among undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty (AD) is a serious issue of global concern given its negative impacts on the quality of education, ethics of professional practices and career outcome. There is paucity of studies on its psychosocial and personality correlates in the Nigerian setting. In this study, we examined whether academic confidence (AC) and psychopathy will predict academic dishonesty (AD). Undergraduate students (N = 173, males = 89, females = 84, Mean age = 23.32 years) from the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, in University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) participated in the study. Measures of the variables were Academic Behaviour Confidence Scale (ABCS), Primary and Secondary Psychopathy Scale (PSPS), and Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS). Result of hierarchical multiple regression indicated a significant negative prediction of AD by AC ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$). Psychopathy positively predicted AD ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). The findings were discussed in the light of enhancing academic confidence and behavioural management of psychopathic behaviours among students in order to reduce academic dishonesty.

Introduction

Academic dishonesty (AD) or academic cheating is one of the major problems plaguing academic sectors not only in Nigerian society but across the globe. Academic dishonesty has been given different definitions by various researchers. Weaver, Davis, Look, Buzzanga and Neal (1999) defined academic dishonesty as 'a violation of an institution's policy on honesty', while some others (e.g., Aderogba & Olatoye, 2012; McCabe & Bowers; McCabe & Trevino, 1993) defined it based on a particular violation of behaviour such as cheating on a test or plagiarism. Jensen, Arnett, Feldman and Kaufman, (2002) identified a variety of academic unacceptable behaviour which include cheating on an exam, copying assignments from other students, plagiarism, as academic dishonesty behaviour. This study will however adopt some academic dishonest behaviour listed by McCabe and Trevino, (1997) which includes the following among others: Copied material and turned it in as your own work, used unfair methods to learn what was on a test before it was given, copied a few sentences of material from a published source without giving the author credit, helped someone else to cheat on a test.

Several studies on the extent of academic dishonesty among students have reported varying percentage of students who cheat. Sheers and Dayton (1987) found that 87% of the students in their study had cheated at least once. Also, Genereux and Mcleod (1995) found that over 80% of students have cheated, whereas Lord and Chiodo (1995) in their study showed that 80% admitted cheating on some significant tests and major projects. Some authors contend that the reason for the prevailing proliferation of AD may be inability of the school authority and some academic staff to take cheating behaviour seriously. Keith-Spiegel (in Murray, 1996) reported that 20% of 500 sampled university professors reported they had ignored to take further measure in evidence cases of cheating behaviour

as a result of the stress and discomfort that follows it. On the part of the students, some researchers have found that there is a common belief among the students that every person cheats (Houston, 1996), and that cheating is a normal part of life (Baird, 1980). These beliefs and attitude invariably encourage cheating behaviour among students. Other researchers have found the following as major justification to cheat: pressure on the part of students to succeed, student's stress, too heavy work load, ineffective preventive measures by instructors and peer pressure (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Wajda-Johnston, Handal, Brawer, & Fabricatore, 2000).

Several factors that seem to correlate with AD had been identified by some researchers. For instance, McCabe and Trevino (1997) in their study found that age, fraternity or sorority membership, peer approval of dishonesty and peer cheating have also been associated with their higher rates of cheating by colleges students. The major perceived reasons for academic cheating in Nigeria were examination anxiety and stress and fear of failure (Ifeagwazi, 2010). In this study therefore, the researchers consider that academic confidence (AC) and psychopathy would be possible factors in academic dishonesty. Confidence according to Sander and Sanders (2003) is a concept that originated from the work of Bandura (1977, 1986, 1993) on the concept of self-efficacy and from the study on student's perception of university teaching. People with high self-efficacy, that is, those who believe they can perform well, are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than something to be avoided (Fezatte, 2009). Self efficacy can also be defined as the confidence people have in their ability to do things that they try to do (Pajares, 2000). Self-efficacy influences people's decision or choice in a situation, such as whether to begin a task or not. It also has some influence even on the efforts one tries to put in that task and their consistency in it. It energises someone to pursue a difficult task. As a result of the influences that self-efficacy has on several aspect of life specifically on academic performance

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as recorded by several empirical evidence (e.g. Lane & Lane 2001, Mckenzo & Smester, 2001; Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez Pous, 1992), Sander et al suggested a new construct, distinct from its parent concept self-efficacy namely, academic confidence (AC).

Sander and Sanders (2003) conceptualized AC as how student differ in the extent to which they have “strong belief, firm trust, or sure expectation” of what university has to offer. They maintained that as part of its parent concept of self-efficacy, AC may also stem from the four sources of self-efficacy, namely, mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological states. Thus, academic behavioural confidence scale was developed by the researchers Sander and Sanders (2007) for use as a survey instrument, to assess the confidence that university students have in their own anticipated study behaviours in relation to their degree programmes. AC is therefore conceptualised in this work as the belief that students have in their ability to carry on with their course requirements and obtain their academic goal. There is paucity of studies that have examined AC in relation to AD. However, few other studies have associated academic self-efficacy with academic dishonesty. Fezzate (2009) found that participants with higher levels of academic self-efficacy reported lower incidence of academic dishonesty before university. During university, self-efficacy was also a strong predictor of academic misconduct. Those who have higher academic self efficacy reported lower incidence of academic dishonesty (Fezzate, 2009).

