

A Comparative Study of Attitudes of Academic Staffs towards Academic Dishonesty between USA and Iranian Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Cheating has been a global and widespread issue at higher educational institutions. While many studies have done to find out cultural differences in cheating and academic dishonesty of students at higher educational institutions in various countries, few have scrutinized the attitudes of the academic staff on the issue. We studied attitudes and beliefs of 226 academic

staffs of two universities: Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Iran and Central Washington University (CWU) in the USA. The results of this study show similarities and differences between attitudes and beliefs of the academic staffs of SBMU and the CWU towards cheating and academic misconduct. Our conclusions revealed cultural similarities and differences on the attitudes and beliefs of staffs at SBMU and CWU.

Keywords: Academic Staff, Cheating, Academic Misconduct, Academic Dishonesty

1. Introduction

In academia, academic staffs including faculty members seem to pay careful attention to academic dishonesty and fraudulent behaviors through formal policies. Indeed, students as well may superficially consent that cheating in all its forms is wrong. Universities around the world may have their own policies and programs to initiate and follow the academic ethical codes (Calgary University 2010; McGill University, 2010). While any higher educational institutions have tried to eliminate chances to attempt students' dishonest behaviors, researches report that cheating and academic dishonesty have been very common among students.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have focused to find why students engage in fraudulent activities in colleges and universities in various countries (Dean, 2000; Bernardi, Baca, Landers, & Witek, 2008; Graves, 2008). On the other hand, with the explosion of digital knowledge and the propelling of staff, academicians, and students into the information society, the environment for cheating has become even more durable so that students tend to have easier time to conduct dishonest actions. Adding to the ubiquitous web is the introduction of new technological tools such as the high speed Internet, smart phones, and nanotechnology.

According to Fain and Bates (2004), there are least 225 websites providing people with term papers for assignments at schools. There have been more reports of cheating today than in the past; in 1969 in the USA, for example, one study reported only 34 % of students admitted to cheating, while in 1992 the figure had been 61 %, and by 2002 the figure had grown to 74 % (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Campbell, Owens, and Denton (2000) along with Thomas (2001), and Gligoff (2001) have all noted that in the USA, cheating on exams and plagiarism seem to be among the most serious concerns in colleges and universities.

While there have been studies relating to the attitudes and beliefs of the students engaged in cheating and academic misconduct in everywhere in the world, studies of the unethical attitudes and actions in medical schools are almost non-existing. One of very rare studies in the medical schools by Salahi, Yekta, Lupton, Khadem, and Maboudi (2010) was conducted at a medical school in Tehran, Iran. What they found was that the higher the academic rank of the students, the less there would be the tendency for cheating and academic dishonesty.

This finding seemed to be in line with the findings of Whitely, Nelson and Jones (1999) which had found that the older a student becomes, the less likely s/he would engage in cheating and academic dishonesty behaviors. However, according to another study by Rennie

and Crosby (2001), 56 % of the responding medical students said they had engaged or would engage in plagiarism. Moreover, it has been reported that students' perceptions of campus climate is among one of the deciding factors describing whether students would report fraudulent activities (Simon et al., 2004).

Who should deter cheating and who should punish those engaged in cheating and academic dishonesty? Strichertz (2001) notes students believe that academic dishonesty is often neglected by academic staffs. However, Callahan (1982) actually showed an evidence that the academic staffs do care about academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty and cheating across cultures may take on a different perspective or interpretation. Putting it briefly, students in different nations may have different opinions on what is and what is not considered wrong. This has received support from social learning theorists (Whitley, 1998; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002).

Indeed, some researchers have tried to compare students' dishonest behaviors in Polish, Chinese, Russian, and American university students (Chapman & Lupton, 2004; Lupton & Chapman, 2002; Lupton, Chapman, & Weiss, 2000). These researches' found quite different ideas of dishonest behaviors and interpretations of cheating behaviors.

This means that these studies support the idea that definitions of cheating are different among cultures. For example, in the USA, if a neighbor enters your home without your permission and takes some bread, you may call 911 for help. However, the same behavior in a town in Africa or Asia may be considered just as bad, or wrong so that it may not need any kind of punishment. Similarly, the attitudes and beliefs of the academic staffs in a particular country towards cheating and academic misconduct may be partially or totally different from those of US academic staffs.

To the best of our knowledge, no comparative study to date has been done for the attitudes and beliefs of the academic staffs towards academic dishonesty and cheating between Iran and the USA. This study tried to find differences of the attitudes and beliefs of academic dishonesty of academic staffs in Iran (Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran) and the United States of America (Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA).

3. Research Method

We used a questionnaire that was developed for surveying the attitudes and perceptions of the academic staffs on what they regard as cheating and academic dishonesty. The questionnaire, whose first draft was originally in Persian, was validated in a pilot study with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82. The Test-Retest of the study with 30 academic staff members showed that there was a reliability of 0.84.

