

STEALING TO GET AHEAD: SOCIAL ANXIETY AND SOME CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG NIGERIA UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty is a fundamental issue in virtually all educational institutions, and one that has lately been gaining increasing attention, but with less research efforts. This study investigated social anxiety, perceived probability of not being caught and perceived probability of not acting on observed academic misconduct as predictors of academic dishonesty among Nigerian university undergraduates. Social anxiety was measured with the Social Phobia Scale developed by Zimmerman (2002); Perceived probability of not being caught and perceived probability of authority not acting on observed academic misconduct were measured with a single item each developed by the present researchers; whereas academic dishonesty was measured with the 10- item Academic Dishonest Scale adapted from McCabe and Trevino (1997). The results of the regression analyses revealed that social anxiety, perceived probability of being caught and perceived probability of not acting on observed academic misconduct significantly predicted students' engagement in academic dishonest behaviours. The findings of the study indicated that these factors that predispose students to engage in academic dishonesty should be taken very seriously if the goal of academics is to be achieved.

Keywords: Social anxiety, perceived probability of being caught, perceived probability of not acting on observed academic misconduct, academic dishonesty.

The goal of this study is to broaden our knowledge on academic dishonesty by investigating whether social anxiety and some contextual variables (perceived probability of being caught [PPNBC] and perceived probability of the authority not acting on observed academic misconduct [PPNAOM]) will have predictive main effect on academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty, academic misconduct and cheating are used interchangeably in the present study.

Understanding student academic dishonesty is particularly important given trends that show cheating is widespread and on the rise. Extensive review of literature on college cheating over the last decade reveals that research on contextual factors on academic dishonesty has been narrowly focused (Brown & Howell, 2001; McCabe & Trevino, 2002). Rather research has mainly focused on personal factors or individual influences on disrespect or disregard academic integrity. Such variables include level of self-efficacy, type of motivation, attitudes, and general personality characteristics (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998). Given the widespread of academic dishonesty in our colleges and universities today, it is overdue for researchers to engage in studies to establish both personal and contextual variables that motivate academic dishonesty in Nigeria.

There has been notable growth in the interest in unveiling what motivate such behaviour and the rate at which it is increasing (Park, 2003; Williams & Hosek, 2003) especially in the Western countries. Despite that the studies of academic dishonesty among college students date back to over 70 years (Etter, Cramer, & Finn, 2006), Nigerian researchers seem

to have done little in investigating this phenomenon. Over the years, the Nigeria educational system which had hitherto enjoyed enviable reputation, international recognition and respectability for its global competitiveness has suddenly collapsed. Today, if Nigeria educational system is mentioned, it evokes negative and aversive feelings; the first sets of thoughts that come to mind are: decline in standard engendered by poor motivation of teachers, deterioration of facilities, examination malpractices, and the like.

Over-reliance or preference of certificates over knowledge in the Nigerian society seems to have paved way and culminated to malpractice or motivates students to engage in academic dishonest behaviours. In Nigeria the means of achieving an outcome is no longer regarded as critical and so many students employ all sorts of means to obtain certificates to guarantee them a future. In fact, misapplication of the reward system is one of the notable culprits that seem to reinforce academic dishonest behaviours. Despite that there has been unprecedented rate of student academic dishonesty in Nigerian schools, there is non-existence of any published empirical Nigerian research that directly examined academic dishonesty both at the post primary school (high school) and tertiary levels. This profound omission by Nigerian researchers is not based on the notion that the country is immune to this menace, but they do not see it as a viable research area. This incidence may be reflective of the value systems being internalized by Nigerians, which over the years has continued to attract the attention of the media and stakeholders. Stakeholders however have evolved strategies such as subjecting prospective students to post Universal Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) the body responsible for organizing examinations for students desiring to gain university education. This is in a bid to check dishonest behaviours and improve the quality of students that gain admission into universities.

Academic dishonesty which has been defined as intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, notes, study aids or other devices or materials in any academic exercise has been persistent for many years, at all educational levels. Several studies indicate that the level of cheating among students in various schools has increased steadily over the past few decades. In fact, it has been estimated that the incidence of cheating in schools suggest that the majority of all students cheat at some point in their academic endeavour (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992). Researchers (e.g., Davis et al., 1992; McCabe & Trevino, 1997) asserted that as many as 80% to 90 of students cheat before graduation. Park (2003) stated that at least 50% of students cheat. In business literature, Kidwell, Wozniak, and Laurel (2003), and Chapman, Davis, Toy, and Wright (2004) found that 75% of students were reported cheating. Their findings are similar to the 63% found by Nonis and Swift (1998). The foregoing reveals that although the estimate of how many students that engages in academic dishonest behaviours varies dramatically, it also indicates that cheating is very pervasive.

