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# Gender Differences in Affective Responses to Having Cheated: The Mediating Role of Attitudes

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Although women hold more negative attitudes toward cheating than do men, they are about as likely to engage in academic dishonesty. Cognitive dissonance theory predicts that this attitude–behavior inconsistency should lead women to experience more negative affect after cheating than would men. This prediction was tested in a sample of 92 male and 78 female college students who reported having cheated on an examination during the prior 6 months. Consistent with the results of previous research, women reported more negative attitudes toward cheating than did men, but cheated at the same rate. However, women did not experience more negative affect than did men, although they reported experiencing less positive affect. The gender difference in positive affect was partially mediated by the gender difference in attitudes.

Key words: cheating, college students, affect, attitudes

Moffatt (1990) described college students as viewing cheating as “an academic skill almost as important as reading, writing, and math” (p. 2). Although Moffatt’s description may seem to be somewhat cynical, there is a growing concern that cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty constitute a major problem on college campuses (e.g., Maramark & Maline, 1993). This concern has been reinforced by the publication of how-to books on cheating (e.g., Moore, 1990) and the establishment of what might be called “cheaters’ sites” on the World Wide Web that provide sample term papers and examinations (McCollum, 1996). Furthermore, researchers have found that, on the average, 70% of students have admitted to having committed at least one form of academic dishonesty while in college (Whitley, 1998), and that

substantial numbers of students cheat not just once, but repeatedly (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; McCabe & Treviño, 1995; Moffatt, 1990).

Given the prevalence of academic dishonesty among college students, it is not surprising that considerable research has been conducted on its causes and correlates, with more than 100 studies having been published on the topic during the past 3 decades (Whitley, 1998). What is more surprising is the relative lack of attention that researchers have paid to gender differences in academic dishonesty given the important role gender plays in theories of moral reasoning (e.g., Lapsley, 1996). Theorists such as Chodorow (1989) and Gilligan (1982) proposed that differential childhood socialization processes lead to different moral reasoning orientations in men and women. These theorists proposed that gender differences in moral orientation result in gender differences in behavior, with women being less likely than men to violate social norms because of the negative effects that such violations could have on other people and the potential of such violations to impair fulfillment of women's nurturant role obligations (Robbins & Martin, 1993). Thus, women are less likely than men to engage in minor criminal behavior (e.g., Tibbetts & Herz, 1996), excessive alcohol consumption (e.g., Robbins & Martin, 1993), and unprovoked aggression (e.g., Bettencourt & Miller, 1996). One would therefore expect to find similar gender differences in violations of academic integrity norms, especially given that engaging in academic dishonesty is correlated with engaging in other forms of minor deviance (Blankenship & Whitley, 2000; Whitley, 1998).

However, in a meta-analysis of research on gender differences in cheating, Whitley, Nelson, and Jones (1999) found a mean difference of only 0.2 standard deviations between men's and women's self-reports of having cheated. Although this difference was statistically significant due to the large cumulative sample size in the meta-analysis, in absolute terms it just met Cohen's (1992) criterion for a nontrivial effect size. In contrast, Whitley et al. found a mean gender difference of about 0.5 standard deviations for attitudes toward cheating, with women reporting more negative attitudes. Thus, women hold more negative attitudes toward cheating than do men but are about equally likely to cheat.

Cognitive dissonance theory holds that such attitude-behavior inconsistencies lead to a negative emotional state called *cognitive dissonance* (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957). Because, on the average, women hold more negative attitudes toward cheating than do men, one would expect women who cheat to experience more cognitive dissonance and so to have more negative affective reactions to having cheated than would men. Although little research has been conducted on such gender differences, Smith, Ryan, and Diggins (1972) found that women reported experiencing more guilt over having cheated than did men. In addition, Tibbetts (1997) found that women reported more shame concerning intentions to cheat, and Cochran, Chamlin, Wood, and Sellers (1999) found that women reported expecting to feel more shame and embarrassment if they cheated. Further-

more, Smith et al. found that guilt was negatively correlated with cheating for both men and women, and Tibbetts and Cochran et al. found that anticipated negative emotions were negatively correlated with self-reported likelihood of cheating.

