

# **ATTITUDES OF ACADEMIC STAFFS TOWARD ACADEMIC DISHONESTY BETWEEN CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY (USA) AND SHAHID BEHESHTI UNIVERSITY OF MEDICAL SCIENCE (TEHRAN, IRAN)**

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## **Abstract**

Academic dishonesty among students has been widespread global issues at higher educational institutions. While many international studies have tried to find causes and differences of the academic dishonesty at higher educational institutions in cultural differences, few have examined the attitudes of the academic staff members on the issue. Our research used 226 academic staff members of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Iran and Central Washington University (CWU) in the USA to find out cross-cultural differences in attitudes and beliefs of the academic dishonesty of students. Our result shows both similarities and differences of attitudes and beliefs of the academic staff members in the two institutions. At the end of this paper, we pointed out risks of using cultural differences to analyze collected data in cross-cultural comparative studies on academic dishonesty.

## **Introduction**

Academic staff members including faculty members seem to work on eliminating academic dishonesty inside and outside of classrooms through formal policies and detentions. Naturally, higher educational institutions around the world may have their own policies and programs to enforce own academic ethical codes (Calgary University 2010; McGill University, 2010). While many higher educational institutions have tried to eliminate chances of academically dishonest actions of students, some researches have pointed out that existing cultural differences will not allow non-US institutions to effectively deal with academic dishonesty of the US point of view. This means that the cultural differences must be carefully considered to not only study on cross-cultural differences in academic dishonesty but also define academic dishonesty based on own cultural values. In other words, international comparative studies on academic dishonesty without clear definitions based on local cultural values will not give any clear idea about causes, differences, and solutions of academic dishonesty.

## **Literature Review**

Many researches have tried to find reasons why students involve in dishonest activities in higher educational institutions in various countries (Dean, 2000; Bernardi, Baca, Landers, &Witek, 2008; Graves, 2008). On the other hand, with the outburst of digital knowledge and the propelling of staff, academicians, and students into the information society, the environment for cheating has become even more durable so that students tend to have easier time to conduct dishonest actions.

For example, expansion of internet access, smart phones, and nanotechnology have enabled students to go for academic dishonesty so easily and instantly. According to Fain and Bates (2004), there are at least 225 websites providing students with term papers for assignments at schools. In fact, there have been more reports of academic dishonesty today than in the past. For example, one study reported only 34% of students admitted to cheating in USA in 1969 while the figure had been 61% in 1992. Then, it became 74% by 2002 (Twenge & Campbell,

2009). Campbell, Owens, and Denton (2000), Thomas (2001), and Gligoff (2001) have reported that cheating on exams and plagiarism seemed to be among the most serious current concerns in colleges and universities in the USA.

While there have been comparative studies on students' attitudes and beliefs in engaging academic dishonesty in various countries, studies on academic staff members' attitudes and beliefs in students' engagement in the dishonesty. One of the very rare studies was conducted at a medical school in Tehran, Iran in 2010 (Yekta, Lupton, Khadem, and Maboudi, 2010). According to the study, the higher the academic rank of the students became, the less there would be the tendency for cheating and academic dishonesty.

This finding seemed to be in line with the findings of Whitely, Nelson, & Jones (1999). Their study found that the older a student became, the less likely s/he would engage in cheating and academic dishonesty behaviors. According to Rennie and Crosby (2001), 56% of the responding medical students said they had engaged or would engage in plagiarism. Moreover, Simon, et al (2004) reported that students' perceptions of campus climate were among one of the deciding factors describing whether students would report fraudulent activities.

Since it is very unrealistic to expect complete disappearance of academic dishonesty, the realistic research question would be, "Who should discourage cheating and who should punish those who engaged in cheating and academic dishonesty?". So far, there are two contradictory opinions for this question. According to Strichertz (2001), students believe that academic staffs should have paid more attention to academic dishonesty. However, Callahan (1982) actually showed evidence those serious efforts by the academic staff members were not rewarded by lowering the number of cases of academic dishonesty.