Many students admit to cheating only once. For a substantial minority, the behaviour is repetitive (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). This phenomenon defined as intentional participation in deceptive conducts regarding one's academic work or the work of others (Kolanko, Clark, Heinrich, Olive, Serembus, & Sifford, 2006) has become so widespread that students and their parents have been observed to openly admit that stealing to pass examinations or to get ahead of others is expected. The foregoing suggests that cheating rates have risen consistently over the past few decades, coupled with a growing majority of students who believe that cheating is acceptable in some circumstances (Cizek, 1999; Schab, 1991). Others view it as a normal incidence and something ordinary. Although people abhor it, yet majority have committed it at one time or another in their academic endeavours. Symaco and Marcelo (2003) noted that academic dishonesty is a chronic problem that has successfully escaped a lasting solution regardless of institutional efforts to curb it. However, one of the many individual variables that have been linked to academic dishonesty is social anxiety.

Social anxiety represents feelings of aversive tension that results from worry over

real or imagined audience evaluations (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Most university students learn to cope with their concerns over grades, but some students seem to worry obsessively about their academic performance (Sarason & Sarason, 1990, as cited in Leary & Kowalski, 1995). For example, feelings of test anxiety are positively related to symptoms of social anxiety. Students who worry about their school work also tend to worry about embarrassing themselves in front of others (Wowra, 2007) and may choose to employ any means to avert it. Often, anxious students tend to learn to avoid social situations that trigger aversive feelings of anxiety. Wowra argued that a student's worry over failing school assignments represents a secondary reinforcer - he or she is really apprehensive of negative audience evaluations more so than failing a school examination *per se*. This worry and preoccupation over audience evaluations may lead to decrements in a student's ability to study and concentrate on examinations. The social anxiety hypothesis of cheating suggests, for example, that a highly anxious student compensates for anticipated decrements in concentration by bringing cheating devices into the examination venue.

There are numerous reports that anxiety is often associated with selective attention to threat cues. Socially anxious individuals are excessively concerned about negative evaluation by others. One may therefore predict that high social anxiety would be associated with academic dishonesty. Social anxiety is characterised by a marked concern about the impression one makes on others (Mansell, Clark, Ehlers & Chen, 1999).

Social anxiety disorder is the third most common psychiatric disorder and is associated with significant impairment in social, educational and vocational functioning (Liebowitz, Gorman, Fyer, & Klein, 1985). It can interfere with any aspect of life that evokes the spectre of evaluation by others, such as the ability to initiate or maintain social or romantic relationships, attend classes that require participation in discussion, take part in meetings at the workplace, or join social or recreational groups (Schneier *et al.* 1994). Individuals with social anxiety disorder are less likely to be married, more likely to terminate their education early, more likely to be unproductive at work or miss work because of their social anxiety, and more likely to receive financial assistance than persons without the disorder (Schneier *et al.*, 1992; Stein, McQuaid, Laffaye & McCahill, 1999). It is not surprisingly therefore that social anxiety disorder has been related to academic dishonesty. Moreover, such students that cheat during examinations may be able to do that partly for some sort of support some contexts provide.

Although the causes of increased academic dishonesty are unknown, some speculate it is due to more pressures for success (Callahan, 2004). Williams and Hosek (2003) asserted that both honest and dishonest students are rational and that the decision to cheat is not because of an impulsive action, but rather a conscious decision that the benefits of cheating outweigh the risks. Buckley, Wiese and Harvey (1998) found that the most effective predictors of student cheating were the probability of being caught and penalized, possessing high hostility or aggression characteristics, and being a man. Researchers (e.g., Pullen, Ortloff, Casey, & Payne, 2000; Chapman, Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004) reported that increased class size, where the perceived likelihood of being caught is lower, decreased surveillance. Haswell, Jubb and Wearing (1999) found that the willingness of students to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment fell dramatically when detection risk and significant penalties were introduced, with size of penalty exerting a greater influence than risk of detection. Impersonal relationships with professors, competition for jobs, gaining higher Grade Point Average (GPA) in order to enter graduate school, test importance and difficulty, close seating arrangements and a culture that appears to accept cheating as a normal part of life are some of the causes of dishonesty. McCabe and Trevino (1993) reported that if students perceive that others will report cases of their academic misconduct it will impact negatively on academic dishonesty. Decisions about academic dishonesty are influenced by societal and school norms and, most importantly, by the attitudes of students' friends. However, if students see their peers

successfully get away with cheating, they are more likely to cheat too (McCabe, 1999; McCabe & Trevino, 1997).

