CONTEXTUAL AND PERSONAL REASONS FOR UNETHICAL BEHAVIOURS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Magdalena Iorga[1,2*] and Laszlo-Zoltan Sztankovszky[2]

[1] *Technical University Iasi, Department of Teacher Training, Bd. D. Mangeron 71, Iasi, Romania*
[2] *University of Medicine and Pharmacy Gr.T. Popa, Gen Berthelot 2, Iaşi, 700483, Romania*

Abstract

In a morally corrupt world, education remains the sole rescue anchor to guide the new generation towards a rehabilitation of moral values. The finding is based on the fact that all those studies which have followed moral reasoning have highlighted the importance of moral reasoning in daily life but also in the professional career, the certainty that moral reasoning is deeply connected to the academic preparation level and the importance of teachers as role models able to inspire values and moral principles. The papers' focuses want to identify students' unethical behaviours during the academic years and the differences between different types of faculties.

Keywords: academic field, cheating, unethical behaviour, students

1. Introduction

While investigating the most frequent of unethical behaviours in the academic environment, copying, Pascal's statements offer an original interpretation: "Let it not be claimed that I said nothing new: the arrangement of the material is new; like playing ball, both players touch the same ball, but one of them touches it better. […] The same ideas, arranged differently, result in a different text, just as the same words, arrayed differently, and result in different ideas." "The gains obtained by intellectual theft are direct in the 'cultural industries' area, and indirect in the academic environment. For the latter, the promotion methods, based on ticking boxes in multiple choice tests and on the quantitative amassing of papers – lacking the analysis of discerning individuals - support unethical practices. Students plagiarize in order to write their undergraduate theses; their professors plagiarize in order to be promoted. Scandals never come to an end, and this is not a local case. Unfortunately, although the phenomenon is largely bemoaned, few ever take effective measures to eradicate it." [A. Mihalache, *E-Plagiatul*, Dilema Veche, online at http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/e-plagiatul]

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*E-mail: magdaiorga@yahoo.com, tel.: +40722800936

If we refer to the subject of 'plagiarism as a tolerated deviance', we may not establish which area of investigation is the most interesting; cases in the media range from the pre-academic to the academic level, both women and men, but, especially, both students and teachers. There have been more than a few TV reports about teachers caught cheating at examinations for filling up the vacancies at pre-academic level; thus, one cannot avoid feeling, at times, that the 'wolf' is loose amongst the 'sheep'.

Copying, plagiarizing, data fabrication, etc., turn, from subjects of discussion, into objects of research.

The practice of plagiarism is thus adopted at all levels. Moreover, every new exam session brings to the fore new fraud methods. The terminology is varied, to clearly express the means of cheating: cheat-sheets, ready-mades, ponies etc. Their time seems to have come to an end due to technological advance. Financially challenged students still go for the classic methods, whereas another student category uses electronic devices as cheating aids.

As claimed by Şt. Boncu, it is interesting that "the practice of cheating in exams, at academic level, often the source of conflicts, damaging to the evaluation process and to the educational process in general, has not come under the serious scrutiny of researchers until now." What is more, "students do not believe that this type of deviance may be completely eradicated [1].

Research of unethical conducts in Romanian students, whether these are part of the private or public academic field, but very well adapted to the latest information technology, are extremely few. Such research work, if clean-cut, could bring to the fore many hypotheses for various approaches (psychological, social and political). But, more importantly, the mere existence of this behaviour leads us to three hypotheses.

The first hypothesis would be that the students of the new generation are very 'resourceful' and motivated by the will to obtain remarkable results (on paper) – but, by comparison with previous generations, for whom the GPA was immensely important for obtaining a job, the adoption of such behaviour remains eclipsed.

