What Does Cheating Mean? Cheating vs. Breaking the Rules in School, Sports, and Relationships

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Introduction

- Cheating is poorly regarded and understood, yet it may be the most human thing we do. It is observed in every domain of public and private life.
- Despite an intense popular interest in cheating, it’s not entirely clear what we mean when we talk about it. For example, is cheating the same as “breaking the rules”?
- It’s also unclear how peoples’ attitudes about cheating may differ across domains like sports, school, and relationships.
- The purpose of this study was to (1) explore the meaning of cheating (vs. rule breaking) and (2) determine whether priming participants with questions about cheating versus breaking the rules would lead to significant differences in their attitudes toward cheating in sports, academics, and relationships.
- We hypothesized that participants primed with questions about cheating may hold more negative attitudes toward cheating than those primed with questions about breaking the rules.

Methods

- Participants completed the study online using Qualtrics. They first completed one of two questionnaires that asked identical questions changing only whether “cheating” or “breaking the rules” was used.
- Following the initial survey, a modified version of the ATC was administered. Each section asked matched questions about cheating in the context of academics, sports, and relationships.
- To conclude, participants provided demographic information, including age, gender, years in school, years in a relationship, and years doing sports.

Results

- Analysis of variance revealed that the groups (i.e., primed with cheating questions versus breaking the rules questions) did not differ significantly the total score on the modified ATC or on its sports, academics, or relationships subscales (see Figure 1).

Discussion/ and Conclusion

- Analysis of the priming questionnaires suggested that more people thought negatively about cheating.
- Majority of participants believed that cheating was more likely to be an intentional act that involved deception, whereas breaking the rules more likely an accident that could potentially have a good outcome. (See Figure 1)
- Evidence showed that participants viewed cheating in relationships as worse than sports and even more so than academics. This was reflected in both priming surveys and domain surveys. (See Figure 2)
- A limitation of this study is the small sample size. A larger sample may be needed to explore planned factor analyses and any potential effects of survey-priming.

Population and Measures

- 100 participants were recruited from university sports teams and classes, family members, and friends.
- The survey’s population consisted of 32 men, 64 women, 2 did not identify; 13 were 18-21 years, 55 were 21-26 years, 30 were 26+ years, 2 did not answer.
- 32 participants began but did not complete the survey.
- Participants completed a survey comprising demographic questions, one of either the cheating or breaking the rules priming questionnaire, as well as modified versions of the Attitudes Toward Cheating Scale (ATC; Gardner & Melvin, 1988) to include questions about school, sports, and relationships.
- Analysis of the priming questionnaires suggested that more people thought negatively about cheating.
- Majority of participants believed that cheating was more likely to be an intentional act that involved deception, whereas breaking the rules more likely an accident that could potentially have a good outcome. (See Figure 1)
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- A limitation of this study is the small sample size. A larger sample may be needed to explore planned factor analyses and any potential effects of survey-priming.