Effects of Gender and Class Standing on Perceptions of Academic Dishonesty in Baccalaureate Nursing Students

Katelyn Hausfeld and Christina Vujanov

The University of Akron

Authors Note

Katelyn Hausfeld, College of Nursing, The University of Akron: Christina Vujanov, College of Nursing, The University of Akron.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:
Katelyn Hausfeld, College of Nursing, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio 44325. E-mail: kmh75@zips.uakron.edu

Christina Vujanov, College of Nursing, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio 44325. E-mail: cnv1@zips.uakron.edu
Effects of Gender and Class Standing on Perceptions of Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is defined as the “the intentional participation in deceptive practices regarding one’s academic work or the work of another” (Caves & Faucher, 2009, p. 37). Academic dishonesty has been an issue for universities nationwide for several decades. To date the majority of research related to this topic focuses on elementary and secondary education, with little work having been done in nursing education specifically (Clark et al., 2005). Nursing education programs are facing the challenge of meeting the demands of the nursing shortage with fewer resources. Most programs have waiting lists and stringent entrance requirements. Nursing curricula are academically demanding and require maintenance of high performance to remain in the program (e.g., National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, 2006; Gaberson, 2007). Johnson and Martin (2005) noted “the competitive nature of academia and the pressure to earn grades to stay in an academic major can lead even good students to violate academic integrity” (p. 48). As a result, students may turn to academic dishonesty to ease their workload and pass their courses.

The current generation of students now filling university classrooms, Generation Y, is characterized as being resourceful, peer dependent, inventive, and self-sufficient. They are fun seeking and used to immediate answers and feedback (Arhin, 2009). Arhin (2009) proposed that the characteristics these students possess have made them more susceptible to the belief that cheating is not morally wrong but rather a means of getting through school. The technology available to Generation Y students is superior to those of all prior generations and has allowed them to create their own distinctive cheating techniques. Generation Y students can email, text, and use wireless messaging during class time, which has contributed to developing new cheating methods that are then propagated through universities nationwide. The pervasiveness of
technology may explain some of the beliefs members of this generation have about academic dishonesty and cheating (Earle & Myrick, 2009).

**Review of Literature**

**Academic Dishonesty Behaviors**

Researchers have investigated the occurrence of cheating behaviors in college students. Bates, Davies, Murphy and Bone (2005) surveyed 1,161 college students from six educational programs to identify the occurrence of cheating behaviors and student perception of cheating. Forty-two percent of the sample admitted to using 2 or more different techniques. Borrowing and copying work were more prevalent than cheating on exams. Males tended to be more academically dishonest than females in this study. Finally, they found that as students progressed though the university, they became more aware of the ethical and moral standards in dishonesty.

**Prevalence and Perception of Dishonesty**

Student perception of academic dishonesty plays a role in the problem because the changing educational and technological environment has left students unsure about what is permissible. For example, Arhin (2009) used a pilot study to survey 44 senior level Generation Y nursing students’ perceptions of academic dishonesty and found that students could identify cheating behaviors in examination situations, but had difficulty identifying academic dishonesty related to class assignments and in laboratory exercises. He found that students easily identified dishonesty in exam situations; however, only 45% saw grading another student’s papers leniently as dishonest. In addition, “students perceived copying a friend’s work with permission as more honest than copying without permission” (p. 20). This may be due to generation Y students’ strong peer dependence and immediate gratification qualities. In a later, larger study of 172
students (Ahrin & Jones, 2009), similar results were found leading to the conclusion that inherent characteristics of today’s generations Y students (e.g., being inventive, resourceful, peer depended and constantly gaining immediate feedback and answers) may contribute to why a number of academic dishonest behaviors are normalized by students.

A study of 560 students in the Northwest U.S. reported wide variability in ranking dishonest behaviors by seriousness. The study noted that students ranked events concerning exams as being worse than those associated with other assignments (Schmelkin, Gilbert, Spencer, Pincus, & Silva, 2008). In a study of 361 nursing students, 62 (17%) did not recognize cheating on an exam as being academic dishonesty (Clark & Springer, 2007).

**Academic Dishonesty in Nursing**

Academic dishonesty as an overall problem is serious; however its occurrence in student nurses could have potentially harmful effects to the student's patients, other students, and the profession itself (e.g., Gaberson, 1997; Jeffreys, & Stier, 1995). Ahrin and Jones (2009) compared nursing students’ perception of academic dishonesty to other disciplines. Although nursing students were better able to identify dishonest behaviors than communication, social work or criminal justice students, less than half of the 172 students perceived only 6 of the 12 academically dishonest scenarios as being wrong.

