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# Effect of Perspective, Type of Student, and Gender on The Attribution of Cheating

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**The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute one's own actions to the situation, while attributing others' actions to their personality. This tendency has been observed in a variety of social situations; however, no research has been reported which tests whether this occurs in judgments related to cheating. Because cheating is on the rise on both college and high school campuses, it would be helpful to understand this behavior better. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to determine whether this error occurs in judgments about cheating. When people cheat themselves or observe others cheating, do they attribute it to their personality or the situation? Participants in the study included 60 male and female high school and 52 college students. A cheating instrument was developed with three scenarios, which had someone else (other) cheating, and three parallel scenarios, which had the reader (self) cheating. Three questions were asked after each scenario to determine (1) how negatively the students rated the behavior, (2) how much they attributed the cheating to the individual's personality, or (3) how much they attributed it to the situation. The results indicated that cheating behavior was considered significantly more negative by the college students than by the high school students; the difference between the two groups of female students was greater than for the two groups of male students. Of all of the groups, female college students rated the cheating most negatively. All students rated the cheating behavior as more attributable to others' personality and more attributable to their own situation. These effects support the fundamental attribution error for cheating and provide insight into human social/cognitive behavior. Educating students about the fundamental attribution error as it relates to cheating could have a positive effect in reducing cheating. © 2000 Oklahoma Academy of Science**

## INTRODUCTION

Cheating has become a major concern on many high school and college campuses. The frequency of cheating is reportedly on the rise. Davis and coworkers (1) reported that as many as 60% of the 6,000 students tested said that they had cheated on at least one examination. Baird (2) reported cheating rates of 76%, and Davis & Ludvigson (3) found rates as high as 70%. McCabe and Bowers (4) found that students who went to institutions with an honor code reported less cheating than did students from schools without an honor code. In addition, Davis and coworkers (1) found that students from smaller schools reported less cheating. Most

students agree that cheating is wrong, but many do so anyway. Drake (5) reported that stress and the pressure for good grades are important variables that affect cheating. The stress that students feel often goes undetected by faculty members (6), and today these causes of stress are still very much relevant.

Davis & Ludvigson (3) investigated the techniques that students use to cheat, as well as whether or not students thought teachers should try to deter cheating. Some students use cheat sheets or hide answers in pens, shoes, hats, or other items. Other students have reported sophisticated systems of using hand and foot signals to others to com-

municate various answers. Some students have recorded their answers on CDs or tapes and listened to the answers during the test. One of the most recent developments includes using clear lip gloss on top of penciled-in scantron answers; to the teacher it looks normal, but the scantron machine reads all answers as correct (7). When teachers detect cheating, they often fault the student, without acknowledging their own role in allowing it to occur.

The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute one's own actions to the situation, while attributing others' actions to their personality (8). For example, if you observe someone else coming in late, you might label him or her as rude, whereas, if you arrive late you might blame it on the traffic or something in your situation. This tendency has been observed in a variety of social situations; however, no research that tests whether the fundamental attribution error occurs in judgments related to cheating has been reported. Such research could provide insight into the dynamics of cheating and, perhaps, help reduce the frequency of cheating.

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether the fundamental attribution error occurs in cheating. When people cheat, do they attribute it to their personality or to the situation? When people observe others cheating, do they attribute it to the other person's personality or the situation? Do college and high school students have different views about cheating? Do male and female students view cheating in themselves and others the same? To answer these questions, three independent variables were used: type of student (college vs. high school), gender (male vs. female), and perspective (self vs. other). There were three dependent variables that were measured: (a) attitudes toward cheating; (b) the attribution to personality; and (c) attribution to the situation.

There were 3 null hypotheses which were developed: (a) attribution of causes for one's cheating behavior will not differ from evaluations of others' cheating behavior; (b) college and high school students will not differ in evaluating cheating behavior; and

(c) male and female students will not differ in evaluating cheating behavior.

There were also 3 research hypotheses developed: (a) the fundamental attribution error will occur in cheating situations with people attributing cheating of others to their personality and attribute their own cheating (self) as due to the situational factors; (b) college students will disapprove of cheating more than high school students; and (c) male and female students will evaluate cheating similarly.

