

Cheat and Hope for the Best: The Unspoken Undergraduate Mantra?

Cari Fellers

Collin L. Davidson

Christina M. Almstrom

Jennifer L. Callahan

Oklahoma State University

University of North Texas

Abstract

Hope is a cognitive motivational construct that relates to people perceiving probable future outcomes because they have strategies to attain their goals and the motivation to undertake those strategies (Snyder, Harris, Anderson, & Holleran, 1991). Over the past decade, empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that high hope is related to success, as measured by a variety of academic indicators. There have been no studies to date though that have examined whether hope might be also be related to academic cheating. The results of this study revealed an extremely high rate of cheating (92%) in the undergraduate population at a midwestern university and hope was found to be related to cheating behavior. Research issues and instructional implications are discussed.

Hope is a cognitive motivational construct composed of reciprocally related (a) pathways (strategies to attain goals), and (b) agency (motivation to use those pathways in the goal-pursuit process) (Snyder, Harris, Anderson, & Holleran, 1991). Every person has an almost inconceivable number of goals throughout a given week ranging from eating breakfast to becoming successful in their chosen career. To attain these goals, however, individuals also need to have appropriate pathways to complete each goal. For instance, to become successful in a given career, a person needs to obtain the required education, job experience, and personal contacts. It is also important that individuals have the agency to put their chosen pathways into action or the aforementioned career-related pathways will not be pursued and the goal will not likely be fulfilled. Hope relates to people perceiving probable future outcomes because they have the “will and the ways” to successfully get what they want out of life (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 570).

In the area of academics, research has consistently shown that individuals who score higher on measures of hope tend to exhibit better outcomes including higher achievement test scores (Snyder et al., 1997), higher grade point averages (Chang, 1998; Curry et al., 1997; Snyder et al., 1991), lower rates of dropping out, and higher graduation rates (Snyder et al., 2002). Snyder (2002) proposed two possible reasons that students who score higher on measures of hope consistently perform better than other students: (1) students who score higher

on hope usually construct multiple pathways to reach their academic goals and have the motivation to pursue their goals and (2) such students are less likely to become distracted by negative emotions and thinking. Empirical data has supported the latter supposition, revealing a negative relationship between hope scores and anxiety (Onwuegbuzie 1998). Similarly, Onwuegbuzie and Snyder (2000) found that lower Pathways and Agency scores (the subscales of the Hope Scale) were related to problematic coping strategies in both study habits and test-taking behaviors as measured by the Coping Strategies Inventory for Statistics (Jarrell & Burry, 1989).

What has not been explicitly examined thus far is the relationship between hope and academic cheating. Perhaps students high in hope are achieving greater success because they pursue the pathways of cheating behavior along with legitimate achievement pathways such as studying. Cheating has been a source of research interest for decades (see the classic Hartshorne and May, 1928, studies for rich historical context) and a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this manuscript. However, in studies over the past forty years, it is clear that academic cheating is a long-standing significant problem with self-reported rates ranging from as low as 59% to as high as 91% (Hetherington & Feldman, 1964; Jackson et al., 2002). Recent evidence suggests that the problem has likely escalated over the past 30 years (McCabe et al., 2001), which may contribute to the wide range of reported prevalence rates. Simultaneous to the rise in cheating is a rise in grade point average, though it has been reported that these higher scores do not reflect actual improvement in achievement, a concept Potter and Nyman (2001) refer to as grade inflation. While there have been many identified contributors to grade inflation, there is some data suggesting that desire for higher marks is related to widespread cheating behavior at both the high school and undergraduate levels (Bushweller, 1999).

In fact, much of the research on academic cheating has been centered on elucidating possible psychological

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer L. Callahan, UNT Department of Psychology, 1155 Union Circle #311280, Denton TX 76203-5017 E-mail: Jennifer.callahan@unt.edu.

reasons why students engage in cheating behaviors. Most prominently, variables significantly related to cheating include test anxiety, impulsivity, intelligence, self-esteem, locus of control, social desirability, and guilt (Alarape & Onakoya, 2003; DePalma et al., 1995; Jackson et al., 2002; Johnson & Gormly, 1972; Kelly & Worell, 1978; Smith et al., 1972; Thorpe et al., 1999). With respect to the current study, the finding reported by Roth and McCabe (1995) that *cheating* was more strongly associated with beliefs and values than with situational factors is especially intriguing and underscores the need for examination of the relationship between hope and cheating behaviors.

As previously mentioned, it has been found that lower hope scores are related to problematic studying and testing coping strategies (Onwuegbuzie & Snyder, 2000). Further, an inverse relationship has been reported between scores on measures of hope and anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, 1998). Certainly, cheating constitutes a problematic coping strategy and high anxiety has been consistently linked with cheating behaviors. Thus, the present study was designed to examine the relationship between scores on a measure of hope and self-reported cheating behaviors.

