

Original Article:

**HOW HIGHER LEVELS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT
CONTRIBUTE TO DETERRENCE FROM
ACADEMIC DISHONESTY**

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Abstract

The following study offers a new approach to considering how higher levels of moral development might serve as a deterrent from engaging in academic dishonesty. Whereas previous studies have relied heavily on the Kohlberg interview and hypothetical scenarios to determine levels of moral development among offenders and non-offenders alike, assessing cheating allows students to reflect on more tangible patterns of behavior. A survey administered to 64 college students asked why they refrained from cheating, and corresponding stages of moral development were assigned based on their responses. For example, individuals who did not cheat for fear of being caught were assigned to stage one of moral development. The survey also accounted for cheating both before and after the transition to online learning due to the coronavirus pandemic in order to evaluate whether context and opportunity impacted one's willingness to cheat. Ultimately, results did not reflect a significant association between moral development and engagement in cheating, contrary to prior research suggesting a relationship between moral development and deviance, thereby requiring more research in this area.

Keywords: academic honesty, coronavirus, deterrence, deviance, moral development

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INTRODUCTION

Cheating is a deviant act that occurs on a frequent basis inside and outside of the classroom. Although it is not criminal in nature, it is reflective of real-world unconventional behavior. While lower levels of moral development have historically been associated with instances of deviance (Buttel, 2002; Fodor, 1972), higher levels could potentially be associated with deterrence. This study explored a potential relationship between moral development, academic honesty, and reasons for refraining from engagement in cheating across various settings and opportunities.

Literature Review

It is essential to gain a foundational understanding of Kohlberg's theory and examine it prior to analyzing how it is related to deviance. Kohlberg's theory of moral development includes six stages that are designated into three levels, beginning at the first level when a person is young and ideally advancing through higher levels during his or her lifetime (Kohlberg, 1958). These stages are also heavily dependent on a person's upbringing and interactions with others. Level one, preconventional morality, includes heteronomous morality (stage one) and instrumental purpose (stage two) (Hutchison, 2017; Kohlberg, 1958). At this level, individuals seek immediate rewards and work to avert immediate punishment (Kohlberg, 1958; Hutchinson, 2017). People classified into this level are motivated to benefit themselves, and they keep in mind their own best interests (Hutchison, 2017; Kohlberg, 1958). The following level, conventional morality, is made up of interpersonal experiences (stage 3) and the societal point of view (stage four) in which an individual is motivated to follow social rules (Kohlberg, 1958; Hutchinson, 2017). Those classified in the second level of conventional morality are motivated by laws, regulations, and standards as they adhere to the will of formal, rational authority (Hutchison, 2017; Kohlberg, 1958). In the third and final level of postconventional morality, including ethics (stage five) as well as conscience and logic (stage six), individuals are motivated by a set of beliefs that transcends those of society and societal laws (Hutchinson, 2017; Kohlberg, 1958). This third level demonstrates a person's selflessness and an ability to empathize, as well as a more personal understanding of right and wrong (Hutchison, 2017; Kohlberg, 1958). Where one lies on this ordinal scale of moral development reflects his or her everyday ability to utilize moral reasoning to make decisions, which has intrigued many who are interested in learning more about human behavior and the root of individuals' actions.

Significance of Kohlberg's Theory

Over the years, Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1958), in its simplicity and usefulness, has proven beneficial to researchers and psychologists. Kohlberg looked internally at the way a person thinks as opposed to regarding their decisions and actions as

products of external factors, despite the influences that external forces have in shaping one's ability to reason (Kohlberg, 1958). Ultimately, Kohlberg's theory of moral development describes the motivation for people to act either to benefit themselves (preconventional level), in accordance with societal rules and laws (conventional level), or for the greater good of society and respect for those in it (postconventional level) (Kohlberg, 1958). Most actions, then, are driven by an incentive to conform to a pattern reflective of one of the three levels (Kohlberg, 1958).

