

Students Perception of Ethics: Implications for National Development

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Abstract

This paper examines the students' perceptions of ethics and the implication of such views for national development using cheating in an academic situation as an indicator of unethical behaviors. A total of 311 undergraduate students, 176 female and 135 male were surveyed. These students were given a set of questions about different instances of academic cheatings that are common among students on a 5- point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not dishonest) to 5 (very severe dishonesty) to indicate their behaviors towards these situations, their responses describe their sense of ethics. The T-test of difference between means and ANOVA were used to statistically analyze the differences between the mean scores. The study found among other things that an average student sees cheating as dishonesty but not as a very serious evil. No significant difference was found between the female and the male students though the female students were seen to be more ethical. Year one students were seen to be more ethical than other classes. These findings indicates that there is need for ethical promotion and education and if ethics education is not encouraged in our institutions of higher learning, the students' who are the tomorrow's leaders and professionals may not be able to support and sustain national development. Since the female are found to be more ethical, engaging and encouraging them in their professions will definitely promote a better ethical atmosphere, which is a booster to national development. This study sees unethical behavior as a bane to national development while, ethical behavior is seen as a key factor that supports national development.

1.0 Introduction

In our increasingly globalized business world, promotion of good ethical behaviors and goals is good business and helps in the healthy building of a nation. The word ethics is the principle of morality, including both the science of the good and the nature of the right. It involves doing the right thing in the right manner. It is a system of moral principles or rules of behaviors. Ethics involves doing things in the most transparent ways, upholding integrity at all times and doing everything humanly possible to tackle and pull down corruption. It is a topical issue in many societies today. Different societies both in the developed and developing

world have in the recent times witnessed the collapse of many organizations due to questionable characters of some people at the helm of affairs of these organizations. This collapse is possible because men and women in our society today are self-centered; they seek selfish gains rather than upholding the public trust on them.

The collapse of Enron Corporation, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson, Global Crossing and others were as a result of illegal and unethical behavior by the corporate leaders. The Nigerian business environment is not left out; there have been cases of reported unethical behavior in Nigeria by companies like Cadbury Nigeria PLC, African Petroleum PLC and Lever Brothers PLC. The collapse of many banks and other financial institutions has been linked with various ethical violations (Ajibolade, 2008; Okafor, 2011). Some of the professionals involved in these incidents actively participated in cover-ups, shredding documentary evidence of their corporate misconduct and creating an elaborate web of intentionally misleading corporate structures; and some of these professionals merely looked the other way as such deceptions occurred in the workplace (Smyth, Davis & Kroncke, 2009)

The consequences of the many cases of unethical behaviors have underscored the importance of ethics in organizations (Ajibolade, 2008). There is need to tackle corruption headlong and make significant inroad into the issue of transparency and good ethical behaviour for sound economic growth and development not to elude us; and real business whether domestic or foreign to be possible (Okonjo-Iwuala, 2003). It is very important to awaken the interest of our people towards building an ethical framework for brighter future and better management of public trust. There is need to re-orientate our people on the need to embrace integrity and ethics. Ethical re-orientation of students' who are future leaders is very essential and is believed that it will change their value system to a great extent. High ethical behavior of students is an indicator of high educational quality, and which will make a way to high national development. Evan and Marcal (2005) hold that one of the possible contributor to the current ethical crisis is the role of business schools; that if students are not exposed to ethically challenging situations in school, they will be unprepared for and more likely to fail in providing needed ethical leadership when they enter business. The suggestion of the above statement is that ethical orientation starts in school.

This study therefore examined the undergraduate students' perceptions of ethics and the implication of such views for national development using cheating in an academic situation as an indicator of unethical behaviors. This study specifically looked at the average ethical behavior of students; the differences in behavior among students' in general; the differences in behavior between female students and male students; and the implications of these behaviors for national development.

In line with the objectives of this study, the following research questions were raised

- i. Is an average undergraduate student ethical?
- ii. Are the female students more ethical than their male counterparts?
- iii. Is there any difference in ethical behavior among the different classes of students?
- iv. What are the implications of the students' ethical behavior for future global competitiveness?

