Attitudes of Students and Teachers on Cheating Behaviors: Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study at Six Dental Colleges in India


Abstract: Cheating behavior has been a serious problem in dental institutions across the globe. Attitudes of dental students have an impact on the quality of health care provided to their patients. This descriptive cross-sectional study had the following objectives: to assess and compare the attitudes of dental students and teachers about cheating behaviors, to assess students’ opinions of various justifications for their cheating, and to assess teachers’ attitudes towards various punishment options for cheating behaviors. The study sample consisted of 1,261 undergraduate students and 131 teachers from six randomly chosen dental colleges in Tamil Nadu State, India. A closed-ended questionnaire was used for respondents to rate the seriousness of cheating behaviors. The students were asked to justify their cheating behavior, and the teachers were asked to assign punishments for the cheating behaviors. The attitudes of students and teachers on the cheating behaviors were analyzed and compared using a Pearson chi-square test, with a confidence interval of 95 percent and significance level of p≤0.05. The attitudes of the teachers and students were statistically different in two cheating behaviors: copying during exams and helping other students copy in exams. The two main justifying reasons students gave for cheating behavior were to pass the exam (59.3 percent) and to obtain a better grade (31.3 percent). Warning and counseling to help the students reassess their moral values were preferred to penalizing punishments by the teachers.

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The basic personality of a person is strongly influenced by his or her attitudes and behavior. The term “behavior” was originally used to describe the observable actions of an individual, but now it includes one’s thoughts and beliefs as well. “Attitude” is one’s evaluation of objects, events, or ideas. It is a mixture of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that predispose a person to respond, in a positive or negative way, to objects, people, processes, or institutions. Our attitudes range from the trivial to the core values that define us. Attitudes can be explicit when we are aware of them and implicit when we do not recognize them. Implicit attitudes influence feelings and behaviors at an unconscious level.1 Some attitudes are complex and involve multiple components. We believe too much candy is bad for oral health, yet we enjoy eating it. Attitudes guide one’s behavior, and behaviors become more consistent with strong attitudes.

Attitudes of dental students have an impact on the quality of health care provided to their patients. Since attitudes shape behavior, assessing the attitudes of the dental students can shed more light on their behavioral component. Studies by Al-Dwairi and Al-Waheidi,2 Andrews et al.,3 and Honny et al.4 assessed cheating behaviors and academic dishonesty of dental and dental hygiene students. Some researchers feel that cheating is the plague of the teaching profession, and they differentiate between planned cheating and panic cheating.5 Planned cheating occurs when the person knowingly plans and intentionally cheats (e.g., drills intentionally on sound enamel of a tooth to
create a caries lesion in a prospective subject for an exam). In panic cheating, rather than being planned, cheating is done out of desperation and fear (e.g., not knowing the answer to a question may make a student turn to copying out of fear of failing). Any form of planned or panic cheating by students needs to be punished. The attitude of the teacher towards the cheating behavior decides the severity of punishment for the students. Our study was planned with the following aims: to assess and compare the attitudes of students and teachers about cheating behaviors, to assess students’ opinions of various justifications for their cheating, and to assess teachers’ attitudes towards various punishment options for the cheating behaviors.

Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted from the Department of Pediatric Dentistry, KSR Institute of Dental Science and Research, Tiruchengode, India. The study proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institution, and Ethical Committee clearance was obtained. The study sample consisted of 1,261 undergraduate dental students and 131 teachers from six randomly chosen dental colleges in Tamil Nadu State, India. Prior to the study, a letter of consent was obtained from the deans of the selected dental colleges.

A closed-ended questionnaire in English, adapted from the articles by Warman et al.6 and Al-Dwairi and Al-Waheidi,2 was used. To ensure the applicability, reliability, and validity of the survey questionnaire with Indian students, a pilot study was carried out with sixty dental students of KSR Institute of Dental Science, Tiruchengode. After the pilot study, the initial thirteen questions were reduced to ten, and a minimum sample size of 1,100 participants was decided for the study. To increase the generalizability of the study, six dental colleges in the state of Tamil Nadu were chosen randomly. The survey form was handed to voluntary participants and collected immediately on completion. Hence, a 100 percent response rate was possible.