Moreover, if there is no stiff penalty for academic dishonesty many students might be motivated to engage in such behaviour. Sheard and colleagues (2002) reported that approximately 50% of surveyed students indicated they would do nothing if they observed a student cheating in an exam or assignment, which the authors attributed to students believing that no effective actions are available to those who become aware of others cheating. Meanwhile, numerous studies (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Nowell & Laufer, 1997; Haswell, Jubb, & Wearing, 1999) found that academic dishonesty is influenced by the likelihood of being reported and the severity of penalties. Iyer and Eastman (2005) asserted that this behaviour is motivated by the students' belief that it has a low negative impact, that is, they feel no one is hurt by the behaviour, low risk of getting caught, and that everyone does it.

Literature on the relationship between general contextual characteristics and academic dishonesty is sparse in Nigeria. Hence, it needs to be given more empirical consideration, especially at this time of notable social decay. Thus, three hypotheses were created to test the predictive relationship of social anxiety and the two contextual variables on academic dishonesty. The hypotheses are: social anxiety will significantly predict students' engagement in academic dishonest behaviours; perceived probabilities of not being caught will significantly predict students' engagement in academic dishonest behaviours; and perceived probabilities of not acting on perceived academic misconduct will significantly predict students' engagement in academic dishonest behaviours.

Method

Participants

The cross-sectional survey research design was employed to select a total of 210 participants from among Benue State University students that participated in the study. They consisted of 121 males and 89 female students. All levels of students were represented in the study, with the final year students having the highest representation of 51 students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 55, with a mean age of 33.10 years. The participants were predominantly Christians with the Tiv ethnic group constituting the highest representation of 157 participants, Idoma 96, and others where 43. All the participants were volunteers.

Instruments

Social Phobia Symptom Checklist.

Social anxiety was measured with the Social Phobia subscale of the Psychiatric Diagnostic Screening Questionnaire (Zimmerman, 2002). It is a self-report symptom checklist of emotional and behavioural problems defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The Social Phobia subscale is highly reliable and also demonstrated good construct validity in a series of validation studies (Zimmerman, 2002). It is a 15-item scale designed in a forced choice response of true or false that asks the participants to recall symptoms of social anxiety over the past 6 months. Sample items include:

"Did you worry a lot about embarrassing yourself in front of others?" and "Were you extremely nervous in social situations?" Eight items measure situation-specific forms of social worry, including "public speaking ... eating in front of other people ... using public restrooms ... writing in front of others ... saying something stupid when you were with a group of people ... asking a question when in a group of people ... [in] business meetings ... and parties or other social gatherings" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 6). Social anxiety scores were calculated by summing all *true* responses (range = 0 [low social anxiety] to 15 [high social anxiety]). The Social Phobia subscale also includes a cut off score of four symptoms.

Respondents who endorse four or more symptoms are deemed to be at significant risk for a diagnosis of social phobia.

Perceived Probability of not being caught Scale.

Perceived probability of not being caught was measured with a single item each. The participants were asked: "How would you rate the chances of students not being caught cheating during examinations in your school?" Response was on a 9-point scale (1-9). Its stability was established at 0.84.

Perceived probability of not acting on observed misconduct Scale.

Perceived probability of not acting on observed misconduct was also measured with a single scale where the participants were asked: "How would you rate the possibility of the authority not acting on observed academic misconduct in your institution?" Response was on a 7-point scale (1-9). Its stability was established at 0.71. Numerous authors (e.g., Abdel-Khalik, 2006; Schumacher, Gleason, Holloman, & McLeod, 2010) have used single-item scales in their respective studies.

Academic Dishonesty Scale.

Academic Dishonesty Scale was used to measure students' academic dishonest behaviour in their academic career. It consists of 10 behavioural items adapted from McCabe and Trevino (1997), which has been used by several other researchers (e.g., Bolin, 2004). Participants are asked to indicate how often they had engaged in each academically dishonest behaviour since beginning their university education using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not even one time* (1) to *many times* (5). The internal consistency reliability estimate based on the current study stands at alpha level of .86. Sample items includes: "Copied material and turned it in as your own work", "Collaborated on an assignment when the instructor asked for individual work".