The second hypothesis refers to the large number of students (following the policies of academic autonomy to increase the number of state-subsidized places and to add self-subsidized places and even distance studies), which makes it impossible for the teacher to control the optimal progress of a written examination. Recourse to various 'inspiration' methods would require, humorously speaking, specialized support from the state organs in charge with 'premeditated theft'; on the other hand, some universities have major problems in what concerns the number of enrolled students. It is a well-known fact that the funds reaching the universities are given *per* (student) *capita*. The Technical University of Iasi, like most Romanian technical universities struggling after 1989, is such a case. Tens of places remain unoccupied at the beginning of the first academic year, and during studies other tens of students withdraw or must repeat the year because of insufficient credits. This decimation of students brings with itself a decrease in financial resources, a fact which affects both teaching

staff and facilities. "If we ask ourselves how the lenience of many academic teaching staff members may be explained, the root cause is this: holding worthless, compiled lectures, one adopts lenience towards students in order to prevent any founded reproofs from their side. A second cause is the fear of the possible disappearance of didactic norms […] rejecting too many" naturally leading to a decrease in the number of classes. Poor students are thus 'helped' to go through university [1].

Finally, the third hypothesis targets the valuation of the teacher or self-valuation, as an individual who is training to become a professional; this remains uncertain.

In addition to the cheating methods employed by the student, for which he is rarely penalized, information sources are increasingly numerous.

Most studies describe this behaviour as frequent, as part of normal student life, as accepted, even encouraged and joked upon. As an explanatory note, students' encouragements for one another have truly become folklore, passed from one generation to the next: remarks about those who fail exams, such as 'the first six years are tough, just till you reach third year' or 'no fail, no prevail', by their black humour, make academic failure easier to bear, but, on the other hand, they contribute to the support and acceptance of students by their peers.

It bears mentioning, however, that in a recent study, published in *Issues of Accounting Education*, the authors of the article emphasize that, for instance, the term 'plagiarism' is not correctly defined in students' speech, which may sometimes lead to mistaken interpretations when evaluating unethical behaviours. The article cites a definition from *British Psychology* that considers plagiarism "materials copied for home essays, from a book or another publication, with no mention of the source" [3].

The term 'copying' is a general one to students, who do not differentiate between copying from their colleagues, from written sources during exams, from books or specialized publications in order to write an essay. A lack of awareness about these assumed behaviours, as well as their severity distributed along a hierarchical scale (and, consequently, with hierarchical penalties), may lead to students' confusion regarding what they are or are not allowed to do. The study carried out by Bushway & Nash and presented by Şt. Boncu analyzes students' perceptions of copying; the methods they employ in order to be efficient or to control this conduct; the character traits of people who opt for copying as a manner of passing exams or improving grades, and cultural differences [1].

2. Is plagiarism taught in schools?

The term *plagiarus*, from Latin, defines "an individual guilty of having taken a slave away from his rightful owner. Martial is the first to use the term closer to its present-day sense, claiming that to use a verse from the works of another is as if you stole one of his slaves." [A. Mihalache, *E-Plagiatul*].Cases of plagiarism and content fabrication are widespread in the Romanian educational environment. Intellectual theft is so common, that it has entered the

routine of carrying out one's tasks, especially those of an academic kind. Looking up information on the Internet, while drafting an essay or preparing homework, is much more frequent than using a bibliography, not merely for reasons of speed, but also for the advantage offered by a computer, of being able to copy & paste. And, in order to save even more time, specialized websites are permanently within reach of those who consider time too precious to waste on education.

We consider plagiarism to be the consequence of the Romanian educational system, strongly theoretical and directed towards mechanical memorization and accurate rendering of content. There are more than a few examples, starting at primary school level – learning texts by rote is encouraged, rather than their creation. The baccalaureate exam scales, or the university entrance examinations (prior to the admission dossiers) were conditioned by the reach of certain ideas, but ultimately the difference was made by the fidelity of rendering a text. Before the year 2000, exam papers were appreciated by their number of pages, rather than by the originality of their ideas. Entire generations of graduates may still accurately render fragments from the works of certain writers, which they had to commit to memory and use for 'literary analyses'. Romanian language teachers used to dictate such analyses from beginning to end, not just to ease their work, but also to have a clear way of identifying their own students among hundreds or thousands of papers. "You have not written well" really meant "you have not reproduced accurately." [4]

In our opinion, plagiarism is 'taught' in Romanian schools, and its practical methods are improved every year. There is no way to eradicate these, since they are practiced at all levels – by teaching staff, students and researchers. This is why they are not considered among the main ethical problems in the academic environment, although plagiarism features in the ethical codes of higher learning institutions.

