Yidan Academic Cheating and Attribution Case

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Academic cheating can be examined through attribution theory, which studies how people explain behavior by assigning it to internal dispositions or external situations. The original essay used several psychological concepts—self-serving bias, actor–observer bias, fundamental attribution error, social learning, perceived norms, pressure, and rationalization—to explain why students may cheat and how observers judge them. Those concepts remain useful, but cheating should not be attributed to one cause or personality type. Students may act dishonestly because of performance pressure, fear of failure, opportunity, weak learning, time demands, perceived unfairness, peer norms, unclear rules, technology, or deliberate calculation. Situational pressures help explain behavior but do not remove responsibility. Effective academic-integrity policy combines clear expectations, authentic assessment, learning support, equitable procedures, and proportionate consequences (McCabe et al., 2012; Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Weiner, 1985).

Defining Academic Cheating

Academic cheating includes unauthorized assistance, copying, use of prohibited materials, contract cheating, impersonation, fabrication of data, collusion beyond permitted limits, and other acts that misrepresent a student's work or learning. Plagiarism is related but may involve careless citation as well as intentional deception, so intent and severity should be assessed. New technologies create additional forms, including unauthorized use of generative artificial intelligence, hidden communication devices, file sharing, and manipulation of online testing systems. Definitions must be stated in course and institutional policies because students cannot be held fairly to rules that are vague or inconsistent across instructors (McCabe et al., 2012; Park, 2003).

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory distinguishes explanations based on personal characteristics from explanations based on circumstances. An observer may say a student cheated because they are dishonest, lazy, or unprepared—an internal attribution. The student may explain the behavior through a family emergency, extreme workload, unclear collaboration rule, or fear of losing a scholarship—an external attribution. Both may contain truth. Human behavior usually reflects interaction between person and situation. The purpose of attribution analysis is not to excuse cheating but to reveal how judgments

can become biased and how policy can address causes without abandoning accountability (Weiner, 1985).

The Fundamental Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to overemphasize personal traits and underestimate situational influences when explaining another person's behavior. A lecturer who discovers copied answers may immediately conclude that the student lacks integrity. That conclusion may be partly correct, yet it can overlook confusing instructions, normalized collaboration, pressure, accessibility barriers, or a poorly secured assessment that created unusual opportunity. Understanding context does not make the submitted work honest. It helps institutions determine intent, educational response, and whether design changes could prevent recurrence. The error is especially likely when observers know little about the student's circumstances (Weiner, 1985).

Actor–Observer Differences

People often explain their own behavior through circumstances while explaining others' behavior through character. A student may say, "I cheated because I had three exams and a family emergency," while describing another student as naturally dishonest. This difference arises because actors have access to their own motives and pressures, whereas observers see the visible act. The bias is not universal and varies with culture, emotion, and outcome. In integrity hearings, both student and instructor should present evidence, and decision-makers should evaluate the act against policy rather than rely on either perspective alone (Weiner, 1985).

Self-Serving Bias

Self-serving bias leads people to credit success to ability or effort and blame failure on external circumstances. A student may view a high grade as evidence of intelligence but explain a poor grade through an unfair test. When cheating produces a good result, the student may minimize the unauthorized assistance and preserve a positive self-image. If caught, they may blame the instructor, technology, or peers. This does not mean every contextual complaint is dishonest. Assessments can be poorly designed, and grading can be unfair. The bias reminds investigators to seek evidence and reminds students that protecting self-esteem can distort responsibility (Weiner, 1985).

Attribution and Moral Identity

Most students prefer to view themselves as honest. When behavior conflicts with that identity, they may redefine the act: "Everyone shares answers," "The instructor did not teach," "I only used a small amount," or "The course is irrelevant." These rationalizations reduce cognitive discomfort. A student

may draw a moral boundary around severe cheating while excusing lesser forms. Integrity education should address these common justifications and explain why unauthorized assistance undermines evidence of learning even when no physical victim is visible. The objective is to strengthen moral agency rather than label the student permanently as a cheater (McCabe et al., 2012).

Achievement Pressure

Grades influence scholarships, graduate admission, employment, family expectations, immigration status, and self-worth. High stakes can increase temptation, especially when students believe one result will determine their future. Pressure alone does not cause everyone to cheat; many students facing the same stakes remain honest. It is a risk factor interacting with opportunity, values, coping, confidence, and perceived consequences. Institutions should avoid unnecessarily high-stakes assessment and provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. Students also need support for time management, anxiety, and help-seeking (Murdock & Anderman, 2006).

