

Conducting Research on Academic Dishonesty

Research on academic dishonesty provides an important source of information on its causes and creates a basis for developing interventions to promote academic integrity, prevent academic dishonesty, and rehabilitate offending students. However, research on academic dishonesty can itself raise ethical issues, as illustrated in the following vignettes. These cases are based on research designs that have been used in published studies.

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Research Vignette 1: To study the effect that anticipated reward might have on cheating, Professor Anne Nova conducted an experiment in which college students were promised either a large reward, a moderate reward, a small reward, or no reward to solve 20 difficult anagrams. Extensive pretesting showed that 90% of students could solve no more than three of the anagrams and that the operational definitions of the reward levels were valid. To give each experimental participant an opportunity to cheat, the research assistant conducting the experimental sessions supposedly remembered something that she had left in another room and went to get it, telling the research participant that she would be back in 10 min. As she left the room, she “accidentally” left a clearly marked answer key for the anagrams exposed to the participant’s view. When the research assistant returned 10 min later, she told the participant that time was up and collected the participant’s answer sheet. She then thoroughly debriefed the participant. Dr. Nova computed each participant’s cheating score as the number of anagrams correctly solved minus 3.

Research Vignette 2: Professor N. D. Field was also interested in the possible effects of anticipated reward on cheating, but wanted to study those effects

in a natural setting. To do so, he used two of the multiple-choice tests he administered to his class, one worth 10% of the final grade and the other worth 25% of the final grade. Each test had the same number of items. Two class sessions after the administration of each test, Dr. Field told his students that he had not had the time to score the tests, but that he wanted them to know the results. Therefore, he told them, he would give each student his or her answer sheet, read off the correct answers, and have students score their own exams. He did not tell the students that he had copied the answer sheets. As he read off the answers, Dr. Field focused on the papers on his lectern and did not look at the class. Dr. Field computed each student's cheating score as the difference between the student's score on the copied answer sheet and the score the student reported after self-scoring the test. Dr. Field used the scores reported by the students in computing course grades and took no action against students whose self-reported scores differed from their original scores.

Breaking Standards of Morality When Studying Morality

Donelson R. Forsyth

Why do people sometimes do things that violate widely held moral principles? Why do they deliberately underpay their taxes? Break vows of fidelity in the marital relationships? Tell lies to loved ones? Cheat on tests? Researchers who wish to answer these questions often face a pernicious moral dilemma, for in their quest to study morality, they may themselves act in morally dubious ways. In the two vignettes, for example, investigators wanted to understand why students cheat, but in doing so, they themselves misled research participants.

To study morality by conducting studies that violate basic moral principles is certainly ironic, but is it unethical? Even if studies of morality escape the special scrutiny that their subject matter suggests, they should at least comply with the professional standards that apply to all research studies involving human participants. Although ethical judgments are a personal matter and reflect each individual's moral beliefs and values, through discourse and debate the field has reached consensus on the value of a risk-benefit approach as a means of organizing the myriad factors that must be considered when evaluating a study's moral feasibility. Both studies can potentially yield insights into the causes of a poorly under-

stood social behavior, but both may also lead to psychological harm, invasion of privacy, manipulation, and legal retaliation. To evaluate these two studies one must weight risks against benefit, as one would in evaluating any project. If this review identifies a substantial potential for risk, then the procedures ultimately chosen by the investigator must be demonstrably superior to alternative, and less risky, research strategies.

Consider the two studies' possible benefits. If dozens of prior studies have already offered convincing evidence of the tendency for people to cheat more when the benefits of successful cheating are greater, then the need for this work is questionable. Moreover, even though the specific finding may be a novel one, its scientific value depends on its conceptual implications. If the results of the study resoundingly disconfirm some prior theory of moral behavior while adding support to an alternative and widely disputed view, then the work's scientific impact is greater than if the study is disconnected from any conceptual framework. The integrity of the study's methods, too, directly determine its scientific value and, indirectly, its ethical value. A badly done study, by wasting participants' time and holding up progress in science, becomes morally suspect by creating only costs with no benefit. Finally, some people may also feel that studies that yield useful information, such as suggestions for creating learning situations that do not pressure students into cheating, are more valuable than studies that have few practical implications.

Both studies also create the potential for risk, for they involve deception, invasion of privacy, and the withholding of consent. Society, in general, condemns deceptive practices, and researchers are not exempted from this norm. The researchers in both studies do not just withhold information from participants, but mislead participants about the nature and purpose of the situation. Both studies, the field study in particular, also fail to provide participants the opportunity to give their consent to participate. In the laboratory study, the consent form could describe the nature of the situation and warn participants that they may experience anxiety and tension as a result of participation. In the field study, no consent form was apparently used, and so participants were not warned of the potential for duress and given the opportunity to decline participation. In neither study, however, were participants fully informed prior to giving their consent. The entire point behind informed consent is that researchers give participants the opportunity to decide for themselves if they will participate after they are fully informed regarding the benefits to be gained and the possible costs sustained. When studies involve deception, consent is not informed.