2.0 Review Of Related Literature

The word ethics is the principle of morality, including both the science of the good and the nature of the right. It involves doing the right thing in the right manner. It is a system of moral principles or rules of behaviors. Ethics is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and

right and wrong or with moral duty and obligation (Webster's New International Dictionary, 1997). In the words of Hurn (2008), ethics is considered as the study of "human duty in its wider sense", emphasizing the common thread of the recognition of obligation and acceptance of responsibility for how one's actions would impact on other people.

In this research, we used students' perception of cheating in an academic situation as an indicator of ethical behaviors of the students. This study is based in part on the study carried on by Smyth, Davis and Kroncke (2009) which indicated that female students are more ethical than male students; that non-business students on the average are more ethical than business majors; and that upper division students are more ethical than lower division students. Ajibolade (2008) carried out a study on accounting students perception of ethical behaviour and found out that beginning students have higher ethical perception scores than the final year students. This is in contrast to the finding of Smyth, Davis and Kroncke (2009). Davis and Welton (1991) found that lower division students have lower ethical standards than do upper division students'. Lipson and McGavern (1993) as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) determined that sophomores (second year students) cheat most. Haines, Diekhoff, LeBeff and Clark's (1986) research as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) showed no significant difference in cheating behaviour on the basis of academic classes. Rocha and Teixeira (2006) as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) conducted a multinational study on academic cheating and found that the magnitude of academic fraud is not constant across countries and that there is a positive correlation between the amount of academic fraud in a country and its level of real-world business corruption. The implication of this finding is that increase in cheating in institutions of higher learning will in effect lead to increase in corruption in a real business world condition, and this corruption is a bane to national development of any country.

3.0 Data And Methodology

To examine the ethical attitudes of Nigerian students, we used students' perception of cheating in an academic situation as a proxy of ethical behaviors of the students. We surveyed the opinion of undergraduates from different faculties from a public institution in Anambra state, Nigeria. A total of 400 questionnaires were given to the students but only a total of 311 questionnaires were duly completed and returned, this represents 77.75% response. This total of 311 undergraduate students, made up of 176 female students and 135 male students formed the basis for this survey. These students were given a set of questions about different instances of cheating that are common among students on a 5- point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not dishonest) to 5 (very severe dishonesty) to indicate their behaviors towards these situations, their responses describe their sense of ethics. Scale 1= not dishonest, 2= very slight dishonesty, 3= slight dishonesty, 4= severe dishonesty and 5= very severe dishonesty. The t-test of difference and ANOVA were used to analyze the responses of the students.

4.0 Data Analysis

Cheating is an evil from any angle it is viewed. It is being perpetrated by unethical persons, so is an unethical behavior. Questions on academic cheating stances of student will help us determine how ready we are as a nation to effectively contribute towards the development of our nation. Rocha and Teixeira (2006) as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) conducted a multinational study on academic cheating and found that there is a positive correlation between the amount of academic fraud in a country and its level of real-world business corruption. Students are the future professionals and leaders who will lead different

organizations and manage public funds; therefore, training them to be of good ethical behavior will be of great gain not only to the nation but to the individuals. The responses to the questions are represented in the tables below.

Table 1: Academic Cheating Instances Examined

Questions	Academic Cheating Instances
1	Increasing the margins or font size to make a term paper appear longer
2	Telling the lecturer a false reason for missing a class or an exam
3	Doing less work than your share in a group project
4	Looking at another student's paper during an exam
5	Allowing another student to look at your paper during an exam
6	Writing an assignment for another student
7	Asking another student to take an exam using your name
8	Using unauthorized sheets during an exam
9	Using sources for a paper which were not included in the bibliography
10	Using direct quotations from other sources, without giving the proper reference
11	Purchasing a paper to turn in as your own
12	Completing another student's exam paper in the exam hall
13	Selling a paper to another student
14	Writing an exam for someone
15	Signing attendance for someone not in class
16	Unauthorized use of school properties