Comprehensive reviews of research on factors that predicts academic misconduct or cheating has not recognized the value of some personality factors (Cizek, 1999; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). In other words, several personality variables have not yet been given adequate attention in this area of research. One of these variables is psychopathy. Psychopathy is among the personality variable commonly referred to as the Dark Triad of personality together with Narcissism and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Many of the studies imploring psychopathy were mainly carried out among incarcerated offenders or prison inmates. The present researchers therefore suggest that psychopathy may be a factor in student’s academic misconduct. Psychopaths are characterized by impulsivity, callousness, manipulation, remorselessness, antisocial behaviour and violation of societal rules and regulation among others, (Hare, 2003, Cleckley, 1982, Willaims, Paulhus, & Hare 2007).

Psychopaths are opportunists who lack any concern for the consequences of their actions and ruthless in their pursuit of their own aims and ambitions (Boddy, 2005 in Onyedibe 2010). They have unrestrained achievement motivation which can be a factor in cheating behaviour. These characteristics suggests that psychopaths may be more likely to violate school rules and regulations such as maintaining academic honesty and integrity. Thus, they can engage in academic dishonesty and cheating behaviour than are non psychopaths. Psychopathy is strongly and consistently related to a wide range of misconduct in non offenders such as, alcohol and drug abuse, bullying, antiauthority abuse, driving offenses, criminal behaviour (William & Paulhus, 2004). Few empirical studies have investigated the relationship between psychopathy and academic dishonesty. Among the three-personality variable, studied by Williams, Nathanson, and Paulhus (2010), psychopathy was the strongest predictor of scholastic cheating. In their study with university students, Cogne and Thomas (2008) also found that primary psychopathy was related to cheating behaviour. This study therefore predicts that this link will extend to academic dishonesty. We therefore hypothesize that: (1) AC will negatively predict lower AD. (2) Psychopathy will positively predict AD.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seventy-three (173) undergraduates of University of Nigeria, Nsukka participated in the study. They comprised 89 male and 84 females, drawn from the 3rd and 4th year class of the department of Pharmaceutical Sciences in University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their age ranged between 16 and 26 with a mean age of 23.32 ($SD = 2.63$).

Instruments

Academic dishonesty was measured using 10 items adapted from McCabe and Trevino (1997) scale for aimed at measuring cheating behaviour among students. Participants were asked to indicate how often they have engaged in each of the academically dishonest behaviour since they entered the university. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from, ‘not even one time’ (1) to ‘many times’ (5). Internal consistency reliability given by Bolin, (2004) based on his own sample for the academic dishonesty scale is $r = .90$. In the present study, the scale yielded internal consistency reliability, Cronbach’s α of .86. Higher scores on this scale indicates higher involvement in academic dishonesty while lower scores indicate lower involvement.

The primary and secondary psychopathy scale (Levenson, et. al. 1995) was adopted as the measure of psychopathy in this study. It consists of 26 items with two factors, namely, primary and secondary psychopath. The primary and secondary psychopathy scale according to the author was developed to assess the two forms of psychopathy recognized in the literature and to assess their relationships to prosocial and antisocial behaviour chosen for their relevance to university students (Levenson, et. al. 1995). The primary psychopathy (16) items were created to asses a selfish, uncaring and manipulative posture toward others, whereas the secondary psychopathy (10) items were designed to assess impulsivity and a self-defeating lifestyle. The items are scored on a four-point likert-type scale ranging from ‘disagree strongly’ (7) to ‘agree strongly’ (4). Seven (7) of the items were scored in reversed direction. Higher scores indicate higher psychopathic tendencies while lower scores indicate lower manifestation of psychopathic tendencies. Internal consistency reliability according the developers was .82 and .63 for the primary and secondary psychopathy, respectively. In the present study, the scale yielded internal consistency reliability, Cronbach’s α of .71.

AC was measured with the Academic behavioural Confidence, a 24-item scale developed by Sander and Sanders (2007). The scale was designed to measure the confidence of university students in their anticipated study behaviours in relation to their degree program. Items are scored on a five-point likert scale ranging from ‘very confident’ (5) to ‘not at all confident’ (1) with higher scores indicating higher academic behavioural confidence. The internal consistency reliability, Cronbach’s α , recorded by Sander and Sanders (2006) was .88. In the present study, the scale yielded internal consistency reliability, Cronbach’s α of .80.

Procedure

Two research assistants approached the students in their different classes with the permission of the lecturer in the class and introduced themselves as well as explained the purpose of the study to the students. The questionnaires were administered to the students who consented to take part in the study. The copies of the questionnaires distributed were one hundred and eighty one questionnaires. The total questionnaires recovered were 178, but five questionnaires were discarded due to incomplete data. The total questionnaires used for the final analysis was 173, representing 96.11% return rate.

Design and Statistics

The design of this study was cross-sectional survey design. Hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis was used for the analysis.