Faucher & Caves’ (2009) review of the literature reported as many as 75% to 90% of nursing students admitted to engaging in some form of academic dishonesty including cheating on exams, plagiarism, sharing work in a group, and cheating in clinical practice. In an investigation of nursing students at 12 US schools during academic year 2007-2008 that included 1057 students, McCabe (2008) reported 58% of undergraduate nursing students admitted to engaging in cheating behaviors. These cheating behaviors included plagiarism and giving and
receiving help on assignments and exams. In a later longitudinal comparison study, McCabe reported that nursing students self-reported classroom cheating behaviors at a higher rate than non-nursing students. Other researchers have also reported that students majoring in nursing more frequently recognized academically dishonest behaviors compared to other students (Arhin & Jones, 2009).

Researchers have noted that academic dishonesty negatively affects nursing faculty (Arhin, 2009; McCabe, 2008; Fontana, 2009). In a qualitative study of 12 nursing faculty from five US colleges of nursing, Fontana (2009) concluded the following:

Nurse educators take significant risks when confronting and reporting student academic misconduct. These include damaging relationships with students and colleagues as well as the teacher’s reputation. Additionally, the time and effort involved in collecting evidence and bringing students to justice may be in conflict with educators’ self-interest (p. 185).

Faculty are ill-prepared to handle the rising rates of academic dishonesty. A study of incivility in nursing schools that included academic dishonesty called for the creation of policy that provides specific channels of response so that faculty will be prepared to manage incidence of academic dishonesty (Clark & Springer, 2007).

Further research is needed to identify the causes of academic dishonesty and to fill the gaps regarding specific demographic and individual variables that are associated with academic dishonesty. Ahrin (2009) suggested that work related to this topic indicates a need for analysis of gender and class standing.
**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of gender and class standing on perceptions and attitudes of academic dishonesty in baccalaureate nursing students in a Midwest state university. The objectives were to:

(i) Describe the perceptions of academic dishonesty among baccalaureate nursing students in a Midwest state university.

(ii) Investigate the relationship between gender, class standing, and perceptions of academic dishonesty in baccalaureate nursing students in a Midwest state university.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this research study is Gladys and James Husted’s Symphonological Bioethical Theory. Symphonology is defined as “a system of interpersonal ethics based on the terms and presumptions of an agreement” (Scotto, 2006, pg. 568). Scotto (2006) goes on to state that “the agreement is based on the nature of the relationship between the parties involved and looks into the commitments and obligations of each party” (pg. 568). In this study the relationship that was examined was the student-teacher relationship. In the student-teacher relationship both parties must hold to the commitments and obligations expected of them or else the relationship no longer functions optimally. For example, students expect teachers to help them learn as much as possible, provide fair exams, be available for questions, and treat each student fairly without any biases. In return the teachers expect students to aspire to do the best work possible, treat them with respect, and be academically honest on all assignments and exams. If either of these parties were not to uphold their expected commitments and obligations, then the relationship suffers. This study examined whether nursing students would accurately
identify academic dishonesty because of their awareness of the commitments and obligations expected of them by their teachers. The researchers expected to find that students would be able to identify academically dishonest behaviors because they knew what behaviors would damage the student-teacher relationship.

Methods

Design

This study used a prospective descriptive design.

Sample and Setting

Convenience sampling was used to construct a sample consisting of sophomore-, junior-, and senior-level nursing students who are enrolled at a Midwest state university and who are at least 18 years old. Participants included both males and females and all races and ethnicities.

The setting was a college of nursing at a state university in a Midwest state. The total available population included all undergraduate students enrolled at the college. The university IRB approved the study’s use of human subjects before recruitment started.

Measures

Perceptions of academic dishonesty were measured using a self-completion questionnaire, a previously modified tool used in the United Kingdom (Arhin, 2009). See Table 2 for the survey tool. The instrument consists of twelve scenarios. The first four represent academic dishonesty behaviors in examination situations, the subsequent five represent cheating behaviors relevant to class assignments, and the final three examine dishonest behaviors toward laboratory exercises. After reading each scenario the participants were asked to identify the situation as being academically dishonest, not academically dishonest, or unsure.
Clarity and face validity of the self-completion questionnaire were achieved via focus groups of nurse educators. The tool has been pilot tested on senior level nursing students. The tool was found to be easy to complete and understand (Arhin, 2009).

Procedure

An e-mail invitation was sent to the university director of student affairs who distributed the e-mail to all baccalaureate nursing students asking them to participate in the study. The e-mail invitation was sent out to students on December 13, 2010. The survey was posted online through Checkbox survey which was accessible to all students who received the e-mail invitation. Student participation was voluntary and no personal identifiers were collected. Upon logging into the survey, students saw a brief description of the study along with a reminder about anonymity and the voluntary nature of the study. Participation in the study served as consent. Demographic data including age, gender, marital status, and class standing was collected prior to obtaining the data about perceptions. The survey remained opened until January 21, 2011.