The study of D. Cutaş, proves that the importance of plagiarism is almost ignored by university teachers, students and administrative staff, but rated as the third most serious problem by doctoral students. The following data has been obtained by the author of that study: 56% of students answering the survey did not know if their faculty had clear citation and paraphrasing standards; 17% claimed that there were no such standards; 51% were aware of cases when teaching staff had taken paragraphs or fragments from other authors, without citation/paraphrase; 54% were aware of cases when their colleagues had plagiarized in their papers.

In what concerns doctoral students, D. Cutaş's study shows that: 47% did not know if their faculty had clear citation and paraphrasing standards; 18% claimed that there were no such standards; 33% were aware of cases when their colleagues had plagiarized in published papers or lectures; 25% were aware of cases when doctoral students had plagiarized; 44% were aware of cases when undergraduate students had plagiarized.

Having teaching experience both in Romania and in foreign universities, the author describes the manner in which first-year students at the University of Manchester are instructed about plagiarism and the methods of checking essays and papers submitted, criteria that might appear absurd, or extremely strict, in a Romanian institution.

"From January 2006 to August 2007 I graded approximately two hundred essays and a few dozen dissertations at the University of Manchester. I never came across a case of plagiarism. When enrolling at this university, each student signs a declaration that explains what plagiarism is, by which he or she commits to having been informed and to having no intention of plagiarism. Each paper – four thousand word long at undergraduate, and five thousand word long at postgraduate level, mandatory for all courses of study – is graded by two individuals, and then, with their grade, students receive a formative report containing the observations of the first person grading. Those who grade take on the obligation to check each and every paper on the anti-plagiarism soft (www.submit.ac.uk) and to sign a statement that they have done so – after which random papers are verified again by external evaluators. Cases of plagiarism are extremely rare and shameful. During my stay in Manchester, in my department there was only one such case. The student had largely used in his paper, among other, correctly cited material, an idea (that had been taught during a lecture) belonging to an academic that he failed to cite. The penalty, apart from a reduced grade, was an interdiction against any academic distinction at graduation for that student (who had good overall results). This penalty is very serious, making it very difficult or even impossible for the student to be admitted to postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom (in order to be admitted to masteral studies, most universities in this country require at least one 'merit' received at graduation)." [5]

3. Problem statement

The numerous studies focused on the issue of ethics at an academic level have emphasized the fact that, in the last fifty years, at least at the level of students' moral behaviour, including someone into the 'deviant student' category means that this person is not among those who were included or included themselves, at least once during their academic years, in an academically wrong behaviour [6]. Bower's study [7], carried out on over 5000 students in 99 higher learning institutions, revealed that three out of four students admitted to having practiced different forms of academic fraud, such as: plagiarism, copying answers from other students during exams, consulting their notes during written exams, doing homework that the teacher indicated as individual work in collaboration with others, or lying to the teacher about their reasons for turning in papers past the deadline. McCabe and Trevino [8] investigated a batch of 6000 students in 31 academic campuses, with results similar to Bowers' study. Two out of three investigated individuals admitted to having taken active part in questionable behaviours during their academic years

prior to the study. Other studies prove that the percentages of academic dishonesty stay over 70% [6, 9, 10-12].

James Rest summarizes the main conclusions: between the ages of 20 and 30, young adults go through dramatic and spectacular changes in their strategies for solving ethical problems. These changes are related to certain shifts in social perception and in the social roles that individuals take. The scale of these changes is associated to the length and level of education. Educational attempts to enhance acuity in sensing moral problems and to reach maturity in ethical reasoning have had measurable results [13].