## METHOD

**Participants:** Altogether there were 112 randomly selected students who participated in the research. Participants were 60 high school students from Classen School of Advanced Studies (26 boys and 34 girls). Their average age was 16. In addition, there were 52 college students from University of Central Oklahoma (15 men and 37 women). Their average age was 29 and they were treated in accordance with ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association.

**Cheating Inventory:** Six scenarios involving cheating were developed for the study: three described someone else cheating, and three similar situations described the reader as cheating. Each scenario was followed by three questions. The first question asked was: "How do you evaluate the behavior described in this episode?" Participants marked anywhere along a line to indicate how negatively they viewed the behavior from "Not at all negative" to "Extremely negative." The second question asked was: "How much of the cheating behavior described in this episode is because of the individual's personality?" The third question asked was: "How much of the cheating behavior is because of the situation in which the individual was involved?" Students rated these two questions on a scale from "Not at all" to "Completely." (Table 1)

**Procedure:** The participants signed consent forms and were told the general purpose of the study was to investigate cheating. They were told that their responses would be kept

confidential. The importance of their honesty in responding was stressed. This was done to ensure, as much as possible, that students would reveal their true feelings without fear of judgment by others. Care was taken to have students spread out in the room so that they would not be afraid of other students looking at their responses. This was also to ensure honesty of the participants.

Next, the participants were given instructions for the Cheating Inventory: "Please read the following situations carefully and answer the questions by placing an 'X' anywhere along the line indicating how you would react." Students used pencils to mark the Cheating Inventory. When they finished, they put the inventories in a box in the front of the room, which was kept away from the researcher in order to reassure the students that their responses were confidential. Finally, the students were debriefed about the experiment and were thanked for their participation.

## RESULTS

The Cheating Inventory was scored by measuring where participants marked the lines. Scores ranged from zero to six for each question. The marks were measured in inches carried out to two decimals. There were six scenarios followed by three questions each for each of the 112 participants. ANOVA was used for the three independent variables: type of student, (college vs. high school), gender (male vs. female), and perspective (self vs. other), a 2 x 2 x 2 design. Data from the three scenarios with someone else cheating (other) were added together to form one scaled score for each participant. Similarly, the data from the three scenarios with the reader cheating (self) were added together to form a scaled score. Separate ANOVAs were performed on each of the three dependent variables: how negatively the behavior was rated, how much of the behavior was due to the individual's personality, and how much of the behavior was due to the situation.

For the negative behavior score (how negatively the behavior was rated), type of

student, and gender interacted significantly ( $F = 13.5$ ;  $P < .0004$ ). (Fig. 1, Table 2). For the personality score (how much of the cheating was due to the personality of the cheater), the main effects for type of student, ( $F = 15.3$ ,  $P < .0002$ ) and perspective of the person cheating ( $F = 11.87$ ;  $P < .0008$ ) were both significant. (Fig. 2; Table 3). No significance was found for the situation score (how much of the cheating was due to the situation); however, the mean for high school students (13.06) vs. college students (10.3) approached significance ( $P < .06$ ).

## DISCUSSION

College students consistently rated the behavior significantly more negative than did the high school students. Although the male college participants rated the behavior as more negative than the high school males ( $M = 13.4$  vs. 12.2), the differences between the female students were significantly larger ( $M = 14.4$  vs. 10.5). All students blamed the cheating more on the others' personality than to their situation; this effect was greater for the college students. Finally, students blamed their own cheating behavior (self) more on the situation than on their personality; this was especially true for the high school students.

All the findings in this study support the fundamental attribution error. That these effects were greater for high school students is consistent with the finding of Davis and coworkers (1) that high school students cheat at a higher frequency than college students. It is important to determine the cause of this phenomenon. Are we observing a deterioration of morality in society? Or is this a developmental or maturational phenomenon?

Many efforts have been made to decrease cheating in both high school and college. Although some of these attempts have been effective, significant cheating still exists. The vigilance of teachers including new tests for different sections, not allowing CDs and tapes during tests, and constant monitoring will help the situation. However, the current research provides a new possibility to help alleviate the situation. In addition to using

TABLE 1. Cheating Inventory.

Please read the following situations carefully and answer the questions by placing an "X" anywhere along the line indicating how you would react.