Method

Participants

Recruitment from a midwestern public university over the course of one semester generated a pool of 364 participants (94 men, 270 women), ranging in age from 18 to 25 ($M = 19.9$, $SD = 1.74$). Over 79% of the participants were Caucasian, 92.8% were not married, and 53.3% were employed. Sixty-five percent of participants reported that they participate in extracurricular activities. Freshmen accounted for 31.3% of participants, while 22.5% were sophomores, 22.3% juniors, and 23% seniors. Slightly more than half of the participants (53%) reported living in off-campus housing.

Materials

First, a novel measure of cheating behavior was constructed (see Table 1) to determine whether the participants had engaged in any of a broad range of common cheating behaviors, including cheating on a test, plagiarism, submitting another person's paper as his/her own, copying another's homework, or lying to a professor or teaching assistant about the reason for a late assignment or missed test. Participants respond using a 5-point Likert scale with response options ranging from $1 = \text{Never}$ to $5 = \text{More than 20 times}$. This questionnaire allowed for the participants to be divided into three distinct groups: Never Cheated, those that reported no cheating behaviors over the previous two years; Caught Cheating, those participants that reported cheating over the past two years and had been caught; and Not Caught Cheating, participants that had admitted cheating over

the past two years but had gone undetected. Importantly, in a recent study, Burrus and colleagues (2007) found that students often do not understand what behaviors constitute cheating and report higher rates of cheating if they are first educated about what constitutes cheating. In the present study, we did not ask students whether or not they "cheated", *per se*. Rather, we asked participants whether they engaged in specific behaviors that have been considered illustrative of cheating in the established literature to increase the chances of obtaining more accurate measures of cheating.

Next, several measures of known major correlates to cheating, including test anxiety, impulsivity, and intelligence were administered so they could be controlled for in the analyses testing the study hypotheses. First, participants completed the 20-item Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI; Spielberger, 1980). The TAI consists of 20 questions, responded to on a Likert scale, that are summed to produce a total score. Total scores can range from 20-80, with higher scores indicating increasing levels of test anxiety. The TAI has demonstrated good internal reliability (.92 or higher) and good test-retest reliability ranging from .81 to .62. The TAI also demonstrated good construct validity with Sarason's Test Anxiety Scale for both females (.83) and males (.82). In the present study, internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .92$). Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, and Allsopp's (1985) 54-item Impulsiveness Questionnaire was presented next. On this measure, individuals are asked to respond dichotomously (yes/no) to questions about their preferences, behaviors, and experiences. Higher scores are indicative of greater impulsivity. The Impulsiveness Questionnaire has demonstrated good internal reliability for both women (.83) and men (.84) and, in the present study, internal consistency on the impulsiveness scale was acceptable ($\alpha = .74$). Next, the Shipley Institute of Daily Living (1991) was presented to measure general mental abilities, and to calculate a reliable estimate of full scale IQ. This measure contains 40 questions of vocabulary knowledge and 20 abstraction questions. The total scores of both subscales were combined to compute the overall total score. Using the normative data provided in the Shipley scoring manual, the total score on this measure was adjusted according to each participant's age. The adjusted score was then converted to an estimate of each participant's Wechsler series full-scale intelligence quotient (IQ). According to the measure's authors, the Shipley Institute of Daily Living has previously demonstrated good internal reliability (.92) and test-retest reliability (.60-.82). Construct validity has been investigated with the Wechsler intelligence scales and found to be adequate (.76 - .87). In the present study, internal consistency was good for both the vocabulary subscale, ($\alpha = .71$), and the abstraction subscale, ($\alpha = .86$).

Finally, the Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) was administered to obtain measures of state Hope. The Hope

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Cheating Behavior Questions in Participant Pool