Procedure

A total of 237 copies of questionnaire were administered to the students just before some of their lectures after the researcher had obtained permission from the lecturers for the various classes. Out of this number administered, only 221 copies were completed and returned representing 93.2 response rates. Out of this number returned, 11 were discarded due to improper completion and only 210 copies of the questionnaires were considered for analyses.

Design/Statistic

The design for the study was a cross sectional survey research design and a regression analysis was adopted to analyse the data.

Results

The descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables are reported in Table 1, while the results for the hierarchical regression analyses are reported in Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Age	33.10	7.61	-							
2 Gender	1.55	.50	-.01*	-						
3 Religion	1.82	.38	.03	.08	-					
4 Parents education	1.42	.50	-.18**	.26***	-.06	-				
5 Social anxiety	20.85	3.77	.11*	-.14*	-.07	-.23***	-			
6 PPBC	1.66	.48	.24***	-.21**	-.07	-.23***	.60	-		
7 PPNAOM	1.43	.50	-.07	.17**	-.05	-.58***	-.07	-.04	-	
8 Academic dishonesty	67.25	8.41	.08	-.04	-.06*	.18**	.40***	.33***	.46***	-

Note: A total of 210 undergraduate students completed the measures. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female); Religion (1 = Christianity, 2 = Others); Parents education (1 = low, 2 = high); Perceived probability of not being caught (1 = low, 2 = high); Perceived probability of not acting on observed misconduct (1 = low, 2 = high). Social anxiety and academic dishonesty are coded so that higher scores on these variables indicate higher social anxiety and academic dishonesty.

Table 2: Hierarchical regression analysis results

Variables	1	2	3	4
Age	.12	.08	.06	.05
Gender	-.09	-.06	-.04	-.06
Religion	-.04	-.01	-.00	.00
Parents education	.22**	.31***	.32**	.03
Social anxiety		.46***	.37**	.36***
PPBC			.16*	.12
PPNAOM				.49**
R Square	.04	.23	.24	.40
R Square Change	.06	.20	.02	.15
F Change	2.97	53.02	4.20	53.62
F value	2.97	13.58	12.19	20.82

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

The results of the analyses computed indicated that the control variables tested in the study contributed 3.6% of the variance in academic dishonesty (adjusted R). This implies that when all the control variables combine, they significantly predicted academic dishonesty $F(4, 205) = 2.97, p < .05$. However, among all these control variables, only parents' education predicted academic dishonesty. Social anxiety explained 23.1% of the variance in academic dishonesty, above and beyond that of the control variables. This result was significant, $F(5, 204) = 13.58, p < .001$. In the regression equation model, social anxiety predicted academic dishonesty among university undergraduates ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). This result is consistent with hypothesis 1 and was therefore upheld. The results of the study equally showed that perceived probability of being caught explained 24.3 of the variance in academic dishonesty, above and beyond that of the control variables and social anxiety. The result was statistically significant, $F(6, 203) = 12.19, p < .001$. In the regression equation model, perceived probability of being caught also predicted academic dishonesty ($\beta = .16, p < .05$). This result is consistent with hypothesis 2 and also was upheld. The results of the present study further revealed that perceived probability of not acting on observed academic misconduct contributed 39.9 of the variance in academic dishonesty above and beyond the control variables, social anxiety and perceived probability of being caught. This implies that it is statistically significant on academic dishonesty, $F(7, 202) = 20.82, p < .001$. In the regression equation model perceived probability of not acting on observed academic misconduct was equally significant ($\beta = .49, p < .001$). This is consistent with hypothesis 3 and was therefore confirmed.

Discussion

Consistent with hypothesis 1, social anxiety predicted academic dishonesty. This result may be explained that when individuals are anxious, may be to a pathological level as a result of worry over real or imagined audience evaluations of their performance, especially when they did not prepare very well for a test, such individuals may engage in a dishonest behaviour. This is because the individual is desperate to put up a 'good' performance so as not to disappoint or embarrass the test taker, parents or colleagues or ultimately to have a good grade. This result seems to be consistent with the study of Wowra (2007) which found that students who worry about their school work also tend to worry about embarrassing themselves in front of others and therefore may engage in dishonest behaviours so as to put up a fair performance. The present result also seems to be in line with that of Schneier and colleagues (1992) and Stein and colleagues (1999) which observed that individuals with social anxiety disorder are more likely to terminate their education early and more likely to be unproductive at work or miss work.