Both studies also subjected participants to stress. The layperson, hearing of the methods used in the studies, may respond that in both the participants are not subjected to pressures any different from that experienced in many everyday situations. Moreover, the participants themselves could freely choose to act in accordance with the dictates of morality, or they could instead decide to cheat in order to earn a better score or test grade. Psychologists recognize, however, that

such situations are coercive ones, and some participants may have experienced anxiety and self-condemnation after cheating. The magnitude of these negative consequences will vary, in part, on the nature of the debriefing used in the research. Although debriefing is mentioned only in the laboratory study, one would assume that both studies provided participants with additional information about the nature of the study and its implications at the conclusion of the experimental session. A careful debriefing, in which participants rights are fully restored and any possible upset replaced with positive feelings toward themselves and the researcher, can go a long way in tipping the risk–benefit calculation back in favor of the project.

The researcher in the field study, by using the researcher's own students as research participants, confronts an addition set of moral complexities. That researcher can claim a personal right to take actions that will help the students learn about psychology's theories, findings, and methods. However, the researcher who studies his or her own students is caught in a conflict of dual roles. The researcher may be a scientist seeking truth, but as a teacher has a special obligation to protect the students. When an instructor acts in ways that violates the trust of students, the instructor can potentially undermine the relationship that makes learning possible.

Given that the studies both create the potential for harm to participants, both researchers should have considered less risky methodologies before settling on the methods they eventually used. They could, for example, have made use of role-play methods in which participants were asked to imagine themselves in a testing situation, correlational methods in which participants reports of past cheating actions were related to the importance of the test, or qualitative approaches involving a small number of willing participants who provide detailed personal information about past instances of cheating. The researchers may, however, have been justified in rejecting these alternatives because they may not yield valid results for this particular hypothesis. The role-play responses of participants may tell us little about how people actually act when tempted to cheat, the self-reports may cast them in a too favorable a light, and journals in the field may not publish evidence generated using qualitative methods.

These concerns for benefits, risks, and alternative methods apply to all studies involving human participants, but it may be that the studies that described two vignettes, because they investigate a moral behavior, are held to more stringent ethical standards than most. When investigators want to study helping behavior, they may create a false emergency and see if people react. Those who study aggression may give participants the opportunity to retaliate against another person. However, when studying moral behavior, investigators must perform the untoward actions that they themselves are studying. Such work may earn a swift moral condemnation because the investigator's violation of societal standards of morality is particularly flagrant. The work itself is based on people's condemnation of certain types of behavior, yet the investigators carry out those very same actions in

their work. Their work creates the impression that they have put themselves above, or at least outside, the regulatory social system that they are studying. This extra ethical objection, however, overlooks the intentions of the researcher. The investigators are not seeking personal gain, but are impelled by a motivation that society applauds: the quest to extend understanding. If anything, they deserve special approval, for they must violate principles that they may personally believe in order to reach scientifically commendable goals.

In closing, this analysis assumes that researchers have a shared set of values concerning research and ethics, and this assumption may not be tenable. As studies of individual differences in ethical philosophy indicate, people differ widely in terms of their reliance on moral principles and the weight they assign to human consequences when making moral choices. Some investigators may insist that their actions be consistent with fundamental moral principles that are exceptionless, and so they would not themselves carry out research that violates those principles and they would condemn others that do so as well. Still other investigators may base their choices of research on self-interest alone, and so would not carry out studies that place them at risk professionally, financially, socially, and legally. However, others may be so dedicated to the analysis of social processes that they feel justified in stepping outside the bounds of moral propriety to extend that knowledge.

Dishonest Studies of Dishonesty: Are They Ethical? Are They Legal?

Zick Rubin

If we are to combat academic dishonesty effectively, we must try to understand it. By exploring the effects of an anticipated reward on cheating, the studies described in these vignettes address one piece of the puzzle of academic dishonesty, and so there are good reasons to conduct studies of this sort. Yet, I fear that the researchers often fail to recognize the central irony inherent in studies like these—that in their effort to study academic dishonesty, the researchers are engaging in academic dishonesty themselves. Indeed, although the researchers don't like to think about it, they may even be acting unlawfully.