	Never	1-5 Times	6-10 Times	10-20 Times	More Than 20 Times
Have you cheated on a test?	145 (36.3%)	205 (51.3%)	24 (6%)	9 (2.3%)	13 (3.3%)
Have you ever been caught cheating?	361 (90.3%)	33 (8.3%)	0	0	1 (0.3%)
Has a teacher suspected you of cheating, but you did not get caught even though you really were cheating?	354 (88.5%)	39 (9.8%)	1 (0.3%)	0	0
Have you ever plagiarized written material?	270 (67.5%)	111 (27.8%)	9 (2.3%)	1 (0.3%)	4 (1%)
Have you been caught for plagiarizing written material?	379 (94.8%)	12 (3%)	5 (1.3%)	0	0
Have you been accused of plagiarizing written material?	338 (84.5%)	56 (14%)	2 (0.5%)	0	0
Have you received consequences for plagiarizing?	374 (93.5%)	21 (5.3%)	1 (0.3%)	0	0
Have you submitted another's material as your own?	326 (81.5%)	65 (16.3%)	3 (0.8%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)
Have you been caught after submitting another person's material as your own?	371 (92.8%)	14 (3.5%)	0	0	0
Have you copied another person's homework?	65 (16.3%)	176 (44%)	69 (17.3%)	48(12%)	35 (8.8%)
Have you been caught for copying another's homework?	343 (85.8%)	47 (11/8%)	2 (0.5%)	0	1 (0.3%)
Have you lied to an instructor /teacher about the cause of your late assignments for missed tests?	200 (50%)	162 (40.5%)	21 (5.3%)	8 (2%)	5 (1.3%)

Note: The total number of participants represented for each row varies since some participants intermittently omitted responses.

Scale consists of 12 items, with four items to assess agency (perceived goal-related motivation), four items to assess pathways (perceived ability to generate specific strategies for attaining goals), and four distracter items. Response options range from 1= *definitely false* to 8= *definitely true*; thus, higher scores indicate greater levels of hopefulness. Summing responses yields an Agency subscale as well as a Pathway subscale. The composite of these two subscales produces a total Hope score. An example of a Pathways item is "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam." A typical item used to assess Agency is "I energetically pursue my goals." Both Cronbach alphas (from .74 to .84) and test/retest reliabilities (.73 to .82 over a 8- to 10-week period) have been found to be acceptable in previous studies (Snyder, et al. 1991). Validity of the Hope Scale has been established through ten years of empirical research (see Snyder, 2002), with excellent concurrent and discriminant validity (Cheavens et al., 2000; Snyder

et al., 1991). It has also previously been used with undergraduate college students (Cramer & Dyrkacz, 1998; Magaletta & Oliver, 1999; Range & Penton, 1994; Synder et al., 1991; Synder, 1999; Sumerlin, 1997). In the present study, internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .84$) and the mean total hope score was 48.58 (S.D. = 7.02).

Procedure

Participants submitted their names upon registering for this study to facilitate awarding extra credit and prevent duplicate responding; however, participant identities were never linked to data to protect data confidentiality. Following consent, participants were administered the study measures in a fixed order from a computer terminal. All participants were treated in accordance with APA's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (American Psychological Association, 2002) and the study was approved and conducted in compliance with the university's Institutional Review Board.

Results

Simple frequencies and percentages for self-admitted cheating behaviors are presented in Table 1. Of the 364 recruited participants, only 5.5% ($n = 20$) of the sample reported no instances of cheating (Never Cheated group) in the preceding two years. In contrast, 26.3% ($n = 96$) of the recruited participants reported that they had been caught cheating at least once (Caught Cheater group) during the same time period. In some cases, individuals were caught cheating for more than one type of behavior (e.g., copying homework, cheating during a test). Thus, the reported instances of being caught cheating for different behaviors, as shown in Table 1, is higher than the number of participants in the Caught Cheater group due to some of these individuals engaging in multiple cheating behaviors. The remainder of the sample acknowledged cheating but believed it had gone undetected. Most participants reported directly witnessing another student cheat ($n = 272$), but very few reported turning in another student for cheating ($n = 39$).

Because the Caught Cheater group was markedly larger than the Never Cheated group, Wilcox's (1992) recommendation for achieving equal sample sizes was followed. Ten participants from each end of the distribution in Hope scores were removed in the Caught Cheater group to eliminate extreme scores and 20 participants were then randomly selected for use in the subsequent analyses. Examination of the 20 Never Cheated participants' data revealed no outliers. Thus, each group included 20 participants for the following analyses.

The correlation between Hope and Cheating status was significant ($r_{pb} = -.34$, $p = .03$); and remained significant when controlling for test anxiety, impulsivity, and estimated intelligence ($r_{pb} = -.38$, $p = .03$). This indicates that individuals with higher hope were less likely to have engaged in cheating behavior. For the purpose of hypothesis testing, the relationship between Hope and Cheating status was examined using a 2 (Hope: Pathway and Agency) \times 2 (Cheating status: Caught Cheating or Never Cheated) within/between subjects ANOVA. Analyses revealed significant main effects for Hope, $F_{(1, 38)} = 8.48$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$, and for Cheating Status, $F_{(1, 38)} = 5.81$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, though the interaction between Hope and Cheating was nonsignificant ($p = .63$). As shown in Figure 1, the Hope main effect means were Pathway = 23.33 and Agency = 25.25 and the Cheating status main effect means were Caught Cheating = 23.01 and Never Cheated = 25.55. These results indicated that those with higher Pathways and Agency scores were more likely to have never cheated.