Results

The result in table 1 showed that none of the demographic variables had significant relationship with academic dishonesty. For the main predictors, the result in table

one showed that academic confidence had significant negative relationship with to academic dishonesty. ($r = -.21, p < .01$). The result also showed that psychopathy had significant positive relationship with academic dishonesty ($r = .31, p < .01$).

In Table 2, AC negatively predicted academic dishonesty ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$). AC accounted for about 17% variance in AD. The negative relationship indicated that the higher the academic confidence, the lower the AD. The result also showed that psychopathy positively predicted AD ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). Psychopathy accounted for about 28% variance in AD.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Age	Gender	AC	Psychopathy	AD
Age	18.38	2.63	-				
Gender			-.08	-			
AC	82.58	13.34	.07	.00	-		
Psychopathy	50.67	9.66	-.12	-.14	.17*	-	
AD	20.51	5.79	.02	.02	-.21**	.31**	-

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; AC = Academic confidence; AD = Academic dishonesty

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression of predictors of Academic Dishonesty

Variable	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Controls			
Age	.03	.04	.08
Gender	.02	.02	.07
Main Effects			
Academic confidence		-.22**	-.17*
Psychopathy			.30***
Adjusted R^2	-.01	.03	.11
ΔR^2	.01	.05	.08
ΔF	.09	8.30**	16.30***

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$;

Discussion

The study investigated the predictive relationship of academic confidence (AC) and psychopathy with academic dishonesty (AD) among university undergraduates. Findings indicated that AC negatively predicted AD indicating that students who reported high levels of AC were less likely to engage in academic misconduct than are students who reported low levels of AC. Thus, the first hypothesis which stated that there will be no statistically significant relationship with academic dishonesty was rejected. This finding is consistent with the previous researchers who found that students with high academic self-efficacy reported lower AD (Murdock et al., 2001; Fezzate, 2009). In her study, Fezzate (2009) found that participants who reported high levels of academic self efficacy reported lower incidence of academic dishonesty both before and during university. Therefore, it appears that the more students have a strong belief and confidence in their ability to tackle the challenges resulting from their course requirement, and obtain their academic goals, the less they are likely to cheat.

Psychopathy positively predicted academic dishonesty, indicating that higher the psychopathic tendencies, the higher the academic dishonesty. It therefore implies that psychopathy is a major predictor of academic dishonesty among undergraduates. The finding supported previous studies which showed that students with psychopathic attributes engage more in AD (Cogne & Thomas, 2008; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Psychopaths are noted for their reckless and notorious

violation of societal norms, impulsivity, callous regard toward others, manipulation, remorselessness and antisocial behaviour among others. Their ruthless violation of societal norms, rules and regulation may explain their readiness to go against the school regulations and authority, of which maintaining academic honesty is one of them. According to Williams et al. (2010), an unrestrained achievement motivation may partially explain this association. Incentives such as high grades and scholarships seem to activate dishonesty among psychopaths. Callous disregard for others and lack of impulse control encourage cheating as a means of achieving success (Williams et al., 2010). While other students may strive to achieve their academic goals with integrity and honesty, psychopaths do not care about their own personal integrity. This reflects the link between psychopathy and moral deficit as demonstrated by Williams et al. (2009).

This study has some important implication on the education sectors particularly in the Nigerian society. It will be noted that almost every universities and colleges hold the claim that students are awarded degrees and higher degrees based on learning and character. It appears that this is easier said than done, as many of our higher institutions are the "home" of academic misconduct, dishonesty and cheating of all kinds. The invention of different kinds of modern technology such as internet facilities, information and communication technology such as mobile phones have made cheating sophisticated and at the same time, easier for students to use without being apprehended. The integrity of any academic institution requires honesty. Therefore,

upholding academic integrity and honesty should be the top priority of the school authorities, academics, and students alike. The school authorities and academics are therefore called upon to rise to this challenge of giving adequate character training to the students, if the aim of academic integrity and honesty is to be upheld. Seminars and workshops for students aimed at increasing academic confidence should be put in place.

Universities should also organise some programmes where students would be adequately helped, especially individuals noted as psychopaths. Such programmes like counselling sessions and psychotherapy should be of paramount importance in any university and college systems. Some researchers suggest the following as a means of preventing cheating behaviour among students: clear warning about the use of cheating detection programs, banning cell-phones and other electronic devices, random or assigned seating arrangements and assigning essays that involve writing about personal experiences that could not be easily plagiarized from external sources (Cizek, 1994, Gulli, Kohler, & Patriquin, 2007; Whitely & Keith-Spiegel, 2002).

While findings of this study are interesting, there are some limitations worth acknowledging. First, the use of cross-sectional design in the study limits the causal interpretation of our findings. Second, the study had fewer participants and this can affect its generalizability to other student populations. Future studies should use large student sample from different universities in Nigeria for better generalizability. The increase of academic misconduct in higher institutions is indeed a very serious challenge on the part of the educators. Academic confidence and psychopathy were found to be significant predictors of academic cheating and misconduct among students. Academic and non-academic staff in the educational sector are therefore encouraged to put in place different measures that will help to curb this terrible problem threatening the educational system.

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