Adapted from Smyth, Davis & Kroncke, 2009

Table 2: Students Responses To The Questions

Questions On Cheating	Responses: 1= not dishonest, 2= very slight dishonesty, 3= slight dishonesty, 4= severe dishonesty and 5= very severe dishonesty					Total Number	Average	R1	R2
	1(%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)				
1	74 (23.8)	91 (29.3)	79 (25.4)	54 (17.4)	13 (4.2)	311	2.49	16 th	16 th
2	40 (12.9)	29 (9.3)	73 (23.5)	119 (38.3)	53 (17.0)	311	3.36	7 th	10 th
3	32 (10.3)	60 (19.3)	64 (20.6)	104 (33.4)	51 (16.4)	311	3.26	9 th	11 th
4	32 (10.3)	37 (11.9)	54 (17.4)	89 (28.6)	99 (31.8)	311	3.60	6 th	6 th
5	52 (16.7)	64 (20.6)	70 (22.5)	70 (22.5)	55 (17.7)	311	3.04	12 th	9 th
6	63 (20.3)	77 (24.8)	63 (20.3)	64 (20.6)	44 (14.1)	311	2.84	14 th	13 th
7	21 (6.8)	14 (4.5)	20 (6.4)	61 (19.6)	195 (62.7)	311	4.27	1 st	1 st
8	21 (6.7)	28 (9.0)	14 (4.5)	69 (22.2)	179 (57.6)	311	4.15	2 nd	3 rd
9	39 (12.5)	63 (20.3)	79 (25.4)	84 (27.0)	46 (14.8)	311	3.11	11 th	12 th
10	47 (15.1)	83 (26.7)	76 (24.4)	73 (23.5)	32 (10.3)	311	2.87	13 th	14 th
11	29 (9.3)	52 (16.7)	33 (10.6)	92 (29.6)	105 (33.8)	311	3.62	5 th	5 th
12	22 (7.1)	32 (10.3)	31 (10.0)	72 (23.2)	154 (49.5)	311	3.98	4 th	4 th
13	53 (17.0)	57 (18.3)	34 (11) (23.8)	74 (23.8)	93 (29.9) (30.6)	311	3.31	8 th	7 th
14	27 (8.7)	23 (7.4)	21 (6.7)	56 (18.0)	184 (59.2)	311	4.12	3 rd	2 nd
15	73 (23.5)	84 (27.0)	65 (20.9)	63 (20.2)	26 (8.4)	311	2.63	15 th	15 th
16	42 (13.5)	70 (22.5)	65 (20.9)	74 (23.8)	60 (19.3) (19.3)	311	3.13	10 th	8 th
Total Average							3.37		

*R1- Ranking by the Mean, **R2- ranking by respondents that see cheating as very severe dishonesty

Table 2 shows the ethical position of the students under study. The total average ethical behavior of students is 3.37, which shows that an average Nigerian student sees most of the cheating cases as dishonesty but, not as very severe dishonesty. Looking at the different cheating cases raised, only three out of the sixteen cases have an average response of up to

4, others have averages of less than 4, showing that an average student does not see some form of cheating as something very severe, meanwhile, it is an evil that can expel a student from school. The implication of not regarding academic cheating as severe dishonest is that when these students who are future professionals graduate, they may not see real business world cheatings of different forms as evil that can cripple national development; and without integrity, global competitiveness may not be possible.

Table 2 also shows that out of all the academic cheating cases examined, that the most highly disapproved behaviors by an average student are cases 7, 14, 8, 12 and 11. The highest ranked, in terms of both mean and percentage of students who see cheating as very severe dishonesty is case 7 “Asking another student to take an exam using your name” 62.7% of the respondents sees case 7 as a very severe dishonesty and another 19.6% sees it as severe dishonesty. 10.9% sees it as either slight dishonesty or very slight dishonesty and only 6.8% sees it as not dishonesty. This represents an overwhelming disapproval of unethical behavior among students. The second most disapproved behavior is case 14 which is “writing an exam for someone”. 59.2% of the respondents sees it as a very severe dishonesty and 18% sees it as severe dishonesty, 14.1% sees it as either slight or very slight dishonest while only 8.7% sees it as not dishonesty. The third most disapproved behavior is case 8 “Using unauthorized sheets during an exam” with 57.6% and 22.2% as very severe and severe dishonesty responses respectively, 6.7% sees it as not dishonesty. Case 12 -“Completing another student’s exam paper in the exam hall” was ranked fourth in the hierarchy of disapproval, followed by case 11 “Purchasing a paper to turn in as your own”

