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978-1-107-03973-5 - Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences: Case Studies and Commentaries

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Susan T. Fiske

Excerpt

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*Part I*

Academic Cheating

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## 1 Beyond the Immediate: Academic Dishonesty

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*Richard Abrams*

It was 1988 and I had been out of graduate school for two years when I encountered my first case of academic dishonesty (at least I had not suspected any dishonesty before that). The course was Experimental Psychology – a laboratory course like those at many universities where the centerpiece of the course is an independent experimental project of the student’s own design culminating in the submission of a complete write-up (in APA style, of course) of the experiment. (These days there are PowerPoint presentations in addition to the paper – and a relaxation of the APA style rules.)

A student who had been performing at an average level in the class turned in a report of an experiment on some aspect of memory. (At least I think it was about memory – isn’t that what people studied in the 1980s?) The paper was excellent – and that was the problem. How could someone who can write so well, think so clearly, and present results so succinctly receive only a C on my tests, where the biggest challenge is to remember the distinction between a Type I and a Type II error? I knew that something was amiss when one of the dependent variables that he reported revealed a grain of analysis finer than what would be possible with the reported number of participants. He reported the percentage of participants who responded in a particular way, but when converted to a number, the value was not a whole number. In other words, the data had come from a study with a greater number of participants than what he had reported. Eventually I found the article on which his paper was “based.”

When I confronted the student and suggested that not only had he not written the paper, but he hadn’t even collected the data, he was defensive. And in his defense he provided “proof” that he had written the paper: a printout showing that the file on his computer had been created one month before the end of the semester. Putting aside for the moment the ease with which one might spoof a file creation date (the student argued that since he had an Apple computer that was not possible), I pointed out that even if he had created the file on his computer one

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month in advance, that did not mean that he hadn't copied the paper. (In retrospect I suppose that the truth is that he had done the whole thing at the last minute and somehow believed that he only needed to convince me that that wasn't the case.)

As a new assistant professor, I consulted with others in my department on the appropriate course of action. The university did have a formal procedure for dealing with cases of academic dishonesty at the time, but it seemed as if the tradition was to handle such cases on a more "personal" individual basis – sending a student off to the judicial board seemed so impersonal, especially at a smallish expensive private university. And so I handled the case myself by assigning a failing grade on the paper (which resulted in his receiving a low but passing grade in the course). A tough break – but perhaps much easier to cope with than a trip to the judicial board. My decision turned out to have been a mistake.

Fast forward to the end of the next semester. Renovation work in the psychology building had just begun, and most of the faculty were avoiding the building when a knock came on my door from an adjunct instructor who was seeking a colleague of mine who was not in the building at the time. The instructor had a primary appointment as an administrator in the dean's office, but had taught a course in the psychology department that semester. Her experience with teaching undergraduates was somewhat limited, so she was seeking out a regular faculty member in the department for some advice: A student had submitted a final paper to her that seemed to be unusually well written for an undergraduate. She was wondering if that was typical of the level of our students. As it turns out, not only was the student the same one that I had dealt with a semester earlier; it was the same paper!

This time formal charges were brought against the student. It was learned that this was not the first time that such charges had been made – there had been a pattern of academic dishonesty that extended back in time (in addition to my experience with the student), a pattern that I had been unaware of because I had handled the situation locally. Eventually it was determined that the student's violations were so egregious that he was expelled from the university. But it was also clear during the proceedings that the same conclusion could have been reached a semester earlier – if I had reported the problem that I had encountered. The lesson: Even in a small university it is not possible for an individual department to see enough of the big picture to appropriately deal with a student's misbehavior. Since that time, when I have had concerns about academic dishonesty (and I should say that the cases are relatively infrequent, and have never been as extreme), I have always brought them to the appropriate college-level committee.

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## 2 Collaboration, Cheating, or Both?

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*Janette B. Benson*

During my first year as an assistant professor, while I was teaching an introductory child development class, two students requested to take a make-up exam. They both presented written documentation for their absence, following the instructor's policies stated in my syllabus. I arranged to have the teaching assistant (TA) proctor their make-up exam. The TA met both students, put them in separate but adjacent rooms, asked that all personal belongings be left outside the testing room, and instructed the students to submit the completed exam to a receptionist when they retrieved their belongings. The TA planned to pick up the completed exams from the receptionist and to score the multiple-choice section before returning both exams to me. The exam consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions, plus two essays. Each student wrote a predetermined "codename" on the exam pages so that the exams could be graded blindly, and then exam grades were recorded on a master sheet that linked the codename to the student ID number. After each exam, I would complete an item-analysis of the multiple-choice items to determine which items might be bad (e.g., poorly written, confusing), too easy, or even too difficult (e.g., less than 10% correct response) in order to maintain or discard them from the test bank I used for subsequent exams. The exams were graded by section, not by exam, to ensure consistency in applying the rubric for nonobjective items (e.g., short-answer and essays).