**Other Cheating:**

-One of your friends needs to get good grades to keep the low cost of insurance for his car. Otherwise, he will not be able to afford it and keep driving. During the final exam in their hardest class, the teacher leaves the room for awhile. You look over your shoulder and see your friend glancing at other people's test papers. Then you watch him copying answers from the test of the best student in class. Your teacher curves his grades, so you know your grade will be hurt by this.

-Your first hour teacher has a hard time getting students to be alert and to pay attention. Classes start early, and the subject is boring to most students. The teacher decides to get everyone's attention by giving an unannounced quiz. After class, you see one of your classmates talking to a student in the class just coming into the room. You hear the student say they have not read the material. You see the first student give the quiz answers to the second one. You did not have this advantage on your pop quiz grade.

-You are in an advanced honors class and the teacher assigns the class a research paper to do on a topic that is not really very interesting. You work hard on the paper for several weeks and finish your paper early. The day before it is due, one of your friends asks you to type their paper because they are very busy with a performance. As you type it, you realize almost all of it is directly off of one Internet article. Your friend gives no one credit, gives no citations at all and it looks like its your friend's words.

**Self Cheating:**

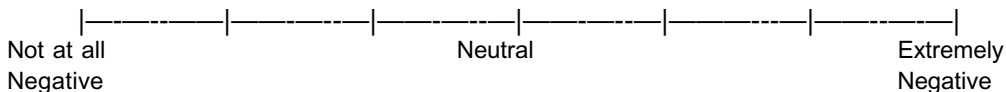
-You are hoping to get your driver's license, but your parents tell you that you must have good grades for the insurance to be affordable. You are taking a very difficult course in which you are having trouble. You know that your score on the final exam will determine your score in the course. The teacher leaves the room during the test and you decide to copy the answers from a nearby student.

-In one of your classes, the teacher is especially boring most of the time. You and other students find it difficult to pay attention. Just before going to class, you find out she is planning a "pop" quiz that day. One of your friends was in her class just before you. In the hall, before your class your friend offers you the answers ahead of time. You quickly memorize the answers to the quiz.

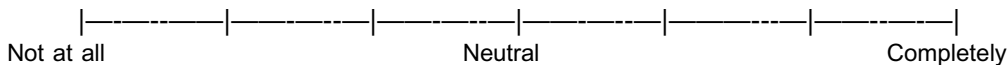
-You are assigned to do a research paper in a very hard class. In fact, you have a lot of big assignments and performances which all seem to be due at the same time. You finish everything except your research paper and it is due tomorrow. It is a big part of your grade. As the evening wears on, you find yourself using more and more of other authors' words and you don't give them credit. In fact, you do not cite the main article you use because you don't want the teacher to look it up.

**Questions:**

1. How do you evaluate the behavior described in this episode?



2. How much of the cheating described in this episode is because of the individual's **personality**?



3. How much of the cheating is because of the **situation** in which the individual was involved?

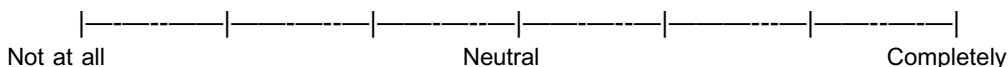


TABLE 2. Analysis of variance for evaluation of cheating behavior.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between subjects	3153.803	111			
Type of student	322.860	1	322.860	13.525	0.0004*
Gender	6.449	1	6.449	0.270	0.6043
Type of student x gender	94.567	1	94.567	3.962	0.0491*
Error between	2578.092	108	23.871		
Within subjects	411.165	112			
Person cheating	1.000	1	1.000	0.271	0.6036
Student x person cheating	9.288	1	9.288	2.519	0.1154
Gender x person cheating	.833	1	.833	.226	.6356
Student x gender x person	.257	1	.257	.070	.7924
Error within	398.289	108	3.688		
Total	3564.970	223			

\* denotes significance

TABLE 3. Analysis of variance for cheating due to personality

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between subjects	3336.437	111			
Type of student	410.005	1	410.005	15.343	0.0002*
Gender	14.443	1	14.443	0.540	0.4638
Student x gender	0.006	1	0.006	0.000	0.9878
Error between	2886.095	108	26.723		
Within subjects	609.596	112			
Person cheating	59.980	1	59.980	11.875	0.0008*
Student x person cheating	1.671	1	1.671	0.331	0.5664
Gender x person cheating	3.542	1	3.542	0.701	0.4042
Student x gender x person	10.855	1	10.855	2.149	0.1456
Error within	545.522	108	5.051		
Total	3946.033	223			

