Narrowing the judgment-action gap: The case of student cheating

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The judgment-action gap: Do people’s judgments guide their actions?

Specific case: Cheating

Most students think cheating is wrong in general

Most students cheat at least once

Judgments and actions diverge in many cases

Evaluations and justifications are mere post-hoc rationalizations

The “wide-gap” perspective

The “narrow-gap” perspective

In most cases, judgments and actions are consistent

Some situations warrant violation of a general principle

Violating principles comes with confliction and guilt

STUDY 1

Do students think plagiarism is acceptable?
Do students plagiarize often?

30-minute online survey
N = 159 college students (M age = 19.77)
127 women, 30 men, 2 other responses

Students believe plagiarism is NOT acceptable

Describe actions on three most recent written assignments

Prompted to summarize a text within time limit
Similarity calculated using external plagiarism checker

Students avoided plagiarizing on most assignments

Narrowing the judgment-action gap may not be as wide as is sometimes assumed

STUDY 2

2A

When students cheat, are there compelling reasons for doing so?

60-minute structured interview
N = 68 college students (M age = 19.65)
49 women, 18 men, 1 other response

Described a recent act of cheating or plagiarism

Most students (53%) did not realize they were cheating

Students who viewed their acts as cheating were more likely to say they were wrong

58% would act differently in retrospective

Many students unknowingly cheated and thought cheating was wrong

% of students Reason for cheating
45% Academic results (e.g., grades)
42% Shortcomings of class
39% Social concerns (e.g., helping friend)
23% Insufficient time
13% Risk of sanctions

Students referenced multiple competing concerns as motivations for cheating

STUDY 2B

Do uninvolved third-person evaluators agree with these reasons?

60-minute structured interview
N = 60 college students (M age = 19.85)
40 women, 18 men, 2 other responses

Evaluated eight vignettes that each described a scenario from Study 2A (randomly assigned)

Positive correlation in evaluations
r(60) = .26, p = .042

Positive correlation in belief of whether act counts as cheating
r(60) = .36, p = .005

First- and third-person evaluations of acts

Illustrative example of similar considerations

First person
“Also wish I could have solved this on my own”

Third person
“He/She did all the work”

Were students in Study 2A just making excuses to make themselves feel better?
Third-party evaluations allow us to see that the reasons are compelling to others without personal stake.

STUDY 3

Do these reasons for and against cheating emerge in students’ real-time decisions?

Experiment: Lab essay writing competition
N = 30 college students (M age = 19.86)
23 women, 7 men

Given prompt on an unfamiliar topic
Must write up to 250 words within 10 minutes to win competition
Prompted by an undercover researcher

48% of participants refused the confederate’s suggestion to copy

Even under challenging circumstances, many students avoided plagiarizing

The confederate prompted participants to provide real-time justifications

% in Study 2A % in Study 3 Reason for cheating
45% 12% Academic results (e.g., winning contest)
42% 0% Shortcomings of class
39% 4% Social concerns (e.g., helping others)
39% 24% Lack of ability
23% 19% Insufficient time
13% 6% Risk of sanctions

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For relevant citations, see the handout. *Correspondence: twaltzer@ucsc.edu