The results of the present study also confirmed hypothesis 2 that perceived probability of not being caught will significantly predict academic dishonesty. This result may be explained that every student is rational and wants to achieve success and if the environment is not such that is capable of check mating deviant behaviours, many may be tempted to take to academic dishonest behaviours. This result seems to be consistent with Buckley et al. (1998), Pullen and colleagues (2000); Chapman and colleagues (2004) which found that the most effective predictors of student cheating included the probability of being caught and that increased class size, where the perceived likelihood of being caught is lower is also related to academic dishonesty. The result also seem to be in agreement with that of Haswell, Jubb and Wearing (1999) which found that the willingness of students to engage in a variety of forms of plagiarism in a risk-free environment fell dramatically when detection risk and significant penalties were introduced. The result is also in line with the assertion of McCabe (1999); McCabe and Trevino (1997) that if students see their peers successfully get away with cheating, they are more likely to engage in similar behaviour.

Furthermore, the results of the present study supported hypothesis 3 that perceived probability of not acting on observed misconduct will significantly predict academic engagement. This result seems to be consistent with that of

Sheard and colleagues (2002) which reported that approximately 80 of surveyed students indicated they would do nothing if they observed a student cheating in a test because of their conclusion that no effective actions are available to those who become aware of others cheating. This result is also consistent with other numerous studies (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Nowell & Laufer, 1997; Haswell, Jubb & Wearing, 1999) which found that academic dishonesty is influenced by the likelihood of being reported and the severity of penalties. It also seems to agree with Iyer and Eastman (2008) who asserted that this academic dishonest behaviour is motivated by the students belief that no one is hurt by the behaviour, low risk of getting caught, and that everyone does it.

Implications of the study

Academic dishonest behaviour has become pervasive because of its contagious nature. When individuals are tensed to certain levels especially as a result of lack of preparedness they may take to dishonest behaviours during examinations. Also when the students are provided with cover such as having a large class size or when they are not closely monitored, they are more likely to engage in academic dishonest behaviours. Reverse is certainly the case when there are small and manageable class size or any other condition that guarantee close or tight monitoring. This goes to mean that very extensive class sizes that are evident in Nigeria are a breeding ground for academic dishonest behaviours because such class sizes could limit the chances of identifying students that indulge in such practice. Therefore government and other stakeholders should evolve strategies to ensure that none of such classes is allowed to take place in order to forestall sanity in our educational system.

Low perceived probability of being caught for academic dishonesty and low perceptions of the authority not acting on observed academic misconduct are difficult to deal with. Interventions aimed at improving on the perceived probability of being caught for academic dishonesty might include an increase in close monitoring, for low perceptions of the authority not acting on observed misconduct include an increase in sanctions. More so, it is evident that when students perceive that the authority does nothing to those caught cheating they are simply motivating such behaviours. This has become commonplace in that the level of decadence in the society has made such heinous crime look less harmful wherein such behaviours observed are not treated with all seriousness. This is often caused by corrupt invigilators or the offenders having some powerful men in authority, which predisposes the invigilator or teacher to avoidable punishment if he/she does the right thing of sticking to the rules of examination.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further researches

The limitations of the present study are many and varied. First is the problem often associated with all survey research studies (cross-sectional design) their inability to establish cause and effect relationship; experimental or longitudinal studies have been suggested if this is to be achieved. The researcher therefore acknowledges the limitation that causality cannot be claimed based on correlational patterns among the variables. Second, the participants for the study were sampled from a single university and so it will be unfair to conclude that it represents the large army of students across Nigeria. Thus, the finding of this study should be interpreted with caution. Third is that use of self-report data, especially for sensitive issues such as academic dishonesty, raises several doubts about the accuracy of the data. Multiple sources such as from peer or colleagues would have adjusted any form of faking by the participants.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the social anxiety and some contextual variables as predictors of academic dishonesty among university undergraduates. The findings of the study indicated that social anxiety, perceived probability of not being caught and perceived probability of the authority not acting on observed academic dishonesty had a main predictive effect on students' academic dishonesty. Every meaningful development hinges on quality education. It is a means by which citizens are equipped with the necessary attitudes, knowledge and skills that will enable them contribute meaningfully to nation building as well as human development. Cutting corners in this process would not only diminish the human potential, but would be a rape to the human dignity, which is fundamental for human capital development.

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