The research in the first vignette is pervaded by lies. As part of her experimental manipulation, Professor Nova makes promises to her student research participants that she has no intention of keeping—the promised rewards never arrive. She sets

up a problem-solving session under false pretenses, telling the students that she is studying anagram solving when she really is studying something quite different. She asks her research assistant to do her best to deceive—to tell students she had “left something” in another room (when she had not), to “accidentally” (but actually very intentionally) leave behind an answer key.

These deceptions may seem innocuous. Indeed, in the larger scheme of things, they are relatively innocuous, because Professor Nova and her assistant know that at the end of the session they will explain to the participants just what they had done and why. Such full explanation undoubtedly takes much of the sting out of the deceptions and distinguishes the researcher’s lies from those of students who cheat. Cheating students do not do so in the knowledge that they will come clean at the end of the day. However, the relative innocuousness of Professor Nova’s deceptions should not obscure the facts that they are deceptions and are, by any reasonable meaning of the term, instances of academic dishonesty.

The academic dishonesty in the second vignette is perhaps more subtle. The tests are real tests, and they really are worth 10% and 25% of the final grade. Although Professor Field’s lies are less obvious than Professor Nova’s, there is academic dishonesty nevertheless: The professor has secretly copied the answer sheets and will score the tests himself. Yet, he implies to the students that he will not be scoring them (“he didn’t have time”).

Although there may be less overt deception in the second vignette than in the first, the study seems far more objectionable. Whereas in the first vignette the researchers know that they will explain all at the end of the day, Professor Field apparently decided that debriefing would make for a sticky situation. So he forgoes any debriefing, and instead uses the students’ self-reported grades—some of which he knows to have been inflated by cheating—to compute their real course grades. One may wonder what the university administration would think if it knew that Professor Field had—in the service of hassle-free research—not only intentionally elicited cheating but also set up a situation in which cheating did pay. One may wonder, too, what the honest students would think if they learned the truth.

In conducting studies like these, the researchers should consider not only whether they are ethical but also whether they are legal. Every state recognizes civil actions for such torts as misrepresentation, fraud, invasion of privacy, and infliction of emotional distress. A student in Professor Nova’s study who was led to cheat—entrapped, he might claim, by the carefully planted answer sheet—and shaken by it might well have such a cause of action. Informed consent from adult (i.e., nonminor) students might be a good defense, but it’s hard to see how fully informed consent can be given when the study involves deceptions of this sort. In the case of Professor Field’s study, it might be the honest student who has the grievance. She might claim with some justification that her contract with the college, as set forth in the student handbook, was breached when the professor awarded course grades that rewarded cheating and, at least in relative terms, penalized honesty.

Students could undoubtedly bring lawsuits in such cases, and under some circumstances might even win them—especially if the aggrieved student had a mother or father who was a lawyer who decided to make something of it. At times, when universities are scared to death of sexual (and racial, ethnic, etc.) harassment lawsuits, perhaps they should be a little more concerned about lawsuits brought by students who are induced to cheat under false pretenses. Indeed, many harassment lawsuits are based on conduct that is more innocuous than inducing impressionable students to behave immorally.

Even psychological researchers who are highly attuned to ethical concerns often seem to be oblivious to such legal considerations. The researchers seem to assume that there is some special sort of academic freedom that allows us to commit as researchers dishonest acts that we could not get away with if we were, say, stockbrokers or real estate agents.

However, such confidence may be misplaced. Recent court cases have emphasized that even members of the press may be held liable for the use of dishonest reporting techniques. For example, in the recent case of *Food Lion, Inc. v. Capital Cities/ABC, Inc.*, investigative reporters who used undercover techniques were found to be liable for certain torts. The First Amendment gives the press a wide berth, but it does not legitimate fraud. Similarly, there is no “researcher privilege” that legitimates deception—nor am I sure that there should be.

Do we really need to engage in academic dishonesty to study academic dishonesty? Perhaps we do. Although a great deal can undoubtedly be learned by thoroughly honest research methods—such as surveys, observational studies, or entirely honest experiments (see Rubin, 1973)—there may be aspects of academic dishonesty that can most effectively be explored only by dishonest means.

I am not an absolutist about honesty. Honesty is most often the best policy, but it must sometimes give way to other values, such as self-defense, the sparing of others’ feelings, and the creation of hope—even false hope—when that is all that is left to a person. Yet, the value of academic integrity is undermined if we too readily grant ourselves a “research exemption.” If we are going to lie in the pursuit of truth, we should at least be honest with ourselves about what we are doing. When we conduct studies like these, we are engaging in academic dishonesty. In each case, we should consider very carefully whether the dishonesty is justified.

REFERENCES

- Food Lion, Inc. v. Capital Cities/ABC, Inc.*, 984 F Supp. 923 (D. North Carolina 1997), aff’d, 194 F. 3d 505 (4th Cir. 1999).
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