Other significant responses in both ranking orders include:

- i. Looking at another student’s paper during an exam (case 4)
- ii. Telling the lecturer a false reason for missing a class or an exam (case 2)
- iii. Selling a paper to another student (case 13)

These behaviors listed in cases 1-16 are very severe dishonesty and must be avoided for good ethical behavior to have its way. No form of cheating is slight dishonesty; all forms of cheating should always be seen to be very severe dishonesty, if good ethical behavior must be upheld. The above result shows that only academic cheating perpetrated in examination halls are taking as severe by the students. Others which are likely to be perpetrated outside the examination halls are not seen as severe dishonesty. Many were seen as just slight dishonesty or even not dishonest, and that is where our problem of national development lies; regarding unethical behavior as slight dishonest. This suggests that it is only under an examination hall like-situation, where people are being monitored that majority strive to uphold integrity (ethics), outside that, ethics are being underplayed and selfishness upheld in the highest order. An average person tends to behave well under close monitoring and has the tendency of underplaying integrity when not being monitored but, ethical person holds integrity at high esteem even in the darkest room. Self-integrity is very important if any nation will succeed and have sustainable development. To sustain a nation, dishonesty must be abhorred not minding the magnitude and every bit of deviation must be taken as very severe dishonesty.

Table 3: T-test for differences between the mean responses by gender

Question	Sex	N	Mean	Std Dev.	t-test	Sig	t-crit	More ethical
1 Increasing the margins or font size to make a term paper appear longer	F	176	2.51	1.181	0.29	0.77	1.98	F
	M	135	2.47	1.118				

2	Telling the lecturer a false reason for missing a class or an exam	F	176	3.40	2.238	0.56	0.58	1.98	F
		M	135	3.32	1.244				
3	Doing less work than your share in a group project	F	176	3.36	1.201	1.54	0.13	1.98	F
		M	135	3.14	1.276				
4	Looking at another student's paper during an exam	F	176	3.59	1.358	-0.11	0.91	1.98	M
		M	135	3.61	1.270				
5	Allowing another student to look at your paper during an exam	F	176	3.06	1.367	0.27	0.79	1.98	F
		M	135	3.01	1.327				
6	Writing an assignment for another student	F	176	2.89	1.381	0.75	0.45	1.98	F
		M	135	2.77	1.298				
7	Asking another student to take an exam using your name	F	176	4.34	1.150	1.20	0.23	1.98	F
		M	135	4.18	1.233				
8	Using unauthorized sheets during an exam	F	176	4.24	1.201	1.55	0.12	1.98	F
		M	135	4.02	1.313				
9	Using sources for a paper which were not included in the bibliography	F	176	3.10	1.181	-0.17	0.87	1.98	M
		M	135	3.13	1.335				
10	Using direct quotations from other sources, without giving the proper reference	F	176	2.81	1.215	-0.87	0.38	1.98	M
		M	135	2.94	1.244				
11	Purchasing a paper to turn in as your own	F	176	3.61	1.347	-0.06	0.96	1.98	M
		M	135	3.62	1.349				
12	Completing another student's exam paper in the exam hall	F	176	4.03	1.251	0.89	0.38	1.98	F
		M	135	3.90	1.326				
13	Selling a paper to another student	F	176	3.36	1.475	0.70	0.48	1.98	F
		M	135	3.24	1.504				
14	Writing an exam for someone	F	176	4.24	1.229	1.98	0.05	1.98	F
		M	135	3.95	1.405				
15	Signing attendance for someone not in class	F	176	2.61	1.308	-0.26	0.79	1.98	M
		M	135	2.65	1.224				
16	Unauthorized use of school properties	F	176	3.18	1.250	0.72	0.47	1.98	F
		M	135	3.07	1.426				

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of both female and male students on their ethical attitudes towards cheating even though, the female students are found to be more ethical than the male students. The female have higher averages in 11 items out of 16.