Scientific literature mentions a few important aspects, such as: proving the importance of the environment, personality traits and moral commitment in shaping the ethical portrait [14], underlining the fact that, in the maturation of ethical behaviour, the discipline policies and support of the faculty are significant [15], identifying five areas of manifestation of unethical behaviour: cheating in tests and homework; inappropriate use of resources; the quasi-error, the subtle manipulation and the coarse manipulation [16], proving the importance of the student's maturity level, with regard to the level of ethical behaviour [17], identifying peer disapproval as the strongest factor to influence avoidance of unethical behaviours and actions [9], the assimilated practice of ethical behaviours throughout the years of study or the indirect participation in these later, in one's professional career - a study that included second and third-year students revealed that those who participated in or witnessed unethical behaviours and situations would later engage in this type of behaviours [18], proposing three important factors for covering the levels of moral maturation, namely: the psychological, demographic and situational factor [19].

4. The study

The participants in the study are 369 students of one of the main Romanian university centres. The students come from five prestigious Romanian universities, of various profiles: technical, arts, medical sciences, agriculture, and teaching. They were surveyed about the practice of unethical behaviours during their academic years. 64.2% are female (N = 237) and 35.8% are male (N = 132). They mainly come from north-eastern Romanian counties – 93.7% (N = 346), especially from Iasi, the studied university centre – 44.4% (N = 164), the rest of 16.3% (N = 23) being from other regions of the country. Most of them come from urban areas – 80.5% (N = 297), the rest being from rural areas – 19.5% (N = 72). Students from 19 types of faculties and 21 counties were taken into consideration. The surveyed subjects attend specialized courses (academic years I-VI).

The data has been analyzed using the SPSS 17.0 program for Windows, with frequency and descriptive data field analysis, cross-analysis, benchmarking averages (ANOVA, T-test) and nonparametric tests (chi-square test).

5. Findings

The study emphasized the differences between the various fraud methods employed by students, comparatively in the five universities, taking into account the following variables: sex, the environment of origin, year of study, number of siblings and one's place in the family, the type of family and the motivation leading to such behaviours.

5.1. *Practicing unethical behaviours (copying) in relation to the type of university and faculty*

The surveyed students come from Al.I. Cuza University (43.4%, N = 160), the Technical University (37.4%, N = 138), the University of Applied Life Sciences and Environment (10%, N = 37), the University of Medicine and Pharmacy (6%, N = 22) and the University of Arts (3.3% N = 12) (Table 1). The students come from 19 types of faculties (Agriculture; Architecture; Automatic Control and Computer Engineering; Biology; Civil Engineering and Building Services; Economy; Electronics, Telecommunications and Information Technology; Electrical Engineering; Geodesy and Environmental Engineering; Geography; Hydrotechnical Engineering; Informatics; Mathematics; Medicine – General Practice; Philosophy; Psychology; Machine Manufacturing and Industrial Management; Materials Science and Engineering; Textiles & Leather Engineering and Industrial Management; Theatre).

Table 1. Distribution according to the type of university.

University	General batch	Students who cheat	Percentage differences	Significant/Insignificant
Al.I. Cuza University	43.4%	38.1%	5.3	significant
Technical University	37.4%	39.2%	-1.8	insignificant
University of Applied Life Sciences and Environment	10.0%	11.3%	-1.3	insignificant
University of Medicine and Pharmacy	6.0%	6.8%	-0.8	insignificant
University of Arts	3.3%	4.5%	-1.2	insignificant

5.2. *Students' unethical behaviors*

265 students taking part in the study, representing 71.8%, admitted to having copied during exams at least once; 83% of these (N = 220) were never caught, 16.2% (N = 43) were occasionally caught, and only 0.8% (N = 2) were always caught.

Several types of unethical behaviour were found out to be practiced during academic years (Table 2). A higher frequency was encountered with second year students, by comparison with the other years of study (I, III-VI).

Table 2. The frequency of unethical behaviours.