All the students and faculty members who participated in the study were asked to rate the seriousness of ten cheating behaviors as either serious or not serious. The second part of the questionnaire evaluated their perception of the reasons for cheating. The third question was on whether they liked studying dentistry or not, and the last was whether they considered themselves ethical or unethical. The teachers were also asked to choose a punishment for those ten cheating behaviors. Statistical analysis was performed using the program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Inc., Version 16). For all statistical tests, a confidence interval of 95 percent and a significance level of p≤0.05 were adopted. The attitudes of students and teachers were analyzed and compared using a Pearson chi-square test.

Results

The questionnaire was returned by all the participants without any attrition in the sample size, for a 100 percent response rate. Table 1 shows the list of ten cheating behaviors assessed and the percentages of students and teachers who considered each a serious cheating behavior. Signing a faculty member’s name in the record book (88.7 percent), falsifying the record and marks (87.2 percent), performing unnecessary procedures on patients to satisfy graduation requirements (85.3 percent), and purposefully creating lesions for the sake of examinations (82.9 percent) were defined as serious cheating by more than 80 percent of the students. Helping other students copy during the exam was considered as serious cheating by only 46.9 percent of the students and 67.2 percent of the teachers. All the remaining nine cheating behaviors were considered serious by more than 70 percent of the teachers. Among the teachers, 90.8 percent felt that signing for the faculty member was a very serious offense. Though the prevalence of seriousness of each cheating behavior varied between teachers and students, there was no significant difference between the two groups for the first eight behaviors. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the opinion of the groups in regards to copying during exam (p=0.005) and helping another student during exam (p<0.001). The two main justifying reasons students gave for their cheating behavior were to pass the exam (59.3 percent) and to obtain a better grade (31.3 percent) (Table 2). Among the students, 88.2 percent confirmed that they liked studying dentistry and 85.6 percent considered themselves ethical.

Table 3 shows that the most preferred punishment by most of the teachers for seven of the cheating behaviors was to warn the student. However, 24.6 percent of them felt that the student should be suspended, and 23.8 percent felt the student should be failed in the exam for signing the faculty mem-
Students not punished for their cheating behaviors have been found to continue similar cheating behavior, having learned that their actions are not egregious enough for punishment by the school. Hence, in this study, the teachers' attitudes towards punishment options were also assessed.

### Cheating Behaviors and Justifications

The ten most common cheating behaviors practiced by dental students in India were included in the study. Among our participants, both students and teachers reported that forging the faculty member’s signature was the most serious cheating behavior. Al Dwairi and Al-Waheidi² and Andrews et al.³ also cheating. Students not punished for their cheating behaviors have been found to continue similar cheating behavior, having learned that their actions are not egregious enough for punishment by the school. Hence, in this study, the teachers’ attitudes towards punishment options were also assessed.

### Discussion

Studies by Lancaster et al.,⁷ Al-Dwairi and Al-Waheidi,² Sharp et al.,⁸ Muñey et al.,⁹ and Muñey and Campbell¹⁰ have shown that cheating behavior is a serious problem in dental institutions. Ozar states that cheating seems to be the only means left for students to retain control over a situation that is slipping away from them.¹¹ Cheating is not limited to examinations. It can happen in the preclinical/lab work assigned to students and also includes forging faculty signatures and falsifying records. This study was conducted not only to assess the attitudes of the Indian students on the cheating behaviors but also to compare their attitudes with those of their teachers. The various justifications for their cheating behaviors were also assessed. McCabe reported that 47 percent of students stated teachers sometimes ignore
found that forging the faculty member’s signature was considered the most serious offense. Providing a faculty member’s signature to clinical work has been viewed as more unethical than getting help for didactic work. In our study, helping other students copy in exams, asking classmates to sign the attendance register, and signing the attendance list for classmates were considered less serious than other cheating behaviors by the students. The teachers felt that proxy of the attendance list was the least unethical among the cheating behaviors. The attitudes of the teachers and students were statistically different on two cheating behaviors: copying during exams and helping other students copy in exams.