Discussion

Results revealed that hope scores were inversely correlated with cheating behavior. The results also revealed a very high level of cheating among participants

in this sample with 92% acknowledging cheating. This rate is not significantly different from the upper limit reported elsewhere in the literature (91%; Jackson et al.,

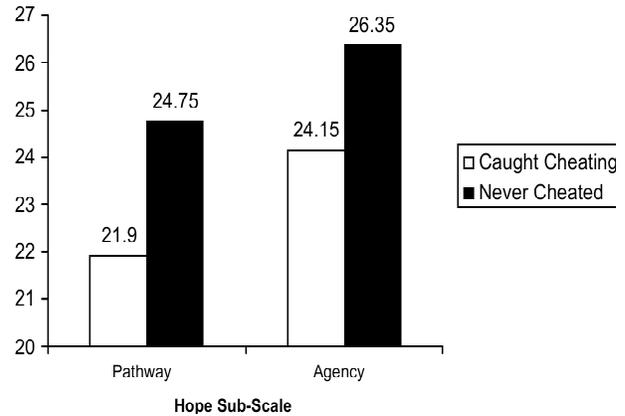


Figure 1. Subscale means on the Hope Scale.

2002), but it does nevertheless represent the upper limit reported to date. One possibility for why the cheating rate on this campus is so high is that our method may have made acknowledgement of cheating behavior more likely. A very recent study by Burrus and colleagues (2007), found that students often do not understand what behaviors constitute cheating and report higher rates of cheating if they are first educated about what constitutes cheating. In the present study, we did not ask students whether or not they "cheated", *per se*. Rather, we asked participants whether they engaged in specific behaviors that have been considered illustrative of cheating in the established literature. Had we simply asked participants whether or not they had cheated, without operationalizing the cheating construct into clear behaviors, we might have observed a lower prevalence rate of self-reported cheating. However, we consider the findings from the present study to be cleaner as a result of this methodology. By defining cheating in behavioral terms we were able to cleanly identify a homogenous Never Cheated group, as opposed to a more heterogeneous group that would have included these individuals in addition to those that did not consider themselves to be "cheaters," when in reality they had engaged in cheating behavior. Similarly, the "cheaters" used in analyses for this study were those that not only acknowledged cheating behaviors but also had external validation that they were cheating by having been caught. As such, our two groups of Never Cheated and Caught Cheaters were behaviorally distinct from one another and appropriate for analyses. It should be noted however, that the largest volume of data was associated with neither of these cleanly identified conditions. The overwhelming majority of the recruited individuals ($n = 272$) acknowledged engaging in cheating behaviors but were not identified as "cheaters" by the institution because they had apparently evaded detection by instructional staff.

Clearly, cheating is a major problem facing colleges and universities today. A number of solutions have been proposed, but the data from this study indicates that some of interventions may be more efficacious than others. For example, although the vast majority of students have directly observed cheating, few acknowledged reporting a peer for engaging in cheating, thereby casting some doubt on the idea that peer relations may be consistently effective tools for thwarting academic cheating behaviors (e.g.; Rudebock, 2005).

When all cheating behaviors were considered collectively (e.g., cheating on tests, plagiarism, having someone else do homework, lying to instructional personnel), Caught Cheaters and Never Cheated individuals significantly differed on hopefulness even after controlling for test anxiety, impulsivity, and intelligence. Students describing hopelessness around their ability to be successful in a course appear to be at higher risk for engaging in cheating behaviors and may benefit from individual assistance or referral to possible sources of assistance with these issues. It may be that since individuals who scored highly on the hope measure tend to have more goals and more strategies and motivation to achieve goals, they were not as tempted to cheat because they had prepared better than their peers. In other words, individuals who obtain higher scores on the hope measure likely have challenging goals related to academics (e.g., getting an 'A' in a class) and likely have multiple pathways (e.g., studying several days in advance of a test, consulting with a student writing center to ensure proper grammar in an important essay) and abundant motivation to achieve their academic goals. If these goals are more likely to be met by legitimate means such as effectively preparing for exams, then a student is probably less likely to feel the need to cheat. As such, it appears that targeting hopefulness may be useful in interventions aimed at dealing with students who cheat. For a possible intervention, see Snyder's 1994 publication.

An interesting future longitudinal study might be to determine whether students who work hard at their studies are hopeful because they have a good command of the competencies necessary to do well in a course, or whether they work hard at their studies because they are high in dispositional hope. In other words, does academic hope result from a series of successes in academia or do individuals who have higher trait levels of hope tend to excel in academic settings?

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