However, there are some shortcomings in the Kohlberg interview, most noticeably that the scenarios were overly hypothetical, as well as an unexplainable "gap between moral reasoning and moral action" (Vozzola, 2014, p. 33). For instance, the Heinz dilemma lays out a scenario of a woman on her deathbed. Her husband, Heinz, knows of a drug that could save her life, but this drug is not available. The Kohlberg interview assesses individuals' levels of moral reasoning in part based on whether or not they believe that it is acceptable for the man to steal the drug to save his wife (Kohlberg, 1984). Kohlberg determines that it *is* moral to break the law to save the woman's life in this instance, putting humanity before all else and adhering to one's own moral code, and a response indicating as such would classify the respondent into a higher level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). While interesting and possibly insightful, this situation is purely hypothetical. It is unlikely that these circumstances would ever apply to those taking part in this specific assessment, and therefore it is difficult to determine exactly how this hypothetical situation and the thought process surrounding it would translate into legitimate actions.

Past research conducted utilizing the Kohlberg interview has been limited in various ways, but most importantly may be the ways they utilize the hypothetical Kohlberg interview or a similar hypothetical questionnaire (Buttel, 2002; Fodor, 1972). They mimic Kohlberg's original study without consideration for other methods of evaluating stages and levels of moral development (Buttel, 2002; Fodor, 1972). The following study will focus on the real and more tangible issue of cheating on a college campus. This study will seek to provide an assessment of the reality of the utilization of moral development and moral reasoning abilities when reflecting on engagement in academic dishonesty, which is a real-world situation not derived from the hypothetical and a real-world example of deviance (Bunn et al., 1992). This study attempts to operationalize the ways in which these hypothetical situations and thought processes would be put into action. More recently, researchers have continued to study moral development and its relation to deviance and academic honesty.

Moral Development and Relation to Deviance

Relatively speaking, the topic of (and the connection between) moral development and deviance is still fairly new. It was shortly thereafter Kohlberg's publication in 1958 that sociologists began to examine how his theory of moral development could relate to deviance. Fodor published one of the first studies examining moral development and its

relation to deviant and criminal behavior (Fodor, 1972). In this study, the Kohlberg interview was given to forty delinquent and forty non-delinquent boys, with delinquents receiving statistically significant lower Moral Judgment scores (Fodor, 1972).

Another study on sex-offenders has confirmed this relationship, and its results concluded that sex-offenders have a level of moral reasoning two standard deviations lower than most other adults (Buttel, 2002). Some researchers have further examined how different levels of moral development correspond to different reasons for deterrence from deviance, including one which demonstrated a correlation between capabilities for moral reasoning and deterrence from engaging in deviant behavior (Veneziano & Veneziano, 1992). They hypothesized said correlation and tested it through a three-part questionnaire. Following the study, Veneziano and Veneziano (1992) suggest that those at the pre-conventional level of moral development were more likely to be deterred by formal sanctions, those at the conventional level were more likely to be deterred by informal sanctions, and those at the conventional level to be deterred by reasons associated with abstract ideals. Both deviant behavior and its counterpart, deterrence, connect to moral reasoning.

Deviance and Academic Dishonesty

Cheating is generally a deviant behavior, and a more accessible behavior to analyze when focusing on the moral reasoning of college students. While deviance and academic dishonesty have their differences, prior research has also offered examples suggesting academic dishonesty and deviance are similar in the sense that individuals work through a similar decision-making process when deciding to engage (Bunn et al., 1992). Bunn and colleagues suggest that academic honesty, in a manner similar to deviance, can be viewed from an economic perspective which essentially weighs the costs and benefits of an act (Bunn et al., 1992). There are “laws governing cheating” (p. 198) that impact the ways in which individuals weigh these costs and benefits, these “laws” of which also are influenced by the instructors upholding them and making arrangements to deter deviant behavior (Bunn et al., 1992). Bunn et al. argues that the more stringent these laws with the greater severity of potential punishment, the greater the deterrence for an individual considering cheating (Bunn et al., 1992). However, should students cheat successfully, they then have the opportunity to gain a higher grade in the course, a higher grade point average, and potentially even better job opportunities following graduation (Bunn et al., 1992). Ultimately, “In the classroom, the professors, proctors, and fellow students act much like policemen, ready to apprehend violators. The cheating student is the criminal, taking information from illegal sources” (Bunn et al., 1992, p. 198). Many students have engaged in cheating or witnessed others cheating, which offers ample opportunities to investigate this behavior, and an important one to evaluate given its similarities to real-world deviance (Bunn et al., 1992).