As I was recording the point totals by section for the two make-up exams I noticed that each student received the same total score – 77.5 points out of 100 – although scores for each section varied slightly (e.g., 40 and 41 points out of 49 on the multiple-choice section, respectively, for each student). Then I noticed that of the multiple-choice items that were marked incorrect for each student, 10 items for one student and 11 for the other, they both incorrectly answered the same six items, and each selected the same incorrect response option. I was stunned by this pattern and was suspicious that the two students collaborated, especially since these test scores were between one-half and one full grade

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higher than their previous exam score, but I wanted to be sure. As a new assistant professor, I had not previously had to deal with student cheating.

I consulted a seasoned departmental colleague who was also a statistician. I explained the situation and my suspicions and asked for his advice. He took one look at the response patterns of the multiple-choice items and said that the probability that each student could have selected the same incorrect response for the same six multiple-choice items without collaboration was extremely small, especially since some of the incorrect response alternatives they selected were not the most frequently incorrect responses selected by the class as a whole, as revealed by the results of the item analysis that I had shared with him. With a very knowing expression on his face he said, "It is very clear they cheated." When I asked him what I should do about it, he said, "Nothing. This probably isn't the first time, it won't be the last time they cheat, and if you pursue this, it will take an inordinate amount of your time. As a young assistant professor, this isn't worth your time. You should be doing your research, publishing, and not dealing with lazy students."

I had very mixed feelings upon receiving this advice. My seasoned colleague was correct about how a young assistant professor should be spending her time, but I also felt strongly that I should not let students get away with cheating as it was unfair to other students in my class, and I took seriously my role as an educator who should also be trying to uphold standards, model ethical behavior, and look for opportunities to make a positive impact.

I invited the students to come together to my office, where I showed them their scored exams and pointed out the remarkable similarities in their response patterns and scores. I then very idealistically asked them to imagine they were me and to tell me what conclusions they might draw from the exams. In my idealism I had hoped that when confronted with the evidence, they would admit their moral downfall, at which point I would meet them halfway to rectify the situation. Their response, almost in unison, was, "It is clear that we studied together, which explains why our responses are so similar." Clearly, this was not how I expected this "teachable moment" to unfold, and I kept hearing the voice of my elder colleague in my ear as my time was being sucked away.

In the meantime, I spoke with the TA and was disappointed to learn that she never returned to check up on the students or to be explicit with the receptionist that the two students should have no contact while taking the exam and when retrieving their personal items when submitting the completed exams. This was an important lesson learned by both the TA and myself to make clear that proctoring an exam also meant

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observing the test takers. We also noticed these two students stopped sitting together during class, and one would frequently miss class.

In the end, I did not give up on my hopes of a “teachable moment” and spent the time to seek out information about the institution’s policies regarding student cheating. I met separately with each student (deploying the “divide and conquer” strategy), and I repeatedly invited each to meet with the department chair if she felt that I was being unfair. One student met with the chair because she was afraid she would be expelled. I finally told each student that she could choose between the following courses of action: (a) I would turn everything over to the University Office of Citizenship and Community Standards and let the issue be resolved through the student judicial process; or (b) the students would admit that the exam results were invalid and that their scores from the first exam, a 67 and 71, would serve as a proxy for the score on the exam in question. In the end, neither student made an outright admission of cheating but chose the second option. The score on the last exam would determine whether the students would earn a passing grade of C– or have to repeat the class, which was required for the major. One student earned enough points on the last exam to pass the course with a C– grade, and the other student earned a solid D–.

At the start of the subsequent academic term, the student who passed the class showed up at my office hours and told me she had thought a lot about what happened, admitted that she had cheated, explained that she was “pressured” by the other student, and felt that she had learned an important lesson, including that she felt she owed me an apology because she wanted to participate actively in her major and did not want to avoid the other classes that I offered. She eventually sought me out for academic advising. The student that did not pass the class did not pass her other classes, was put on academic probation, and subsequently dropped out.

Almost 30 years have passed since this incident, and if faced with the same situation again, I most likely would take the same approach. I never once regretted that I ignored the advice of my elder colleague to save my time and look the other way. I continue to believe that part of my responsibility as a professional is to uphold personal and institutional ethical standards, to model academic ethical values to others, to capitalize on teachable moments, and to provide better advice to younger colleagues than was once offered to me.

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### 3 Grappling with Student Plagiarism

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*Scott Plous*

Some years ago, I was grading final papers for a seminar I teach on the psychology of prejudice, and I noticed an usually eloquent passage from a student who was not an especially strong writer. At first I was impressed with the poetic quality of the passage, but the more I thought about it, the less sure I was that this particular student could have written it, so I searched the web and found that the student had used a professional writer's material without attribution – a clear instance of plagiarism.