Data Analysis Plan

The data from the surveys was sent to the researchers in aggregate form and stored in Checkbox, the program used to generate this survey. The data was kept in a password protected file only accessible to the researchers. Descriptive statistics were generated for the group. Relationships between age, class standing, gender, marital status and perceptions of academic dishonesty were expressed in percentages for comparison.

Results

Table 1 shows the demographic description of the group. The majority of students (53%) were at the senior level. The senior class has the greatest percentage of individuals 25 years and
older with 56.1%. The majority of participants (87.9%) were female and the majority of students (78.5%) were single. The results of the academic dishonesty surveys are shown in Table 2.

**Academic Dishonesty in Examination Situations**

The first four survey questions regarding taking an examination proved to be where students most easily recognized academically dishonest behaviors. Greater than 96% of all students were able to easily recognize that going into the bathroom and looking at notes during an exam as well as writing answers on their arm were academically dishonest behaviors. 78.52% of all students recognized grading a neighbor’s exam leniently as academically dishonest, while 83.22% recognized writing mnemonics on their hand to be dishonest.

**Academic Dishonesty in Class Assignments**

The second set of five questions, questions 5-9, focused on academic dishonesty during assignments. Students had a harder time identifying dishonest behaviors within this question set. Greater than 94% of students recognized that photocopying and using parts of the work of a friend without their permission and that taking quotes from a reference without citing to be academically dishonest. Only 76% of students recognized that cutting and pasting without quotation marks and citing using a website URL to be academically dishonest. 71.81% of students saw photocopying a friend’s work and using parts of it to write up their own conclusion with the friend’s permission to be academically dishonest. Finally only 16.11% of students could recognize that borrowing work of a friend to gain their own ideas to be academically dishonest.

**Academic Dishonesty in Laboratory Assignments**

The final set of questions focused on Laboratory assignments. This is where students performed the poorest in recognizing academically dishonest behaviors. Only 72.48% percent of
students recognized that making up their own lab results to be academically dishonest. A poor turnout of 14.77% students saw asking a neighbor during a laboratory exam how to understand the instructions as academically dishonest. Finally, only 44.97% of students saw handing down lab coursework and results to lower classes as academically dishonest.

**Academic Dishonesty in Relation to Marital Status, Age, Gender and Class Standing**

In eight out of twelve scenarios presented married people were better able to determine academic dishonesty. A greater percentage of those over the age of 25 were also able to recognize academic dishonesty in eight out of twelve situations presented. Overall females were better able to recognize academic dishonesty, yet males could better recognize dishonesty in laboratory situations. In regards to class standings, Juniors did the best in recognizing academically dishonest behaviors, while Sophomores did the worst.

**Discussion**

It is important to recognize that students have varying levels of understanding within different academic situations. This study corroborates previous research results that students recognize academic dishonesty in examination situations yet lack this understanding in laboratory settings. Further research should be conducted to explore the reasons students do not uphold the same standards of academic dishonestly in different settings. The relaxed environment of the laboratory setting that often includes technological devices, as opposed to the structured exam setting that precludes the use of technology may contribute to the inconsistency. Class assignments that are unsupervised, not grade-weighted as heavily, and also often include the use of technology may be viewed as outside the realm of academic structure. Further research is necessary to examine the cause of the academic dishonesty disparity.
As recognized in this study older and married students were more likely to identify academic dishonesty. As individuals mature, they are more likely to hold higher moral and ethical standards. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that older adults are better able to identify academic dishonesty. Additionally, married individuals often times understand the importance of relationships as they are often closely linked to their family and spouses. Relationships are also important in an academic setting as the teacher and student should work together to reach a common goal. This understanding of relationships may be why married individuals attempt to uphold the academic standards of the professor and are able to recognize academic dishonesty.

Although male response for this survey was low with eighteen responses, it is important to keep in mind the percentage of males in this study (12.2%) is higher than the percentage of males in the workforce (5.4%) (Gomez, 2003). Therefore, these results are statistically significant. Females recognized academic dishonesty more frequently than males in the areas of examinations and class assignments. Males outperformed females in regards to laboratory assignments.