The research for this study had two purposes. The first was to conduct a conceptual replication of Cochran et al.'s (1999), Smith et al.'s (1972), and Tibbetts's (1997) research on gender differences in affective responses to cheating. One shortcoming of these studies was that they used only single-item measures of affect, thus increasing the role measurement error could have played in their research (e.g., Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991). The research for this study used multiple-item measures of both positive and negative affect to reduce the impact of measurement error on the results. In addition, consistent with current theories of emotion that view positive and negative affect as independent dimensions (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), both affective dimensions were assessed. Although Tibbetts found no gender difference for students' self-reported pleasure over cheating, he asked his respondents about hypothetical situations; results might differ for affective responses to actually having cheated.

The second purpose was to test the role of attitudes toward cheating in affective responses toward cheating. If the gender difference in affect responses stem from attitude-behavior conflict as postulated by cognitive consistency theories, with women experiencing greater conflict due to their more negative attitudes toward cheating, controlling for gender differences in attitudes toward cheating should reduce or eliminate the gender difference in affective response.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 92 male and 78 female introductory psychology students at a comprehensive Midwestern state-supported university who reported cheating on at least one exam in any of their courses during the prior 6 months. They ranged in age from 17 to 31 years, with a mean of 19.9 years. These students were part of a sample of 277 male and 324 female students who took part in a survey in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.

### Measures

The following measures formed part of a questionnaire dealing with multiple aspects of academic, social, and work behavior. All participants responded to the measures of cheating and attitudes toward cheating; participants who reported having cheated during the prior 6 months also completed the measure of affective responses to having cheated.

***Cheating.*** Cheating was assessed by asking students how many exams they had taken in the prior 6 months and on how many of those exams they had cheated. Students who reported having cheated on at least one exam were classified as cheaters. A cheating rate score was calculated as the number of exams on which the student cheated divided by number of exams taken.

***Attitudes toward cheating.*** Attitudes toward cheating were assessed using the 18 items developed by Beck and Ajzen (1991). Beck and Ajzen intended that the items form four scales derived from Ajzen's (1991) theory of the relation between attitudes and behavior—attitude, perceived norm regarding cheating, perceived control over cheating, and perceived moral obligation not to cheat. However, in the data collected for my study, all of the items loaded on a single factor in a maximum likelihood factor analysis using oblique rotation and so were consolidated into a single attitude scale. All items were rated on 7-point scales, with the scale score computed as the means of the item scores; higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward cheating. Five of the items were in a semantic differential format in which participants rated the concept of cheating on bipolar adjective pairs such as *good–bad* and *foolish–wise*. The other items consisted of a stem and a response scale anchored by bipolar adjectives or phrases. Examples, with the response anchors in parentheses, are “If I cheated on a test or exam, most of the people who are important to me would (*not care–disapprove*)” and “Cheating on a test or exam goes against my principles (*agree–disagree*).” The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale computed for the entire sample of 601 participants was 0.91.

***Affective reactions to having cheated.*** Affective reactions were assessed using the 11 positive affect terms and 16 negative affect terms comprising the positive and negative affect scales developed by Cacioppo et al. (1997) and Watson et al. (1988). Participants were instructed to think back to the last time they had cheated on an exam and to rate how cheating had made them feel using each of the 27 terms. Ratings were made on 5-point scales with high ratings indicating a higher level of the affect. Sample positive affect items are *comfortable*, *good*, and *pleasant*; sample negative affect items are *ashamed*, *nervous*, and *unhappy*. Scale scores were computed as the means of the item scores. Internal consistency coefficients were 0.96 for the positive affect scale and 0.95 for the negative affect scale.

## Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire in a classroom setting in groups of 5 to 20 persons, depending on the number who signed up for a particular data-collection session. Participants were seated with an empty chair on each side to preserve the

confidentiality of their responses. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and given a feedback sheet explaining the purposes of the study.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean cheating rate, mean scores for the attitudinal and affective response variables, and *t* values for gender differences in the means. In the entire sample of students (which included both those who did and did not report having cheated), more men (33.2%) reported having cheated at least once than women (24.1%),  $\chi^2(1, 601) = 6.50, p = .01$ . However, among the students who cheated there was no statistically significant gender difference in cheating rates, with men reporting having cheated on 20.9% of their tests and women reporting having cheated on 18.8% of their tests. Women reported more negative attitudes toward cheating, a finding that is also consistent with that of prior research (Whitley et al., 1999). Men reported more positive affective responses to cheating, but there was no gender difference in negative affective responses.

Table 2 shows the correlations among cheating rate, the attitude scores, and the affect scores. Higher levels of cheating were associated with more positive attitudes toward cheating and a more positive affective response to cheating, but not to negative affective response. Positive affect was associated with more positive attitudes toward cheating. Negative affect was not associated with any of the other variables. Positive and negative affect were essentially uncorrelated.