Fear of Failure and Self-Efficacy

Students with low confidence may believe they cannot succeed through legitimate effort. Cheating can then appear to protect them from failure, embarrassment, or disappointment. Attribution matters because a student who interprets difficulty as evidence of fixed inability may avoid learning and seek shortcuts. Instructors can support adaptive attribution by emphasizing strategies, practice, feedback, and improvement rather than intelligence alone. This does not guarantee honesty, but it makes legitimate success feel possible. Academic support should be available early, not only after a violation (Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Weiner, 1985).

Time Pressure and Procrastination

Procrastination can leave a student facing a deadline with insufficient time, increasing the appeal of copying or contract cheating. External demands such as employment, caregiving, illness, and multiple courses also create genuine time pressure. Students remain responsible for communicating and seeking extensions where available, but institutions should provide clear procedures for emergencies. Course design can reduce last-minute misconduct through staged assignments, drafts, checkpoints, and feedback. A large unsupervised final submission creates more opportunity than a process in which students show development over time (McCabe et al., 2012; Murdock & Anderman, 2006).

Peer Norms

Students are more likely to view cheating as acceptable when they believe peers do it frequently and face no consequence. Perceived norms may be inaccurate; a few visible incidents can create the

belief that dishonesty is universal. Social-norm messaging should therefore be truthful and avoid unintentionally advertising high cheating rates. Collaborative study can blur boundaries when instructors do not explain which tasks permit shared work. Students should know when discussion is encouraged, when sources must be cited, and when the final product must be independent (McCabe et al., 2012).

Social Learning

Social learning theory suggests that people observe behavior and its consequences. If classmates gain high grades through unauthorized methods, if older students share answer banks, or if instructors ignore obvious violations, cheating may be learned as effective and normal. Conversely, students who see honest effort recognized and policy enforced consistently receive a different message. Role modeling matters beyond students: faculty members who misuse sources, change rules unpredictably, or ignore research ethics weaken credibility. Academic integrity is an institutional culture, not only a student obligation (Bandura, 1977; McCabe et al., 2012).

Opportunity and Deterrence

Cheating becomes more likely when opportunity is easy, detection appears unlikely, and consequences seem minor or inconsistent. Deterrence can include secure assessment, varied questions, identity verification, oral follow-up, version control, and clear sanctions. Excessive surveillance, however, can invade privacy, disadvantage disabled students, create false accusations, and damage trust. Effective prevention should prioritize assessment design and student engagement before relying on intrusive proctoring. The probability of fair review may matter more than severe punishment rarely applied (McCabe et al., 2012).

Online Assessment

Online learning creates legitimate flexibility but also challenges concerning unauthorized resources, messaging, impersonation, and commercial answer services. Instructors can design open-book assessments that require application, individualized data, explanation, reflection, or oral defense. Time limits should be tested for accessibility and should not be so extreme that they measure connection speed or typing rather than learning. Technical failures need documented procedures. Students should not be presumed dishonest merely because an automated system flags eye movement, noise, or unusual behavior. Human review and appeal are essential.

Generative Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI can assist brainstorming, explanation, language revision, coding, or feedback, but it can also produce unauthorized work, fabricated references, and false claims. Rules should identify permitted and prohibited uses for each assignment. A blanket statement that “AI is cheating” may conflict with professional practice, while unrestricted use can prevent assessment of individual learning. Students may be required to disclose prompts, verify outputs, cite use, or submit process evidence. Detection tools have limitations and can produce false positives, especially for multilingual writers. Disciplinary decisions should not rely solely on an AI-detection score.

Contract Cheating

Contract cheating occurs when another person or service produces work that a student submits as their own, whether payment is involved or not. It is difficult to detect because the work may be original in the plagiarism-software sense. Warning signs can include abrupt changes in style, inability to explain the submission, or mismatch with previous work, but none alone proves misconduct. Oral discussion, drafts, and personalized assignments can reduce opportunity. Students who use such services may also face blackmail or misuse of personal information. Institutions should educate students about these risks (McCabe et al., 2012).

Culture and Communication

Students come from educational traditions with different approaches to memorization, collaboration, textual borrowing, authority, and citation. Cultural difference should not be used to stereotype international students or excuse clear deception. It does mean that academic conventions must be taught explicitly. Examples, practice exercises, feedback, library instruction, and discipline-specific guidance are more effective than assuming everyone arrives with the same understanding. Policies should be available in accessible language and format (Park, 2003).