\* denotes significance

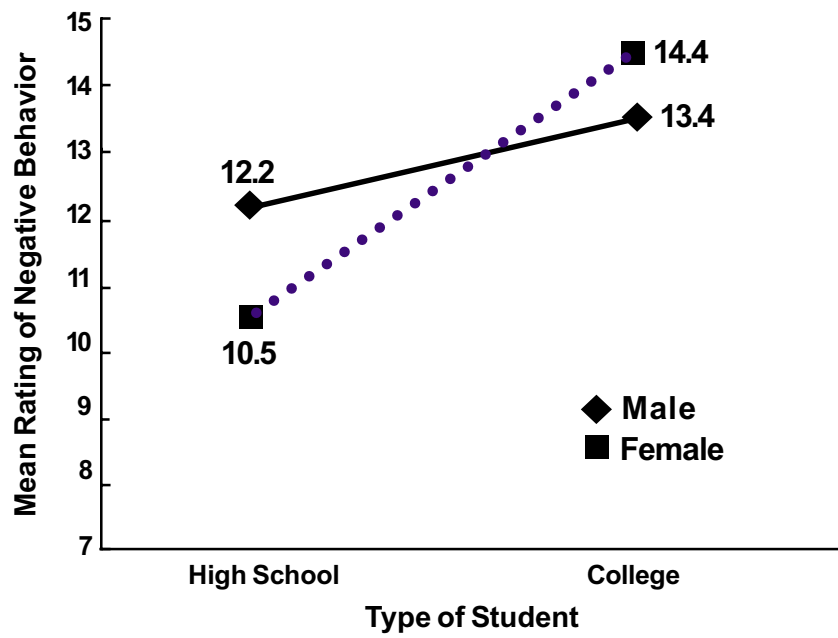


Figure 1. Interaction of type of student and gender.

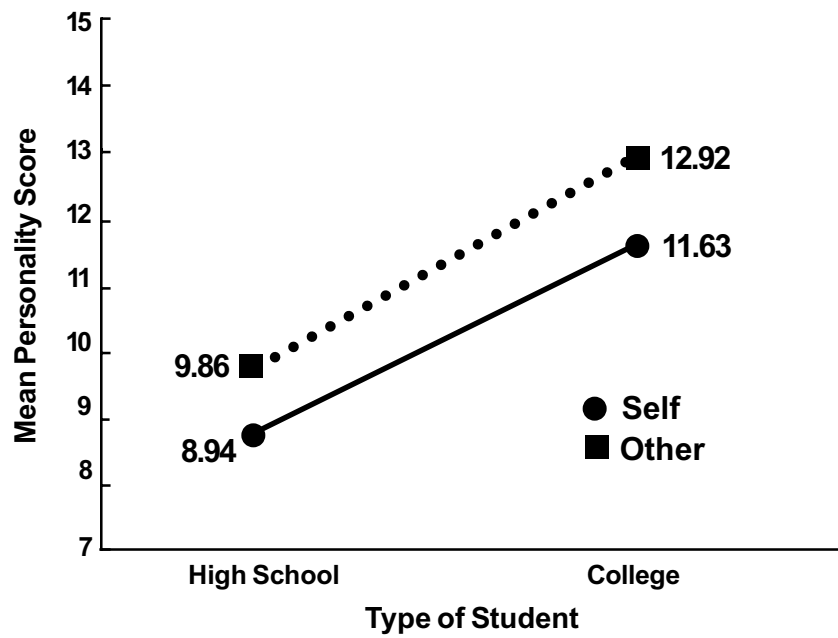


Figure 2. Main effects for type of student and perspective.

the previously tried methods, perhaps teaching students about the fundamental attribution error might help reduce the effect. That is, if educated about situational vs. personality factors, students might assume more responsibility for their own cheating and blame the situation less. They might also be able to understand that certain factors in one's environment do increase the likelihood of cheating. Unless something is done, cheating is likely to continue to be a problem of epidemic proportion.

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