The Dental Council of India, established as a result of the Dentist Act of 1948, is the accrediting body that prescribes the curricula for dental training and ensures that proper dental education standards are maintained throughout India. Professional ethics and behaviors and consequences associated with unethical behavior are explained to all students and faculty members on the opening day at the beginning of the first year. The parents who put these students through school are also invited to this meeting. In some dental colleges in India, each teacher is allotted a group of students as wards to be watched over through the entire curriculum. The parents of these wards can approach the respective teachers to follow the student’s academic progress. Teachers usually inform the parents about any misconduct of the students before taking any serious action. The attitude towards cheating could be influenced by various other factors like social, cultural, educational, and economical background of the students also.

Cheating behavior can be based on the psychic triad as explained by Sigmund Freud. The ego is the conscious and reality-oriented portion of the mind. It is the executive of the personality and serves both the id (instinctual drives) and the super ego (moral principles and values). The id says “go ahead and copy” in an exam because it wants the desire to be fulfilled. The ego says “copy when the invigilator is not watching, so that you will not be caught.” The super ego warns the student against it, saying “don’t copy” because it is wrong to copy during exams. The id wins if the student preplans to cheat or copy in the exam (planned cheating). The id again wins when a student panics and instinctively decides to cheat in the examination hall (panic cheating). The super ego wins if he or she realizes that any form of cheating or copying during exam is wrong. Therefore, it is the attitude of the person that determines whether to cheat or not.

Passing the exam or getting a better grade was the most common reason why students said they engage in cheating behaviors in our study. Students passionate about learning work hard to achieve their grades, but the temptation to cheat and score top marks is equally great. The person who cheats has a need to do it and has his or her own justifications for it. Private Indian schools and colleges still strive to show high grade marks and best results to attract more admissions in the forthcoming years. Students are under pressure to perform better and score higher marks. Educational institutions must focus on education without stress and fear. They need to understand that cheating undermines the integrity and moral principles of the students. They must put more emphasis on these values, rather than on obtaining high marks, in order to resolve the severe problem of academic fraud in schools and colleges. According to Bertolami, it is difficult to make students understand that all kinds of cheating are equally unethical. Ethical values do not come from higher education,
but implementing an ethics course with young school children would foster an introspective basis for true behavioral change.

**Punishment Options**

Students are creative in developing cheating techniques, and the availability of new technological tools has given students more creative ways to cheat in examinations. It has become a challenge for teachers to be aware of these techniques and combat these behaviors. Punishment is a process that decreases the occurrence of a behavior. It is the presentation of a stimulus or event following a behavior that acts to decrease the likelihood of the behavior being repeated. Skinner identified two types of aversive events that can act as a punishment: punishment by application and punishment by removal.\(^1\) Punishment by application involves the presentation of a punishing stimulus following a response, while punishment by removal involves the loss or withdrawal of a reinforcer stimulus following a response. In everyday usage, we refer to a particular consequence as a punishment (e.g., bar the student from exam or fail the student for copying). Strictly speaking, it need not work like a punishment all the time because the punishment should actually reduce the future occurrence of the behavior. Punishments should be intended to teach or promote a more appropriate response and not penalize the student for his or her behavior.

In our study, the commonly used punishment options were assessed, and for seven out of the ten cheating behaviors, teachers preferred to warn the student. Punishments like warning and counseling tend to make the students reassess their moral values and avoid unethical behaviors. Academic institutions take measures to decrease the cheating behaviors by installing video cameras during an exam and use computers to customize individual exams.\(^2\) However, dental school administrators and teachers need to work together and develop strategies for not only combating cheating activities but also to boost the ethical understanding of students. The attitude towards education and ethics should be changed, and that, in turn, can improve the behavior of the students.

This study had some limitations. Students may not have been completely honest due to the nature of the sensitive questions and fear of potential disclosure. If the details of socioeconomic status and cultural background of the participants were known, their influence on the cheating pattern could have been studied. Future research should focus on prevalence of planned and panic cheating among dental students and whether severe punishments would cut down planned cheating among dental students.

**Conclusion**

Academic fraud is a major issue today in schools and colleges across the globe. In our study, the most common justifications the students gave for their cheating behaviors were to pass exams and get higher grades. The teachers’ perspectives on justifying cheating behaviors were different from that of the students. Teachers in this study group preferred to warn and counsel the students rather than punish and penalize them for most of their cheating behaviors.

**REFERENCES**