Purpose

By completing a retrospective study that asked students to recall their past experiences with cheating and assess their moral reasoning, this study explored the action of cheating which, although not a criminal act within itself, is still against the rules and can mirror real-world deviance for the purpose of this study. The study explored actions as they related to a person's stage of moral development. Although some research has examined moral development, it has historically been studied to assess why people do engage in deviance, with less emphasis on why they do not (Paternoster, 2010). As opposed to the Kohlberg interview, the following analyzes actual responses that offer deeper insight into students' levels of moral reasoning as they reflect upon their decision-making processes.

Data was collected for the purpose of this study to explore a potential link between moral development and deterrence, specifically how higher levels of moral development might serve as a deterrent from cheating. The study itself will focus on the moral reasoning of students who cheat versus those who do not as well as how the context of the environment (ie. in person versus online) may alter one's ability to apply the same degree of moral reasoning to the given situation. In the study, students are asked if they have cheated in the past year and how often. All students, regardless of whether or not they have cheated, will be asked why they refrain from cheating when the opportunity has presented itself. Answers could range from not wanting to be caught, because they want to follow the rules, or because they care about academic integrity and learning, with each response corresponding with one of Kohlberg's stages and levels of moral development (see Table 1 under Method). It was hypothesized that students who refrained from cheating out of fear of being caught would reside at the preconventional level of moral development while those who refrained from cheating because cheating was against their personal moral code would reside at the postconventional level of morality. The study aimed to find an association between lower levels of moral development and engaging in cheating, which would validate the findings of previous studies (Buttel, 2002; Fodor, 1972; Veneziano & Veneziano, 1992). Alternatively, it would also offer results based on real-world behaviors as opposed to hypothetical scenarios. It would not simply observe a potential connection, but rather how a relationship could transfer into action (i.e., whether or not they choose to engage in cheating). Anyone may have the capacity to think at a high level of moral development during a short hypothetical assessment, but whether this thought process is acted upon in the real world offers greater insight into whether said reasoning abilities are transferable beyond the study.

Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic offered an opportunity to capture student behavior given the change in circumstances. The transition to online learning has allowed for greater opportunity to cheat. The study evaluated both cheating and refraining from it before and after the transition to online learning due to the virus. The development of the coronavirus in the midst of the research process has posed some unique challenges as well as some unique opportunities. The coronavirus forced a transition to online learning that

was not anticipated in the initial development of the study. However, its existence has also allowed for greater research and insight into the intersection of opportunity with moral development and deterrence. According to opportunity theory, individuals weigh costs and benefits to make rational decisions based on the likelihood of immediate reward (and avoidance of immediate pain) (Hannon, 2002). A study by Campbell (2006) indicates that it is easier to cheat in online classes, and the growing use of technology has, to some degree, promoted cheating behaviors. Online learning is rapidly evolving, particularly since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and it would be reasonable to investigate its effects on trends in academic honesty and how this opportunity to cheat with decreased risks and similar or even increased rewards could outweigh an individual's sense of moral reasoning.

Within the following study, it is hypothesized that there will be a statistically significant relationship between students' engagement in cheating and their assigned levels of moral development. Students' stages of moral development would correspond with whether or not they engage in cheating, similarly to how moral development may correspond with individuals' decision to engage in real-world deviance. It is also hypothesized that there will be an increase in cheating following the transition to online learning due to the coronavirus pandemic given the increased opportunity to engage in cheating with far less potential to be caught. This will assist in evaluating the influence of circumstantial and contextual influences on one's ability to implement moral reasoning. Given the cost-benefit analysis individuals conduct when deciding to engage in both academic dishonesty and deviance, cheating would theoretically increase during this time period given a decreased potential to be caught while the reward of a higher GPA remains constant.