The questionnaire was then translated into English by native speakers for the same validation test in the USA. The English translations were checked by both native English speakers and Persian speakers with English fluency prior to the validation in the USA. At Central Washington University (CWU) the validation test was done with 21 randomly selected academic staff members. CWU used Survey Monkey program to collect the data. The

validation was effective with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.81.

Once the validity was ensured, a total of 130 randomly selected academic staff members at CWU participated in this study. Out of the 130 collected questionnaires, we could use 128 questionnaires for this study. In Iran, Tehran, participants were randomly selected at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences with 98 usable questionnaires. We used SPSS 16 software for statistical processing.

4. Findings

Significant statistical differences were found when looking at the two schools as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Mean & SD for the questions with significant differences on the attitudes of the academic staff of SBMU and CWU universities about cheating, academic misconduct, and dishonesty* Total N=226**

	SBMU		CWU		P-VALUE
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	
Q1	21.31	0.1997	11.74	0.1597	0.001
Q2	1.58	0.49	1.32	0.46	0.038
Q6	2.09	1.67	5.05	1.99	<0.001
Q7	3.07	2.23	1.00	0.0000	<0.001
Q8	3.13	1.98	4.63	1.95	<0.001
Q9	3.50	1.85	4.92	1.25	<0.001
Q11	3.88	2.04	2.59	1.13	0.004
Q14	1.85	3.36	1.57	0.59	0.003
Q16	5.50	7.97	3.59	1.49	0.004
Q18	5.20	1.94	4.54	1.50	0.032
Q19	3.84	2.24	5.57	1.33	<0.001
Q20	4.83	1.91	2.22	1.45	<0.001
Q22	1.26	4.88	0.44	2.21	<0.001
Q25	6.40	1.65	5.16	1.42	<0.001
Q27	5.90	1.65	5.16	1.42	<0.001
Q29	2.52	1.07	3.28	1.24	<0.001

* For full study of each of the questions in the survey, refer to the Questionnaire in the Appendix.

**SBMU N= 98 (66 Male, 22 Female, Missing 10); CWU N=128 (69 male, 56 Female, Missing 3).

Q2 asked "Do you know of any students who have cheated on exams at this university?" and Q12 asked "I believe most students cheat in exams." The number of participants who answered YES in both questions at SBMU was much larger than the number of CWU

participants who answered YES in both questions.

While this may imply that Iranian students tend to cheat more, we cannot confirm if such a simple conclusion reflects reality. This is because answers for Q2 can be very subjective. It really depends on how academic staff perceives students' cheatings. At the same time, we may have to consider influence from certain beliefs or expectations of the academic staff to their students. Needless to say, academic staff's own experiences will influence as well.

When all participants were asked if sharing notes or papers from previous classes were unethical and unfair through Q6 and Q7, CWU academic staff members considered these were unethical and unfair. The sense of unfairness seems to be comprehensive, reflecting that the CWU academic staff felt that cheating occurred not only for those students who actually cheated but also for those who directly or indirectly supported or initiated the students' cheating.

In addition, CWU academic staff members felt that student A who gave all materials of a class to the student B was actually engaging in academic dishonesty because A gave B chances for academic dishonesty with the materials. We can see that CWU academic staff seems to be more sensitive for cheating in the classroom than Iranian academic staff members.

This difference might be caused by different ideas and perceptions of academic dishonesty in various cultures (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009; Aurora, Teixeira, & Rocha, 2006). Some may consider a specific behavior as cheating, while others may not. For example, at SBMU the academic staff usually attempts to make sure those who are supposed to be in the class are actually present. Sometimes, when there are many students in one class, such as those large general classes which all students have to complete regardless of their major of study, such as literature, theology, etc., there may be more than 40 students sitting in one class. If a student impersonates another student who is absent, it may be considered an act of cheating or academic misconduct. In such classes, the instructor may not be able to make sure whether one student has done his/her homework assignment, or course project (as an instructor usually has four or five of such classes), and it will be practically impossible to check on such issues and cheating during the course, or even commit plagiarism on their projects, let alone using websites for doing their term projects.

Due to such cultural relativity in the definition of cheating, CWU's idea of cheating may be student collaborations by SBMU's idea. The result of Q8 and Q19 seem to provide this point by showing different sense of "actions of cheating" between CWU and SBMU academic staff members.

At this point, our research indicates that Iranian students may be more group-oriented and there may not be the separation or distinctions between leaders and followers in a group setting as those purported in US group dynamism. In the Iranian classroom, it is assumed that all group members work equally. Regardless of the amount of contributions, all group members equally respected and rewarded.