The final variable investigated was class standing. The researchers expected to find that as nursing students progressed through the program they would be able to more easily identify academic dishonesty. However, this was not the case. The Junior class was able to recognize the greatest number of scenarios as academically dishonest. The Senior class followed, while the Sophomores did a poor job in recognizing academic dishonesty. A possible explanation for the Sophomore class is that they are new to the program and have not yet learned the moral and ethical standards the nursing program promotes. In contrast the Junior level nursing students are in the core of the nursing curriculum taking their hardest classes and finally beginning to feel like a real nurse. They desire to hold the same high ethical standards as the nurses they are looking
up to in clinical. Finally, the senior class has become comfortable in clinical and class situations and therefore may not take assignments as seriously. They have been working hard for four years, are tired and looking forward to graduation. They have been in the program longer and have made more connections with classmates and potentially found more ways to cheat.

The theoretical framework that guided this research potentially validates reasons as to why students may cheat. In Symphonological Bioethical Theory, there is a relationship between students and teachers and if either party does not uphold their expected commitments and obligations, the relationship suffers. The researchers at the beginning of the study expected that students would be able to identify academically dishonest behaviors because they knew what behaviors would damage the student-teacher relationship. That relationship is essential to their success. The students were not fully successful in identifying academically dishonest behaviors. Therefore, one reason students may cheat is because they lack a student teacher relationship or they have a poor student teacher relationship in which there are no consequences if that relationship is damaged or broken. If a student respects and feels that the professor truly wants them to succeed they may be more likely to refrain from dishonest behavior. This goes both ways as students must uphold their part of the relationship as well by putting forth their best effort and maintaining honesty in all assignments.

**Limitations**

The limitations within this study include the limited sample size. An additional limitation includes the unequal number of responses between the three classes as the senior class had the majority of responses (53%). The use of convenience sampling may also be a limitation in that the data cannot be generalized to all nursing students.
Conclusion

In conclusion, academic dishonesty is a continuing issue for nursing education. Students and faculty need to be provided with education about academic dishonesty in that it extends beyond examinations and into their class and laboratory assignments. Further research should examine why students perceive honesty differently between examinations, class assignments, and laboratory assignments. Additionally, research should examine the student teacher relationship and how it impacts student’s willingness to refrain from academic dishonesty.
References


Table 1

*Demographics of Sample Population*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS STANDING</th>
<th># of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARITAL STATUS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Survey Tool and Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenarios</th>
<th>Students who responded “yes”</th>
<th>Students who responded “no”</th>
<th>Students who responded “not sure”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During an end of year examination, a student goes to the bathroom and looks at some hidden notes to find answers.</td>
<td>143 (95.97%)</td>
<td>3 (2.01%)</td>
<td>2 (1.34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two students sit next to each other in a class test. The instructor asks students to grade their colleague’s answers. The two students swap papers and grades each others test leniently.</td>
<td>117 (78.52%)</td>
<td>17 (11.41%)</td>
<td>13 (8.71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student writes some notes on her arm and uses them to answer some questions in an exam.</td>
<td>146 (97.99%)</td>
<td>1 (0.67%)</td>
<td>2 (1.34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a memory prompt, a student writes some mnemonics and abbreviations on her hand before going into an exam.</td>
<td>124 (83.22%)</td>
<td>12 (8.05%)</td>
<td>13 (8.72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is having difficulty writing an assignment. He borrows work from a friend and uses this to gain ideas for his own write up.</td>
<td>24 (16.11%)</td>
<td>101 (67.79%)</td>
<td>23(15.44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is having difficulty writing an assignment. She photocopies the work of a friend and then uses parts of this to write up her assignment without the knowledge of her friend.</td>
<td>141 (94.63%)</td>
<td>3 (2.01%)</td>
<td>5 (3.36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>Frequency (Percentage)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is having difficulty writing an assignment. She photocopies the work of a friend and then uses parts of this to write up her assignment, with the permission of her friend</td>
<td>107 (71.81%)</td>
<td>27 (18.12%)</td>
<td>15 (10.07%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student finds an internet site which is relevant to his work. He cuts and pastes portions of this in his own work, changing it very little. He does not use quotation marks but lists the name of the websites in his references.</td>
<td>114 (76.51%)</td>
<td>18 (12.08%)</td>
<td>17 (11.41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is writing an assignment. She takes several quotes directly from a journal without using quotation marks and does not reference them.</td>
<td>141 (94.63%)</td>
<td>3 (2.01%)</td>
<td>5 (3.36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following a laboratory exercise which produces no results, a student makes up some results for her write up.</td>
<td>108 (72.48%)</td>
<td>22 (14.77%)</td>
<td>19 (12.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is following a schedule in a laboratory examination. He does not understand one of the instructions, so asks his neighbor.</td>
<td>22 (14.77%)</td>
<td>101 (67.79%)</td>
<td>26 (17.45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students hand down coursework and laboratory reports for use by other students in lower classes.</td>
<td>67 (44.97%)</td>
<td>56 (37.58%)</td>
<td>26 (17.45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>