The hypothesis derived from cognitive consistency theory that the gender difference in positive affect was mediated by gender differences in attitudes toward cheating was tested using the procedures described by Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger

TABLE 1  
Means and Standard Deviations on Measures of Cheating Behavior, Cheating Attitude,  
and Affective Response to Having Cheated for Male and Female Participants

Variable	Men <sup>a</sup>		Women <sup>b</sup>		<i>t</i> (157)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Cheating rate	0.21	0.17	0.19	0.14	0.89
Attitude toward cheating	4.04	0.95	3.50	1.03	3.43*
Positive affective response	1.94	1.12	1.32	0.90	3.85*
Negative affective response	2.38	1.12	2.47	1.44	-0.48
Ashamed	2.19	1.27	2.60	1.71	-1.76
Guilty	2.76	1.47	2.93	1.83	-0.67
Uncomfortable	2.91	2.40	2.66	1.68	0.75

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 92. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 78.

\**p* < .001.

(1998). Demonstration that attitudes toward cheating mediate the gender difference in positive affect requires that four criteria be met. First, gender must be correlated with positive affect, and second, gender also must be correlated with attitudes toward cheating; Table 2 indicates that these criteria were met. Third, attitudes toward cheating must be correlated with positive affect with gender controlled. Regression analysis indicated that, with gender controlled, attitudes toward cheating had a semipartial correlation with positive affect of .253,  $t = 3.30$ ,  $p = .001$ , indicating that the third criterion was met. Finally, the relations between gender and positive affect must be reduced when attitudes toward cheating are controlled. The standardized regression coefficient for the relation of gender to positive affect was reduced from  $-.266$ ,  $t = -3.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , to  $-.227$ ,  $t = -2.98$ ,  $p = .004$ ; that is, gender accounted for 7.1% of the variance when attitude differences were not controlled and 5.1% of the variance when attitude differences were controlled. The Z value for the test of mediation was  $-2.38$ ,  $p = .02$ , indicating partial support for the hypothesis that attitudes toward cheating mediate the relation between gender and positive affective responses to cheating. However, there was still a substantial direct relation between gender and positive affect.

Two possible explanations for the failure to find gender differences in negative affect could be tested with the data collected for this research. The first derives from the possibility that different negative emotions are important to women and men. Ferguson and Crowley (1997) found general support for Lewis's (1971) hypothesis that women are more likely to experience shame after having performed a nonnormative act, whereas men are more likely to experience guilt. This possibility was tested by examining gender differences on two of the negative affect items, *ashamed* and *guilty*. As shown in the fifth and sixth rows of Table 1, the gender difference was not statistically significant in either case.

A second possible explanation derives from Elliot and Devine's (1994) research on the affective consequences of attitude-behavior inconsistency. They found that such inconsistency has greater effects on feelings of discomfort than on general negative affect. This possibility was tested by examining gender differ-

TABLE 2  
Correlations Among Measures of Cheating Behavior, Cheating Attitude,  
and Affective Response to Having Cheated

Measure	Gender	Cheating Rate	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
Cheating rate	-.07			
Positive affect	-.29*	.28*		
Negative affect	.04	.07	.14	
Cheating attitude	-.26*	.28*	.31*	-.04

\* $p < .001$ .

ences on one of the negative affect items, *uncomfortable*. As shown in the last row of Table 1, the gender difference was not statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, there was a gender difference in affective responses to having cheated and this difference was partially mediated by gender differences in attitudes toward cheating. However, the difference in affective response that was found was not the one predicted based on cognitive dissonance theory. The hypothesis derived from that theory was that women would have more negative affective responses to having cheated because women exhibit the same level of cheating as men despite having more negative attitudes toward cheating. The negative affect would result from the attitude–behavior inconsistency. However, rather than women reporting more negative affect, men reported more positive affect. That is, women and men reported similar degrees of negative affective reactions to having cheated, but men reported a higher degree of positive affective reactions. These results are a mirror image of the results of previous research: Cochran et al. (1999), Smith et al. (1972), and Tibbetts (1997) found that women reported more negative affect toward cheating than did men, and Tibbetts found no gender difference in reports of positive affect.