Table 4: Mean Responses of Students According to Classes (1 -4)

Question	Yr 1		Yr 2		Yr 3		Yr 4		More ethical
	mean	SD	Mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	
1 Increasing the margins or font size to make a	2.97	1.11	2.33	1.01	2.36	1.26	2.50	1.13	Yr 1

	term paper appear longer									
2	Telling the lecturer a false reason for missing a class or an exam	3.76	1.16	3.33	1.08	3.19	1.36	3.37	1.23	Yr 1
3	Doing less work than your share in a group project	3.26	1.16	3.43	1.15``	3.14	1.32	3.27	1.23	Yr 2
4	Looking at another student's paper during an exam	4.32	1.01	3.22	1.43	3.42	1.27	3.64	1.31	Yr 1
5	Allowing another student to look at your paper during an exam	3.03	1.29	2.96	1.40	2.90	1.40	3.14	1.32	Yr 4
6	Writing an assignment for another student	3.41	1.35	2.74	1.31	2.92	1.35	2.69	1.33	Yr 1
7	Asking another student to take an exam using your name	4.44	1.19	4.02	1.42	4.28	1.01	4.30	1.17	Yr 1
8	Using unauthorized sheets during an exam	4.09	1.11	3.96	1.32	4.26	1.34	4.16	1.33	Yr 3
9	Using sources for a paper which were not included in the bibliography	3.24	1.21	3.20	1.11	2.97	1.36	3.13	1.24	Yr 4
10	Using direct quotations from other sources, without giving the proper reference	2.97	1.17	2.52	1.21	2.94	1.30	2.92	1.20	Yr 1
11	Purchasing a paper to turn in as your own	3.26	1.44	3.48	1.41	3.69	1.33	3.70	1.31	Yr 4
12	Completing another student's exam paper in the exam hall	4.03	1.24	3.76	1.40	4.04	1.23	4.00	1.29	Yr 3
13	Selling a paper to another student	3.50	1.46	3.28	1.54	3.04	1.56	3.42	1.43	Yr 1
14	Writing an exam for someone	4.24	1.23	3.98	1.45	4.12	1.37	4.13	1.27	Yr 1

15	Signing attendance for someone not in class	2.88	1.43	2.37	1.29	2.72	1.23	2.61	1.25	Yr 1
16	Unauthorized use of school properties	3.29	1.29	2.85	1.35	3.59	1.27	3.13	1.33	Yr 3

Looking at the mean responses of the different classes from year one to year four, year one students are seen to be more ethical than other classes. The year one students who are fresh from home are more ethical than other students who have been in school before them. The second year students are worse than other students. This is an indication that that there is need to emphasize the teaching of ethics in our schools from the first year of study to the last, as this is one of the key determinants of national competitiveness.

TABLE 5: ANOVA (Comparison of Differences in Mean Responses by Class)

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
question 1	Between Groups	10.434	3	3.478	2.661	.048
	Within Groups	401.276	307	1.307		
	Total	411.711	310			
question 2	Between Groups	7.836	3	2.612	1.713	.164
	Within Groups	468.106	307	1.525		
	Total	475.942	310			
question 3	Between Groups	2.538	3	.846	.550	.648
	Within Groups	471.841	307	1.537		
	Total	474.379	310			
question 4	Between Groups	27.224	3	9.075	5.446	.001
	Within Groups	511.534	307	1.666		
	Total	538.759	310			
question 5	Between Groups	3.356	3	1.119	.615	.606
	Within Groups	558.181	307	1.818		
	Total	561.537	310			
question 6	Between Groups	15.431	3	5.144	2.896	.035
	Within Groups	545.205	307	1.776		
	Total	560.637	310			
question 7	Between Groups	3.986	3	1.329	.941	.421
	Within Groups	433.325	307	1.411		
	Total	437.312	310			
question 8	Between Groups	2.761	3	.920	.583	.626
	Within Groups	484.435	307	1.578		
	Total	487.196	310			
question 9	Between Groups	2.370	3	.790	.505	.679
	Within Groups	480.691	307	1.566		
	Total	483.061	310			
question 10	Between Groups	6.668	3	2.223	1.483	.219
	Within Groups	460.187	307	1.499		
	Total	466.855	310			
question 11	Between Groups	6.585	3	2.195	1.214	.305
	Within Groups	554.881	307	1.807		
	Total	561.466	310			
question 12	Between Groups	2.618	3	.873	.527	.664
	Within Groups	508.225	307	1.655		
	Total	510.842	310			
question 13	Between Groups	8.807	3	2.936	1.333	.264
	Within Groups	675.939	307	2.202		
	Total	684.746	310			
question 14	Between Groups	1.390	3	.463	.266	.850
	Within Groups	534.443	307	1.741		