Assessment Design

Authentic assessment asks students to apply knowledge to cases, local data, personal reflection, iterative projects, performances, or professional tasks. It is not cheat-proof, but it reduces the value of generic copied answers. Multiple low- and moderate-stakes assessments distribute pressure. Requiring drafts and feedback creates evidence of process. Question banks, randomized values, and regular revision reduce reuse. Design should align with learning outcomes; an assessment made difficult only to prevent cheating may become invalid as a measure of knowledge (McCabe et al., 2012).

Instructor Relationships and Help-Seeking

Students are more likely to seek legitimate help when instructors appear approachable, explain office hours, respond respectfully, and normalize questions. Fear of humiliation can push struggling students toward peers or online services. Clear extension policies reduce bargaining and favoritism. Compassion does not mean removing standards. It means creating a path for students to disclose difficulty before misconduct occurs. Referral to tutoring, counseling, disability services, emergency aid, and advising can address underlying problems (Murdock & Anderman, 2006).

Procedural Fairness

An accusation can affect grades, reputation, immigration status, and educational progression. Institutions need written notice, access to evidence, an opportunity to respond, impartial decision-makers, consistent standards, and appeal. The burden and standard of proof should follow institutional policy. Faculty should distinguish suspicion from finding and protect confidentiality. Students should not be pressured to confess merely to resolve a case quickly. Fair procedures strengthen legitimacy and reduce bias.

Implicit Bias in Enforcement

Not all students are equally likely to be suspected or reported. Language difference, disability, race, nationality, and unfamiliar writing style may influence faculty judgment. Automated tools can reproduce these disparities. Institutions should monitor reports and outcomes for unequal patterns, train decision-makers, and require evidence beyond intuition. Equality does not mean ignoring misconduct; it means applying policy consistently and reviewing systems that produce disproportionate accusation without comparable evidence.

Consequences and Educational Responses

Consequences should reflect intent, scale, prior history, impact, and institutional rules. A first minor citation error may require education and resubmission, while organized impersonation or purchased work may justify severe sanction. Restorative or educational responses can include integrity modules, reflection, skill development, and supervised reassessment. Sanctions should not become purely punitive if the goal includes future ethical behavior. Repeat or deliberate misconduct still requires meaningful accountability to protect fairness for other students and the credibility of qualifications (McCabe et al., 2012; Park, 2003).

Why Cheating Harms Others

Cheating creates more than an unfair grade. It disadvantages honest students, weakens instructors' ability to evaluate teaching, and allows people to advance without required competence. In professions such as healthcare, engineering, law, education, and finance, unearned credentials may create public risk. It also damages the student's learning and confidence because success depends on concealment rather than ability. Institutions lose trust when enforcement is arbitrary or when widespread dishonesty is ignored. These harms explain why integrity is a shared academic value (McCabe et al., 2012).

Researching Cheating

Self-report surveys often underestimate or overestimate misconduct depending on anonymity, definitions, memory, and social desirability. Disciplinary records capture only detected and reported cases. Experimental scenarios may not reflect real stakes. Researchers should use multiple methods and avoid treating one prevalence estimate as exact. They should distinguish attitudes, intentions, observed behavior, admissions, and adjudicated violations. Ethical research must protect participants because disclosures can create academic risk.

Institutional Prevention Strategy

A comprehensive strategy begins with clear definitions and orientation, followed by course-specific rules, ethical assessment design, accessible support, faculty training, and fair enforcement. Institutions should monitor emerging technologies and commercial services without creating panic. Student representatives can help identify confusing practices and communicate expectations. Data on violations should be used to improve curriculum and policy, not merely rank departments. Leadership must model research and administrative integrity as visibly as it demands student honesty (McCabe et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Attribution theory helps explain why students, instructors, and institutions interpret academic cheating differently. Observers may overemphasize dishonest character, while students may protect self-image by blaming pressure or unclear rules. Situational factors—including high stakes, low confidence, procrastination, peer norms, opportunity, technology, and weak support—can increase risk, but they do not erase agency. Academic integrity is strengthened when expectations are explicit, assessment demonstrates individual learning, help is accessible, faculty model ethical conduct, and allegations receive fair review. The goal should not be to divide students permanently into honest and dishonest types. It should be to prevent misrepresentation, respond proportionately, and cultivate the

skills and moral responsibility required for genuine academic achievement (Bandura, 1977; McCabe et al., 2012; Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Weiner, 1985).

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