Unethical behaviour	%
Using unquoted Internet sources	61.1%
Copying answers from another student during examinations	34.7%
Using notes during written examinations	13.6%
Doing homework that the teacher indicated as individual work in collaboration with other students	33.6%
Reading an abridged version, a summary of the work, instead of the complete version	30.6%
Finding out in advance the subjects to be tackled in an examination, from different sources	17.4%
Not quoting and not emphasizing the quotes inserted into an academic paper	10.6%

Many types of motivation were revealed to be the reasons for practicing unethical behaviours: the difficulty of the course, the insufficient time to prepare, too much to learn, the interest for the subject or the lenience of the teacher, the importance of the exam or the number of credits. The frequency of the behaviours is showed in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' motivation with regard to their cheating colleagues.

Motivation of the behaviour	%
The course was difficult	31.3%
Insufficient time to prepare	38.1%
There was too much to learn for this course	31.7%
The subject was not interesting	23.4%
The behaviour was practised by several colleagues as well	18.9%
Teacher's lenience	12.8%
The importance of the grade	5.3%
The large number of credits of the course	1.9%

Among others, these behaviours are worth mentioning: writing an academic paper under the name of another student (9.15%), visiting a teacher or his family after an exam, in order to influence him (0.4%), lying to the teacher about the reason for turning in a paper past its deadline (7.5%), illegal access to computer databases (1.1%), sabotaging lab experiments (1.9%), buying academic essays, papers, etc. (4.2%), offering 'gifts' to teaching staff in cases of

exam failure (3%), buying the subjects to be given in future exams (1.5%), paper or written material fabrication, by inventing quotation sources (4.5%).

5.3. *Students' motivation to practice unethical behaviours*

The most frequent reasons why students resort to unethical behaviours are related to objective parameters of academic life (the high levels of difficulty of courses or the short time to prepare), while the least frequent reasons are related to subjective factors (teacher's lenience, the importance of a good grade for the student).

5.4. *Students' attitudes towards those who copy*

Over 90% of students have witnessed a colleague copying. Out of these, 60% made observations directly to those colleagues, while only 4.8% told the teachers about those behaviours.

Copying is a behaviour to be penalized in any educational institution, and there are various methods to discourage and decrease its practice, in order to offer equal and honest chances to all students. Penalties can greatly vary from one university to another, from throwing students out of an exam to expelling them from the academic environment. Discouraging this behaviour by the educational institution, however, is not supported by the students' attitudes. The study reveals that students do not take attitude in order for their copying colleagues to be penalized, although this might harm them. An earlier study [20] emphasizes the fact that the answers of students who witness their colleagues copying and do not take a moral attitude take the stance of indifference ('it's his business') and by transferring the responsibility to the teacher ('the teacher should take attitude').

5.5. *Family typology and unethical behaviours*

The issue of work migration has important effects on Romanian families. The SOROS and UNICEF statistics have revealed that over 8% of children have at least one parent working abroad. The migration of parents is motivated by the desire to ensure better living conditions for their families and a better education for their children. Including this variable in the study has not revealed a significant difference in the practice of unethical behaviours between children whose families are home and those with at least one parent working abroad.

Table 4. Students with relatives working abroad.

Respondents' category	General batch	Batch of students who copy	Percentage differences	The evaluation of the difference
yes	71	31.7	-2.7	significant
no	29	68.3	2.7	significant

Approximately 18% of the surveyed students have at least one parent and 30% of them have at least one relative working abroad: the mother (8.1%), the father (4.3%), both parents (5.2%), siblings (11.7%) (Table 4).

6. Discussion

Beside the data regarding the academic motivations, data was collected on reasons that supposedly influence the emergence of unethical behaviours, such as: a single parent family, siblings or parents working abroad, the number of siblings, getting married, and having children.

It has been observed that most students come from two-parent families (85.9%, N = 317); 13.6% (N = 50) of the students surveyed come from single parent families, and 0.5% (N = 2) are orphan. In this sense, one may affirm that 70.7% (N = 261) of students have no close relative working abroad, 8.1% (N = 30) have the mother working abroad, 4.3% (N = 16) have the father working abroad, 5.2% (N = 19) have both parents abroad and 11.7% (N = 43) have siblings abroad.