	Total	535.833	310			
question 15	Between Groups	5.964	3	1.988	1.234	.297
	Within Groups	494.512	307	1.611		
	Total	500.476	310			
question 16	Between Groups	26.519	3	8.840	5.215	.002
	Within Groups	520.336	307	1.695		
	Total	546.855	310			

Table 6 shows significant differences in the mean responses of four cases out of 16 of the different classes (year one – year four).

4.0 Findings

From the students' responses, we found out that an average student sees cheating as dishonesty but not as a very severe dishonesty. Only the examination related cheatings were viewed as very severe cheatings by majority of the students. Other cheating instances which are perpetrated outside the examination hall were not viewed as very severe as the ones done in examination situations. It shows that it is only under examination hall situations where the students are being monitored that they tend to be more ethical, but outside the monitored environment, an average student plays down on ethics. The female students are found to be more ethical than the male students, even though there are no significant differences between their mean responses. This is in agreement with the findings of Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) which indicated that female students are more ethical than male students.

The fresh (year one) students are found to be more ethical than other classes and the year two students are found to be worst in ethical behavior. But no significant difference was found among the different classes in majority of the cheating circumstances examined but exist in few of the situations. This finding shows that most of the fresh students from home are more ethical than those who have been exposed to the school environment. It is an indication that there is poor ethics education in schools. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Ajibolade (2008) which found out that beginning students have higher ethical perception scores than the final year students. It also agrees with the findings of Lipson and McGavern (1993) as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009) which concluded that sophomores (second year students) cheat most. The finding is in contrast to the finding of Smyth, Davis and Kroncke (2009) and that of Davis and Welton (1991) which found that lower division students have lower ethical standards than do upper division students.

The implication of these findings is that there is need for ethical promotion and education and if ethics education is not encouraged in our institutions of higher learning, the students' who are the future leaders and professionals may not be able to support and sustain national competitiveness and development. If these youngsters are not trained to see every iota of cheating (deviation) as very severe dishonesty, they will still fail the nation when they come up to leadership positions tomorrow. In the words of Rocha and Teixeira (2006) as in Smyth, Davis & Kroncke (2009), there is a positive correlation between the amount of academic fraud in a country and its level of real-world business corruption. Since the female are found to be

more ethical, engaging and encouraging them in their professions will definitely promote a better ethical atmosphere, and thereby promote national development.

5.0 Conclusion

An average student does not see cheating as very severe dishonesty. While some students' see some academic cheating instances as very slight or slight dishonesty, others see them as severe or very severe dishonesty. Dishonesty is dishonesty not minding the degree and should be taken as very severe. It is very important for Nigerian schools to start early to preach and teach integrity (good ethical behavior) as a way of life by introducing ethics education in school, without integrity, our nation cannot find her feet in global competitiveness. Schwarzkopt as in Smith & Smith, (2003) opined that leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character (ethics) but, if an individual must be without one, the person should be without strategy and remain with character.

Finally, ethics education in our institutions is one of the instruments of reforming our ethical behaviors as a nation. Unethical behavior is seen as a bane to national development while, ethical behavior is seen as a key factor that support national development. In real ethics, we must be ready to adjust our thinking, positions and behavior to be ethical and to remain ethical over time. Hence, ethics demands a willingness to change (Ethics Quality, 2006). It is therefore important that our institutions of higher learning give urgent attention to the teaching of ethics and exposure of students' to good ethical behavior and decision making. Cheating of all sorts is a form of unethical conducts and students who cheat in college today may soon become professionals engaging in similar unethical behaviors in the workplace of tomorrow (Sims, 1993; Smith, Davy, Rosenberg & Haight, 2002).

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