METHOD

Participants

The following study obtained survey results from a convenience sample of 64 students at Saint Anselm College, a small, liberal arts college in New Hampshire. Saint Anselm College is a predominantly white institution, and the majority of students reside in New England. It is also a Catholic college, and many students identify as Catholic. There are more female than male students. All participants (N=63) were enrolled as students at Saint Anselm, where students are predominantly aged 18-23. Of our sample, the majority of students also identified as female (N=45, 72.6%), whereas males made up 27.4% of the sample (N=17), and one participant chose not to respond (N=1, 1.6%). Race could not be asked in the context of this survey, given that it could potentially be an identifying factor at a predominantly white institution and threaten anonymity. Of the sample, 15.9% were freshmen (N=10), 15.9% were sophomores (N=10), 25.4% were juniors, and 42.9% were senior (N=27). A convenience sample was selected for purposes relating to the changing

nature of academia in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which was time sensitive, with a goal of surveying participants who had experienced both traditional in-person learning and online learning. Given that online learning could potentially impact the rate at which students cheat, a convenience sample was selected in order to efficiently capture the ways in which cheating behaviors were potentially impacted by this shift in opportunity.

Initial statistics were calculated to gain a sense of basic trends within the population with regards to who engaged in cheating. Engagement in cheating was calculated based on grade level, both before and after the transition to online learning. The Junior class initially cheated at the highest rate prior to the transition to online learning at a rate of 56.3% (N=9), but following the transition, the Freshman class cheated at the highest rate, or 80% (N=8). Engagement in cheating was also calculated based on gender. Males reported higher rates of cheating, both before and after the transition to online learning at rates of 52.9% (N=9) and 64.7% (N=11), respectively. Missing data was excluded from these calculations.

Materials

The survey was conducted electronically, making it cost-effective and relatively easy to distribute. Students received an email announcement with a link to the survey, and some professors advertised the survey in their classes, although it remained optional. Data was processed using software available through the college's resources and stored safely in password protected locations online.

Demographic Questions

The survey began by asking demographic questions. It inquired about participants' gender identity, grade in college, primary major, and grade point average. In the context of this study, this was for exploratory purposes. Grade point average, in particular, placed students into categories on a scale, with ranges including 0-2.19, 2.20-2.79, 2.8-3.19, or 3.20-4.0. Each bracket denoted certain checkpoints for various requirements. For example, a 2.8 is the average GPA for accepted students, but below the threshold to qualify for the Dean's List and Honors Programs. It was possible that these students had a greater incentive to cheat in order to improve their grades, similarly to how people of a low socioeconomic status may, for instance, resort to deviant or illegal behavior such as dealing drugs in order to make money and improve their situations.

Assessment of Stages and Levels of Moral Development

Additional questions inquired about reasons for not cheating when one may have had the opportunity to do so. Students were then assigned a stage and level of moral development based on their responses. These questions were intended to offer a real-life alternative to the Kohlberg interview, utilizing real behaviors to assess stages and levels which have, for an extended period of time, been assigned solely on the basis of responses

to hypothetical scenarios. Please refer to Table 1 for specific reasons students refrained from cheating and each corresponding stage and level.

Table 1. Levels and stages of moral development and corresponding reasons for not cheating

Level of moral development	Stage of moral development	Survey responses: Reasons for not cheating
Level 1: Preconventional	Stage 1: Heteronomous morality	You did not want to get in trouble or get caught cheating
Level 1: Preconventional	Stage 2: Instrumental purpose	Others will think you are a better student for not cheating
Level 2: Conventional	Stage 3: Interpersonal experiences	It is the right thing to do to refrain from cheating
Level 2: Conventional	Stage 4: The societal point of view	It is against the rules to cheat
Level 3: Postconventional	Stage 5: Ethics	It would be unfair to other students to cheat on the assignment or exam
Level 3: Postconventional	Stage 6: Conscience and logic	Refraining from cheating is morally right and you are above the practice of cheating

Assessment of Cheating

Further questions inquired as to whether students engaged in cheating prior to and/or following the transition to online learning. Engagement in cheating (either “Yes,” students engaged in cheating, or “No,” they did not) signifies a deviance (or the absence of it). The frequency of cheating was also assessed, as was an assessment of what students cheating on (i.e., homework, tests, projects, papers, other, or N/A).