The strange thing for us is that there have been more reports of cheating in the USA than in

Iran, (Thomas, 2001; Gligoff, 2001). This may be because SBMU academic staff members did not report so-called cheating in the USA by not *recognizing* it as cheating. For example, 41.8 % of the SBMU staff said that the students cheat while the figure was 66.4 % for those at CWU.

This is not only because Iranian staff members do not recognize so-called cheating in the USA but also because students in Iran has different ideas about cheating from US students. CWU has clear standards of academic honesty so that students at CWU tend to know clearer ideas about dishonest conducts (CWU Code of Conduct, 2010). On the other hand, Iranian students with poorer standard of academic honesty may not clearly know what exactly will be academic dishonesty in classroom.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed similarities and differences of the attitudes between the academic staff members of Central Washington University (CWU) in the USA, and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Iran. There are definitely different interpretations and understanding of academic dishonesty between Iran and USA. Also, since Iranian staff members does not exactly know what academic dishonesty means with poorer standard of academic honesty, they actually do not recognize so-called academic dishonesty in Iranian classrooms.

The last point was especially important since not knowing the concept of academic dishonesty does not mean cultural difference. Rather, this is a systematic problem. Therefore, our study is actually warning for other researchers who are focusing solely on cultural differences in studies cross-cultural differences in academic dishonesty. We do need to know differences in systems, rules, and code of academic honesty in higher educational institutions in different countries.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

Dear Colleague;

Your participation at this research provides us with invaluable information regarding academic dishonesty so that an international investigation would be possible. Generally, the results of this research will assist students and the academic staff to better manage the classes.

You are asked to answer 27 questions which are in yes/no, fill in the blank, MC formats, and also questions with 7 choices. The usual time to answer the questions is around 10 minutes.

Your participation in this research is quite voluntary. Do not respond if you wish not to participate. The information you give us will be quite confidential and are for research purposes only. Do not write your names.

- 1- Please write your opinion of the % of the students who cheat: -----
- 2- Do you know of any student who has cheated in exams at this university?
Yes ----- (1) N0 ----- (2)
- 3- Do know of any student who has cheated in the exams in your class?
Yes ----- (1) N0 ----- (2)
- 4- Have you seen a student while cheating at this university?
Yes ----- (1) N0 ----- (2)
- 5- Have you seen a student while cheating in your class?
Yes ----- (1) N0 ----- (2)

Look at the following case and answer its questions please:

Student A chooses English Course 102 in Fall Semester. His Friend, students B, chooses the same course in the Spring Semester. Student A hands over all his notes from the course to

student B. Student B got access to all answers of student A in the exam, and used them for himself.

6- I think student A has cheated.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

7- I think student B has cheated.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

Student B learns that student A got good grades in some of his classroom assignments for the course. Student A had had to go to the library a lot to study the course and prepare its projects. Student B decides to use the notes given to him by student A instead of going to the library.

8- Do you think that student B has cheated?

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

9- When the instructor talks about the problems, punishments and ethics related to academic dishonesty, the rate of cheating reduces.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

10- Passing over of the questions from the previous semesters/ or sections is an example of academic dishonesty.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

11- Using the questions from the previous semesters IS NOT CONSIDERED CHEATING.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

12- I believe most students cheat in exams.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

13- I believe most students cheat in doing homework assignments (to be done outside classroom).

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

14- In any classroom, it is the teacher's responsibility to prevent students from cheating.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

15- Have you ever reported a case of academic dishonesty to you department chair?

Yes ----- (1) No ----- (2)

16- The teacher of a course has to be present in his exam sessions.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

17- Students do not cheat in the class projects.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

18- The proctors in the exams help in student cheating.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

19- Students use a class project for several courses.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

20- The revision and change of the classroom materials by the teacher is necessary to prevent student cheating.

Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree

21- When a student's cheating has been confirmed, it is the same teacher's responsibility to punish the student.

- Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree
- 22- There are no administrative tools to punish the cheating students.
Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree
- 23- Have you ever studied the regulations regarding student academic dishonesty of your university?
Yes ----- (1) NO ----- (2)
- 24- The regulations regarding the student academic dishonesty at this university is quite straightforward and transparent.
Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree
- 25- The presence of proctors is necessary in exam rooms to prevent student cheating.
Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree
- 26- Training courses for the proctors are necessary.
Strongly disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Strongly agree
- 27- Which of the following is the best authority to decide on the punishment for the cheating students?
1-The teacher of the course 2- The College Academic Council
3-The Students' Behavior Committee 4- The College Office in Students' Affaires
5- The University Council 6- The University Office in Student Affaires

Please write your academic status: -----

Please write your age: ----- years

Please write the years you have worked as an academic staff: -----Years

What is your sex?

Male ----- (1) Female ----- (2)

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