

THREE FUZZY AREAS IN THINKING ABOUT ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

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Abstract

The way we think about academic misconduct shapes how we deal with it. A review of literature from 1932 to the present reveals three areas where fuzzy thinking can undermine efforts to achieve goals related to academic integrity. These fuzzy areas are (1) toggling between moral and administrative views of academic misconduct, (2) approaching academic misconduct as the outcome of rational judgment, and (3) assuming students regard cheating as immoral. Avoiding fuzzy thinking in these areas enables educators to fine-tune their approaches to deterrence and consequence, to build stronger and more just cultures of integrity at their institutions.

Fuzzy Area One is whether academic misconduct should be regarded as 'wrong' for reasons that are administrative or moral. While rarely acknowledged, this distinction is baked-in to how institutions regard the goals of their academic integrity policies, and what range of responses to academic misconduct they develop and employ.

The administrative view is often represented when academic misconduct is conceptualized in research and policy as an inventory of specific behaviors, e.g., plagiarism, crib notes, changing margin size to make a paper look longer. By the administrative view, ignorance is no defense. Culpable ignorance policies hold students responsible for knowing the rules and impose consequences regardless of intentionality. Administrative approaches protect program integrity, which can be damaged by any form of academic misconduct.

Concerns about academic misconduct often also take a moral tone, for instance, when focused on the 'wrong' of taking unfair advantage. By

this conception, integrity policies protect honest students and seek to create communities that inculcate honesty as a moral value. In practice, educators and researchers frequently toggle between administrative and moral conceptions of misconduct. This can be seen in policy preambles and article introductions that approach academic integrity as a moral abstraction and then treat cheating as an inventory of behaviors without regard for intentionality or seriousness. As an example, Galloway (2012) begins by lamenting that "the majority of students report it is wrong to cheat, but most do it anyway ... Why are so many students willing to engage in this behavior?" The article then toggles to an analysis of results from a behavior inventory that takes no account of intentionality or seriousness.

While both the administrative and moral conceptions of academic misconduct have merit, it can be misleading to frame academic misconduct as a moral issue but measure it as an administrative one. Before considering measures such as 'zero-tolerance' or 'three strikes,' or mentoring, reflection, and restorative practice, institutions should be clear about where their integrity policies prioritize the preservation of program integrity and where they prioritize moral aims such as building cultures of honesty.

Fuzzy Area Two is whether students cheat based on rational judgment. This may seem like a strange assertion, since we often automatically assume that humans are rational actors. A tenacious legacy of the cognitive revolution in psychology is that the most influential theoretical models of cheating psychology are still couched entirely in cognitive-rationality.

Students are held to be “rational, utility-maximizing agents who decide to cheat by comparing its benefits and costs” (Bisping, Patron, & Roskelley, 2008, p. 5) and whose behaviors entail premeditated intentionality (Ogilvie & Stewart, 2010). These views are rooted in Rational Choice Theory (Sullivan, 2006), Deterrence Theory (Stafford & Warr, 1993), the Theory of Planned Behavior (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), and the Theory of Reasoned Action (DeVries & Ajzen, 1971).

Only since Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in 2002 for his insights into the non-rational nature of decision-making (Kahneman, 2011) have non-rational factors begun receiving consideration in published literature on cheating; these include *automaticity* (Harding Carpenter, & Finelli, 2012), *emotion and intuition* (McTernan, Love, & Rettinger, 2014; Murdock, Beauchamp, & Hinton, 2008; O’Rourke, Barnes, Deaton, et al., 2010), and *social contracts* (Barnhardt, 2014; Barnhardt & Ginns, 2017; Brent & Atkisson, 2011; Murdock, Miller, & Kohlhardt, 2004).

Taking a balanced view of the rational and non-rational aspects of academic misconduct broadens thinking about approaches to prevention. The assumption that academic dishonesty stems from rational judgment supports preventative measures that emphasize the cost/benefit of cheating or that feature logical exhortations. Allowing, instead, that cheating may also stem from non-rational factors supports preventative measures focused more on managing perceptions and building relationships.

Fuzzy Area Three is whether students agree that cheating is immoral. The very phrasing ‘whether students do / do not agree that cheating is immoral’ is already misleading. While copious evidence shows that most students think cheating is immoral, in general (e.g., Josephson Institute, 2000 – 2012), research over the last

ninety years also shows that this belief can be abandoned under certain circumstances.

Domain theory (Turiel, 1983) holds that young people view rules as being either moral or conventional. Rules occupy the moral domain when they involve harm or benefit to self or others, whereas they occupy the conventional domain when they originate in tradition, custom, or administrative considerations. For instance, in a related study, Thornberg (2008) found that students did not passively accept school rules as inherently moral; they judged “moral transgressions as wrong regardless of the presence or absence of rules” (p. 49). This is to say that moral judgment can be internal to the individual and specific to a given context.

At the macro level, most students think cheating is immoral. Similarly, most people think ‘breaking the law’ is immoral, in general terms. But we can easily think of circumstances that would make it appropriate to break the law. Likewise, students can disconnect their generalized beliefs about the immorality of cheating from specific acts of misconduct in class contexts that they regard as lacking moral validity. Taking this view, institutions may choose to focus more attention on shaping student perceptions of learning experiences as just vs. unjust or beneficial vs. harmful, with approaches such as building positive student-teacher relationships (Barnhardt & Ginns, 2017), designing classes around mastery goals (Murdock et al., 2004), designing programs that leverage the power of school culture (Crittenden, Hanna, & Peterson, 2009), and esteeming the credibility and competence of teachers (Anderman, Cupp, & Lane, 2010).

Being conscious of fuzziness in the aims and assumptions around academic misconduct mentioned above can help educators clarify and achieve the goals of their academic integrity policies.

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