There are several possible explanations for these inconsistencies in outcome. Two possible explanations—gender differences in the types of affect experienced (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997) and possible gender differences in dissonance-specific affect (Elliot & Devine, 1994)—were ruled out on the basis of data collected for this research. Other possibilities remain. From a methodological perspective, affect was assessed differently in this study than in the prior research: Cochran et al. (1999), Smith et al. (1972), and Tibbetts (1997) used single-item measures of affect, whereas this study used a combination of two well-validated multiple-item measures. Consequently, the results of this study may be more psychometrically sound than those of the other studies.

Possible explanations for the lack of a gender difference in negative affect can be found in cognitive dissonance theory, the history of gender differences in academic dishonesty, and the different goals of this study compared to those of Cochran et al. (1999) and Tibbetts (1997). Cognitive dissonance theory provides two possible explanations. First, for an attitude–behavior discrepancy to arouse dissonance, the person must see the behavior as voluntary, that is, to make an internal self-attribution for the cause of the behavior (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). However, many college students who cheat attribute their behavior to external causes (e.g., Diekhoff et al., 1996; Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986). Consequently, they may not feel dissonance or other negative emotions because they do not see themselves as having freely chosen to cheat, but rather to have been compelled by circumstances to cheat.



Second, the results of research on cognitive dissonance theory also suggest that dissonance may be felt most strongly only by individuals for whom the attitude-behavior discrepancy has important implications for the self-concept (Elliot & Devine, 1994). That is, only students who see themselves as honest and for whom honesty is an important part of the self-concept may experience dissonance if they cheat. To the extent, then, that there are no gender differences in the centrality of honesty to the self-concept, there may not be gender differences in negative affective responses to having cheated. Although self-rated honesty has been found to be negatively related to cheating (Michaels & Miethe, 1989), especially for people for whom honesty is important (Wojciszke, 1987), there appears to be no research examining possible gender differences in that relation.

Although cognitive dissonance theory can provide explanations for a lack of gender differences in negative affect in response to have cheated, Smith et al. (1972) found that women did report more negative affect than did men. Why might such a gender difference have disappeared over time? McCabe and Bowers (1996) found that a larger proportion of female college students surveyed in the mid-1990s reported having cheated compared to those surveyed in the mid-1960s, eliminating the gender difference in cheating found in the earlier research. As cheating has become more normative for female college students, it may be generating lower levels of negative affect, so that as women's behavior has become more similar to men's, so has their affective response to the behavior.

Finally, although Cochran et al. (1999) and Tibbetts (1997) found gender differences in cheating-related negative affect in recent research, their focus was on anticipatory affect—how participants thought they would feel if they cheated—rather than on affect in response to having cheated. Both Cochran et al. and Tibbetts found that anticipated negative affect was associated with lower self-reported likelihood of cheating. Thus, students who anticipate experiencing negative affect if they cheat do not cheat. In contrast, cheaters—the group studied in this research—do not experience substantial negative affect regarding the behavior whether they are men or women.

What about the finding that men reported more positive affect in response to having cheated than did women? Although Tibbetts (1997) found no gender difference in anticipatory positive affect for cheating, Tibbetts and Herz (1996) found that men did report more anticipatory positive affect relative to other forms of minor deviance, such as drunk driving and shoplifting. Why might men take more pleasure from deviance? Robbins and Martin (1993) suggested that women are less likely to engage in deviant behavior because girls are strongly socialized to avoid it. In contrast, boys may be socialized to see deviance in a positive light. For example, boys are more likely to be rewarded and less likely to be punished for behaving aggressively than are girls and are taught that aggressive games, such as football, are fun (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). More generally, the saying “boys will be boys” reflects a societal attitude that some level of deviance is permissible for boys, and perhaps

even necessary for their proper psychological development (Hartley, 1974), and minor deviance and risk taking make up part of the male gender role (e.g. Brannon, 1976; Thompson & Pleck, 1987). Therefore, men may see deviance in more positive terms—reflected in their more positive attitudes toward cheating—and take more pleasure in having gotten away with performing a forbidden behavior.

These explanations suggest possible avenues for future research. For example, issues that could be addressed include the roles of attributions about the causes of having cheated and of honesty as a facet of the self-concept in affective reactions to having cheated. For men, is investment in the traditional male role associated with cheating and affective reactions to having cheated? Similarly, does investment in the traditional female role play a part in these processes for women? Finally, given the role played by anticipatory affect in inhibiting intentions to cheat, the general topic of the relation between affect and honesty—dishonesty merits more thorough investigation.

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