Most students are single children – 37.4% (N = 138), closely followed by those who have one sibling – 34.1% (N = 126), by those with two siblings – 19% (N = 70), and by those with three siblings – 6% (N = 22). Only 3.5% (N = 13) come from families with more than 4 children. Of the students who have at least one sibling – 62.6% (N = 231), most – 41.5% (N = 96) are the youngest in the family, 30% (N = 70) are the eldest, and 28.5% (N = 65) have both younger and older siblings.

Almost a quarter of the surveyed students are married – 24.7% (N = 91), and 19.2% have children (N = 71), of whom 2.8% (N = 10) have children out of marriage.

The justification of unethical behaviour has most often been the difficulty of the subject studied (31.3%), followed by the insufficient time to prepare (38.1%) and by the great quantity of study material (31.7%). Other commonly invoked reasons have been that the subject was not interesting (23.4%), and that others were doing the same (18.9%). On the other hand, the less commonly invoked reasons have been teacher lenience (12.8%) and the importance of a good grade (5.3%), or the large number of credits of the course (1.9%).

90% (N = 332) of those surveyed witnessed at least one colleague copying. Of these, 83.2% (N = 307) took no attitude whatsoever. Of the 62 who did take an attitude, most (54.8%, N = 34) warned those who were copying, 40.3% (N = 25) told the other colleagues about this fact, and only 4.8% (N = 3) alerted the teachers about what had happened. With respect to the students' attitudes when witnessing a colleague copying, those who engage in such behaviour themselves tend to warn more often than those who never cheat, but the difference is not statistically relevant – p = 0,126. No factor to influence the attitude towards those who copy has been detected (sex, the environment of origin, the university or faculty, family abroad etc.), the statistical calculations revealing p > 0.7 confidence indices for all of these factors.

The cross-analysis has not turned out differences between those who copied and those who did not, apart from their environment of origin, relatives working abroad, their university and faculty, and their year of study. Thus, students from rural areas have had a higher percentage among those who copied, but calculating averages has not revealed a significant difference (p = 0.096). The students who have not copied have been found out, to a greater extent, not to have parents working abroad – namely, 31% of the students with no parent working abroad have not copied, while this is only true for 20.5% of those with parents abroad (p = 0.05).

A comparison between universities shows that, only in the case of students preparing to become teachers, the number of those who copy is lower than two thirds. In other universities, those who copy represent over 75%, T-Test calculations showing the significant difference between the first university mentioned and each of the others.

Faculty analysis shows that only Mathematics and Psychology students have a higher percentage of students who do not copy, by comparison with those who do (63.6% vs. 36.4%, respectively 50.7% vs. 49.3%). At all other faculties, the percentage of those who have not copied is below 25%. In addition, there has been a significant difference between students who are single children, 62.3% of whom have copied, by comparison with those with one or several siblings, 77% of whom have copied (p = 0.02).

In the case of students who have siblings, those with one sibling have had the highest percentage of cheating behaviours – 81.7%, the percentage decreasing as the number of siblings increases.

The ANOVA test establishes the confidence index p = 0.045. Moreover, a difference may be noted between students, in relation with their order of birth within the family. 34.6% of the students who are the elder siblings do not copy, but only 15.6% of the youngest siblings do not copy, the average calculation revealing a confidence index p = 0.047.

Being married and having children seem to represent 'protection factors' against copying, but the average calculation confirms this only in the case of married students, 35.6% of whom do not copy, compared to single students, 25% of whom do not copy (p = 0.049).

7. Conclusions

The results of the study show that over 70% of students practice unethical behaviours. Psychology and Mathematics students are the least inclined to adopt cheating behaviors. There is a number of student categories more frequently associated with unethical behaviours: those whose parents work abroad, those who come from families with two children, and, by birth order, those who are the youngest in the family.

With regard to marital status data, unmarried students are more prone to practise unethical behaviours than married students. No significant differences

have been revealed to depend on sex, the environment of origin, or becoming a parent.

Acknowledgment

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