Procedures

Students who agreed to participate in the study were tasked with completing the aforementioned survey digitally. In order to assess the ways in which opportunity could potentially influence cheating and essentially override the deterrent effects of higher levels of moral development, the survey captured responses about behaviors regarding academic honesty both before and after the transition to online learning, a transition of which offered greater opportunities for cheating and ultimately a reward with less of a risk to the students engaging in the behavior. Student participants were primarily assessed regarding their stages and levels of moral development as these stages and levels related to their real-life engagement (or lack thereof) in deviance, or in this case, academic dishonesty.

RESULTS

Cheating and Moral Development

Chi-square tests for independence were carried out to observe a potential association between stage and level of moral development and student engagement in cheating, both before and after the transition to online learning. Four chi-square tests were run in order to measure potential association. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant association between stage of moral development and engagement in cheating as well as between level of moral development and engagement in cheating. The first chi-square analysis tests for a statistically significant association between stage of moral development and engagement in cheating prior to the transition to online learning while the second test examined the level of moral development in place of the stage. Similarly, the third and fourth chi-square tests for independence were conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant association between stage of moral development and engagement in cheating and level of moral development and engagement in cheating, respectively, following the transition to online learning. Ultimately, results did not support these hypotheses.

There were four chi-square tests of independence performed. An alpha level of 0.05 was used for all statistical tests. A chi-square test was conducted to examine the relation between stage of moral development and engagement in cheating prior to the transition to online learning. The relationship between these variables was not found to be statistically significant, $X^2(5, N=54)=6.00, p=.306$. Students' stage of moral development did not bear any relation to their engagement in cheating prior to the transition to online learning. The following chi-square test was conducted to examine a relationship between levels of moral development (i.e., preconventional, conventional, postconventional) and engagement in cheating prior to the transition to online learning. The relationship between these variables was not found to be statistically significant, $X^2(2, N=54)=4.20, p=.122$. Again, regardless of one's level of moral development, students cheated the same amount. A third chi-square

test examined the relationship between stage of moral development and engagement in cheating following the transition to online learning. This relation was not found to be statistically significant, $X^2(5, N=57)=7.46, p=.133$. Despite an increase in cheating, stages of moral development were not related. The fourth and final chi-square test examined the relationship between level of moral development and engagement in cheating following the transition to online learning. This relation was not found to be statistically significant, $X^2(2, N=57)=5.60, p=.053$. Regardless of level of moral development, there was no relation to cheating nor the increase in cheating. Ultimately, results indicated that there was not a statistically significant association between stage or level of moral development and whether students engaged in cheating, either before or after the transition to online learning.

In this specific study, it is also possible to compare instances of cheating to reasons for which students refrain from cheating when given the opportunity. Out of those who did engage in cheating in any capacity before the transition to online learning, 51.9% would refrain from cheating when the opportunity presented itself because they did not want to get caught and punished, and 7.4% of cheaters thought that others would think they were better students for not cheating. In total, according to these responses, this places 59.3% of students who have cheated at the lowest, preconventional level of moral development. Furthermore, 18.5% of those who cheated before the transition said they would refrain in certain instances when presented with the opportunity because it was the right thing to do, and 7.4% said it was against the rules, placing 25.9% of cheaters prior to the transition to online learning at the conventional level. Among those who have cheated, none would have refrained out of fairness to other students, and 7.4% said cheating was morally wrong and they were above the practice, leaving only 7.4% at the level of postconventional morality. While many people in society as a whole may not even achieve postconventional morality in their lifetime, it is notable that not one of the students who cheated said that they did so out of consideration for their peers who studied. This was not the case for those who did *not* cheat prior to the transition to online learning.

