WHAT'S THE HARM? THE PROFESSOR WILL NEVER KNOW: UNDERSTANDING HOW STUDENTS JUSTIFY PARTICIPATING IN THE "GREY AREAS" OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

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Abstract

Most students do not engage in serious cheating, but many engage in seemingly insignificant transgressions. These trivial violations, such as unauthorized collaboration or sharing what is on a quiz, are difficult to catch and sanction. Moreover, regardless of the seriousness of the violation many professors are reluctant to investigate and sanction cases they do identify (Jendrek, 1989; Singhal, 1982). As such, we argue that a proactive approach to academic integrity is more effective than a post-hoc punitive approach. Adopting a prevention focus can also reduce one's likelihood of sliding down the slippery slope (Welsh et al., 2015), which is the phenomenon by which small violations pave the path to increasingly more significant major ethical violations (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). To be proactive, however, requires that we understand not only the specific scenarios in which students engage in trivial, hard to detect violations, but what drives their willingness to engage in academic integrity more generally.

In this study we used responses from 44 students at a Canadian University who participated in one of four computer-facilitated focus groups to create a catalogue of scenarios in which students might consider it to be acceptable to engage in specific types of trivial violations. We then administered an online survey to 856 students at the same university. In the survey we asked students to evaluate the extent to which they felt each scenario was acceptable (e.g. asking a friend if they were on the right track or comparing final answers but not how they arrived at the answer when completing an individual assignment). More than a quarter of the students also provided open-ended comments at the end of the survey about their thoughts on academic integrity in the university in general.

We examined the students' qualitative and quantitative responses using mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) and neutralization theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) to categorize why students violated academic integrity. Importantly, we found that the mechanisms students used to justify why it was acceptable to push the boundaries on specific questionable behaviour differed from those they used to justify violating academic integrity more generally. By regressing self-reported rates of academic integrity violations on a measure of students' willingness to engage in grey area violations, we also demonstrated that the slippery slope effect occurs in academia; students who found it acceptable to violate academic integrity in more "grey area" situations also engaged in more trivial and non-trivial academic integrity violations in general.

Our study contributes to the theories of moral disengagement and neutralization in two important ways. First, we identified several ways students used the mechanisms of moral disengagement and neutralization theory to justify violations of academic integrity that to

our knowledge had not been previously identified. These included rationalizing their behavior 1) because they convinced themselves that there were no consequences and 2) to avoid being the victim. In addition, similar to drawing on higher loyalties (e.g. friends) to rationalize being academically dishonest, we also identified the process of justifying actions as meeting the higher purpose of learning. Second, we demonstrated that while students predominantly displaced responsibility when speaking about violating academic integrity in general, when they were confronted with evaluating the acceptability of specific scenarios, explanations that relied on displaced responsibility and condemning the condemners were not among the most acceptable solutions. In short, students drew on different mechanisms to justify their actions at the micro versus macro level of behavior.

Our analysis also showed that this process appears to unfold over time with students who had been in the program longer periods of time showing greater moral disengagement with respect to the three seemingly minor transgressions we analyzed. We also showed that higher levels of moral disengagement in specific behaviors correlated not only with higher levels of engagement in those questionable behaviors, but higher levels of engagement in other minor as well as more serious violations. We argue that these findings demonstrated the importance of not turning a blind eye to seemingly harmless minor transgressions, as in accordance with the notion of the slippery slope, these minor transgressions appeared to be the gateway for more serious transgressions. If students were working collaboratively on individual assignments, relying on notes from others and sharing information about quizzes, then they were also more likely to plagiarize and submit work that it was not their own.

Finally, recognizing that small trivial violations are challenging to detect and monitor we offer three tactics that either undermine or neutralize the mechanisms of moral disengagement that students used to justify their actions. Our suggestions at the pedagogical level speak to mechanisms that students used to justify their actions in specific violations and those at the program level speak to mechanisms that students used to justify their actions more generally.

References

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