In the case study that follows, I'll describe my three-part response and conclude with a few words about why my response fell short of a comprehensive solution.

*Part 1: The student.* After discovering the act of plagiarism, I promptly emailed the student, pointing out that sections of her paper matched unattributed sources verbatim and constituted plagiarism. I then asked her to email me a list of all passages taken directly from other people's work, along with a citation or web address for each original source. I also wrote that even though I had provisionally given her a score of zero for the paper, I hoped that there was a simple explanation for what I found, and I assured her that I was fully committed to handling the problem as fairly as possible.

In less than an hour, the student replied that she was alarmed by my email message because she believed that she had cited all sources adequately, and because her paper did not, as far as she knew, include any direct quotes from other sources. She then asked me to identify the problematic passages so that we could clear up the matter as soon as possible.

Later that day, I sent her details documenting the plagiarism I had discovered, and I once again asked her to list any other such cases so that I could assess the scope of the problem and understand what went wrong. Then, silence.

After nearly a month had passed, I emailed the student one last request for information, but once again I received no reply, at which point her



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course grade became permanent. The ultimate result of this episode was that a student whom I had previously admired, and who had seemed destined to earn a grade of A– or B+ in the seminar, instead received a D– and ended the course in disgrace.

*Part 2: The instructor.* I'll never know whether this case involved an act of deliberate plagiarism, an innocent error, or something in between, but the next time I taught the seminar, I resolved to prevent similar cases from occurring. Perhaps the most important step I took – one that I would encourage all instructors to take – was to address plagiarism explicitly in the seminar syllabus. In my revised syllabus, I included a section referencing the Wesleyan University Honor Code, asked students to abide by the code, and offered these guidelines on writing assignments:

All papers, journal entries, and presentations for this class must be original – not reprinted, excerpted, or adapted from existing work (e.g., papers for other classes, books, articles, web pages). Similarly, any text, tables, figures, or images reproduced from other sources must include clear reference citations, and all quoted passages must use quotation marks to indicate that they are quotations. If you're not sure about how to reference something, please ask me rather than running a risk of violating Wesleyan's Honor Code.

I also discuss these guidelines with students before they write their first paper, and I've posted the revised syllabus online for other instructors to adapt and use as they see fit. Since adding this information to the syllabus six years ago, several students have consulted with me to make sure their citations were appropriate, and to the best of my knowledge, none have committed plagiarism.

*Part 3: The institution.* A year or two after I changed my seminar syllabus, Wesleyan decided to revise its honor code, and as luck would have it, I was appointed to serve as faculty representative to the task force drafting the revision. At the time, the existing honor code made relatively little distinction between plagiarism and cheating on exams, but after my encounter with plagiarism, I had come to understand that plagiarism and cheating on exams were different enough from each other to warrant separate treatment. Whereas cheating on exams is almost always intentional, plagiarism can be the unwitting result of carelessness or a failure to understand the importance of quotation marks and academic standards of attribution (e.g., that slight paraphrasing does not make borrowed material one's own).

I therefore proposed that the university honor code treat plagiarism and cheating on exams separately, which I'm pleased to say it now does. In addition, Wesleyan now asks faculty advisers to define and discuss

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plagiarism with incoming first-year students, and the new Honor Code includes a detailed description of plagiarism as:

the presentation of another person's words, ideas, images, data or research as one's own. Plagiarism is more than lifting a text word-for-word, even from sources in the public domain. Paraphrasing or using any content or terms coined by others without proper acknowledgement also constitutes plagiarism.

*Epilogue: Why this solution doesn't entirely solve the problem.* My three-part response to plagiarism addressed the problem at the level of the student, instructor, and institution, but it ignored a key ethical issue that takes place at the level of the educational system itself: the greater scrutiny some students face when it comes to the detection of plagiarism. In this particular case, for example, what led me to suspect plagiarism in the first place was that the student in question seemed unlikely to have written such an eloquent passage. If, in contrast, a student with strong writing skills had plagiarized the same passage, I probably would have been impressed and never thought to check whether or not the work was original.

Indeed, the issue isn't simply that students are treated differently, but that students who enter college with weak writing skills and prior educational disadvantages are at greatest risk of being caught plagiarizing. Thus, earlier disadvantages become compounded – disadvantages that may have contributed to my seminar student receiving a course grade of D–, which itself may carry further consequences down the road.

What can be done to treat students more fairly? One answer is to analyze all student work uniformly with plagiarism detection software or services such as Turnitin, but that solution is time consuming, prone to false negatives, and doesn't alter the fact that exceptionally high-quality work will continue to arouse more instructor suspicion when it comes from unexceptional students. A second answer is for instructors to level the playing field by checking exceptional work regardless of who submits it, although that solution is undoubtedly easier said than done. For now, the best I can say is that I continue to grapple with this challenge, and I hope that this brief case study will help other instructors do the same.