Among those who never engaged in cheating prior to the transition to online learning, some students refrained from cheating for different reasons than those students who admitted to cheating. Out of these students who did not cheat, 32.4% refrained from cheating out of fear of getting caught and punished, and 2.9% thought that others might think better of them for not cheating, totaling 35.3% of these students who did not cheat at the lowest level of moral development. Next, 26.5% did not cheat because they believed it was the right thing to do, and 2.9% refrained because cheating was against the rules, placing 29.4% of these students at the conventional level of morality, a slightly higher percentage than those who had cheated. Finally, 2.9% refrained primarily because they recognized that it would be unfair to other students, and 17.6% refrained because cheating was against their own moral code and they were above the practice, for a total of 20.5% of students who would fall into the category of having postconventional morality, which was higher than the 7.4% of students at this level who admitted to cheating.

Impact of the Transition to Online Learning Due to the Coronavirus

As predicted, initial survey results demonstrated a rise in cheating following the transition to online learning. This reflected the ways in which students capitalized on opportunity, similarly to the cost-benefit analysis someone may conduct when engaging in deviant behavior. According to the survey, whereas 42.86% of students cheated before the transition to online learning, 58.06% cheated after the transition to online learning occurred. Not only has there been an increase in cheating with regards to the number of students who cheat, but also in the number of times students have cheated. Before the transition to online learning, 11.11% of the sample population cheated more than five times. However, after the transition, that percentage rose to 35.71%.

DISCUSSION

Summary and Connection of Results

Kohlberg's theory of moral development has provided insight into behavior and criminal and deviant activity that many other theories cannot. Instead of focusing on external factors, such as the Broken Windows Theory, theories of weather, and even control theory, which all have external components that can cause a person to engage (or refrain from engaging) in deviance, Kohlberg's Theory is one of internal responsibility for a person's actions. Through his investigation of internal reasoning, Kohlberg has come to explain motivations that are beyond these external factors, and ultimately lead society to better understand the actions people take in their lives.

Results of this study did not offer a statistically significant association between stages or levels of moral development and engagement in cheating at the 0.05 threshold. While cheating increased greatly following the transition to online learning, this may speak to opportunity and the ways in which students conduct a cost-benefit analysis as opposed to the direct utilization of moral reasoning. If anything, higher levels of moral development were unable to prevent many students from engaging in cheating when the chances of getting caught were exceptionally low with a high likelihood of reaping the rewards of doing so.

Nonsignificant Results

Given a lack of significant findings, the results suggest that there is reason to reevaluate the legitimacy of past studies and particularly the use of the Kohlberg interview. Its use of solely hypothetical questions may not accurately reflect the ways in which humans employ moral reasoning in real-life scenarios (Vozzola, 2014). This new framework for evaluation offered results contrary to prior studies, indicating that more research is needed to gain insight into the effectiveness of the Kohlberg Interview for assessing stages and levels of moral development. Should results of future studies using

real-world assessments of moral development as opposed to hypothetical assessments align more closely with the results of this study, one might consider utilizing a real-world framework for assessment moving forward.

Comparison to Previous Studies

This change in assessment may account for some of the contradictory results when compared to prior studies. Unlike studies by Fodor (1972) and another by Buttel (2002), this study did not reflect a significant association between moral development and deviant behavior, which, in this case, was demonstrated through engagement in cheating. Literature regarding moral development and cheating is limited. One study on cheating among medical students revealed that, while students had negative perspectives on cheating and resided at what would be considered higher levels of moral development, they engaged in cheating themselves (Semerci, 2006). It is possible that this once again indicates a flaw in Kohlberg's assessment as it relates to real-world actions as opposed to hypothetical thought processes. It is possible that students in this study would have resided at higher levels of moral development had they been administered the traditional Kohlberg interview, and this real-world assessment once again offers potential for many new avenues of research in the future.

Importance and Implications

Future studies regarding the impact of the transition to online learning would include a more in-depth look at this transition and the moral development of students who did not cheat. Individuals that answered saying that they had not cheated before or after the transition to online learning persevered through an opportunity to use academic dishonesty to benefit themselves with fewer risks of punishment. Future studies will investigate the reasoning behind why these students did not cheat, specifically whether cheating was against their personal moral code. This would place them at the highest level of moral development. If those who refrained from cheating indicated that they did so for said reason, it would be reasonable to further hypothesize that higher levels of moral development may play a role in deterrence from deviance.

Ultimately, if the study were to serve as the framework for which future studies might build to help examine how moral development might serve as a potential deterrent from engaging in deviance, then researchers could work with educators to implement evidence-based measures to support students' growth in ability to employ moral reasoning and create a more thoughtful society, beginning with young people. While there is a fear of indoctrination specifically surrounding education in public schools (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999), programs in both Singapore and Malaysia have successfully taught character education to students and helped many to move from one level of moral development to the next, proven through pre and post-tests (Koh, 2012; Thambusamy & Elier, 2013).

While there remains a fear of indoctrination, some students may not receive character education anywhere besides the classroom, and it *has* proven to be effective in increasing levels of moral development. As opposed to specifically teaching right from wrong, educators have a unique opportunity for young people to think critically and ask questions to make their own decisions. Even classroom setups can foster environments that promote empathy (Wiley, 1997). By making a space for young students to share their thoughts and listen to others while coming to their own conclusions about their beliefs, it creates opportunities for them to learn and develop in a unique way in accordance with their unique perspectives (Lee, 2017). The goal is not to have everyone think and act the same, but rather, the goal is to create opportunities for a more thoughtful and empathetic society, which is ultimately the thing that will reduce deviance because people have a greater understanding and appreciation for one another.

Future studies could investigate the long-term effects of character education as it relates to deterrence from deviance. Further research may also take GPA into account. Just as a majority of deviance is carried out by people of a lower socioeconomic status (Buonanno, 2003), GPA will serve as “academic wealth.” Since socioeconomic status could potentially serve as an identifying factor and thus was not included in the administered survey, future analysis will instead examine how students with lower GPAs in particular refrain from committing deviance. Should they be students with higher levels of moral development, it would be reasonable to further investigate whether moral development truly transcends less fortunate outside circumstances, as past research has claimed that it does but has been challenged to empirically test (Vozzola, 2014).

Limitations

Despite all intentions to limit bias, it is impossible to do so completely. To begin, the sample taken was a convenience sample. As it was not feasible to complete a random sample while keeping in consideration of the rapidly changing nature of in-person and online learning due to the coronavirus, a convenience sample allowed data to be captured in a time-sensitive manner. By offering the survey to all students who received the announcement, there was a greater likelihood of a higher response rate, as students would not feel obliged to take the survey. The survey was limited by its relatively small sample size. It was also limited to students at Saint Anselm College, a Catholic institution, at which the majority of students are religious. Participation in unique religious organizations can play a significant role in the moral development of some individuals (Guo, 2018). The beliefs of varying religions and religious organizations often hold people to a higher moral standard and can prove influential to those who believe in a higher power and the messages delivered by said higher power (Guo, 2018). Future studies should replicate this study on a larger scale or with a more diverse sample population. However, it is also possible that there is truly no association between moral development and engagement in cheating, and

that the same findings will hold true across replicated studies. Further investigation is needed.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the study. It is impossible to say just how large of an impact, but this shift in opportunity could have affected students who may exhibit varying levels of moral development in more supervised circumstances. Their moral development, even if it was at a higher level, may not have been enough to deter students when the opportunity to engage in cheating had such a low risk. Should the circumstances be ideal, with little supervision, a motivated offender, and suitable victim (if applicable), it would be worth further investigation to examine whether anyone is capable of engaging in cheating, or, in the broader context, criminal or deviant behavior.

Significance for the Social Sciences

By studying moral development as a deterrent from engaging deviant behavior, one can gain greater insight not only as to how individuals think, but also where their motivations lie. These motivations translate to humanity's varying sense of responsibility. While some have a responsibility to themselves, others have a responsibility to the law, and others have a responsibility to society and the greater good. No motivation or responsibility is necessarily right or wrong, but the weight that these motivations and responsibilities hold contribute to the functioning of society as a whole. For instance, a certain level of societal freedom may contribute to deviant behavior, but it also contributes to creativity and individuality. Channeling the opportunities one has in order to do good can serve as a benefit to the individual and the community. Encouraging conversations about morals and empathy can promote the deterrence from negative aspects of society, such as deviant activity, while simultaneously contributing to the positive aspects of society that are derived from operating together as a whole.

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