In addition, this question must be answered carefully by considering cross-cultural perspectives and interpretations of academic dishonesty. In short, students in different countries may have different opinions on what is and what is not considered academic dishonesty. This concern was supported by social learning theorists (Whitley 1998; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002). Several researches showed validity of this concern through comparative studies in Poland, China, Russia, and the USA (Chapman & Lupton, 2004; Lupton & Chapman, 2002; Lupton, Chapman, & Weiss, 2000). In other words, these studies support the idea that definitions of cheating are quite different among cultures.

### **Methodology**

Our questionnaire was especially developed to study the attitudes and perceptions of the academic staffs on what they regarded as cheating and academic dishonesty. The questionnaire was originally written in Persian and it was validated with randomly selected 30 Iranian academic staff members. Its Cronbach's Alpha was 0.82. The Test-Retest showed the reliability of 0.84.

Native speakers then translated the questionnaire into English. Both native English speakers and Persian speakers checked the English translations with English fluency prior to the validation in the USA. The English version was validated in similar ways with 21 randomly selected academic staff members in the USA. The validation was effective with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.81.

Once the validity was proven, 130 randomly selected academic staff members at CWU participated in this study. Out of the 130 collected questionnaires, we could use 128 questionnaires for this study. In Iran, participants were randomly selected at Shahid Beheshti

University of Medical Sciences and we could use 98 questionnaires. We used SPSS 16 software for statistical processing.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The observed differences were statistically tested and summarized in the table 1. In our questionnaire, Q2 asked, "Do you know of any students who have cheated on exams at this university?". Q12 asked, "I believe most students cheat in exams." The number of participants who answered YES in both questions at SBMU was much larger than the number of CWU participants who answered YES in both questions.

While this may imply that Iranian students tend to cheat more, we are wondering if such a simple conclusion reflects reality. This is because we believe that YES on Q2 can be very subjective. It may depend on various ways of academic staff members to see students' cheatings. In addition, we may have to consider general influence from certain cultural values, beliefs or expectations of the academic staff to their students. We also think that academic staff members' own experiences in academic dishonesty will be influential.

When we asked if sharing notes or papers from previous classes were unethical and unfair through Q6 and Q7, CWU academic staff members considered these were unethical and unfair. The sense of unfairness seems to be comprehensive, reflecting that the CWU academic staff felt that cheating occurred not only for those students who actually cheated but also for those who directly or indirectly supported or initiated the students' cheating.

In addition, CWU academic staff members felt that student A who gave all materials of a class to the student B was actually engaging in academic dishonesty because A gave B chances for academic dishonesty. It seems like CWU academic staff members are more sensitive for cheating in the classroom than Iranian academic staff members.

Naturally, this difference might be caused by different ideas and perceptions of academic dishonesty based on cultural differences (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009; Aurora, Teixeira, & Rocha, 2006). Some may consider a specific behavior as cheating while others may not. For example, a majority of academic staffs of SBMU usually make sure all students attend classes. If there is a student missing a large class (more than 40 students), they may consider this academically dishonest or even cheating the class. This is because instructors of the large classes focus more on attendance than completions or performance of assignments. The instructors believe that it will be impossible to check all assignments and performance of every student in large classes. As a result, academic dishonesty in assignments and projects will be everywhere in large classes. Such cultural differences in the definition of cheating may let SBMU's staff members think CWU's perceptions of cheating as student collaborations. The result of Q8 and Q19 seem to provide this point by showing different sense of "actions of cheating" between CWU and SBMU academic staff members.

So far, our research has also shown that Iranian students may be more group-oriented and there may not be the separation or distinctions between leaders and followers in a group setting. Indeed, in the Iranian classroom, it is very common sense to treat all group members equally and respectfully regardless of the amount of contributions. It is also very common sense to reward all group members equally regardless of the amount of contributions.

However, what confusing us is the higher number of cheatings reported in the USA than in Iran, (Thomas, 2001; Gligoff, 2001). We think this may be explained a little when we found that SBMU academic staff members did not report so-called cheating in the USA by not recognizing

it as cheating. For example, 41.8 % of the SBMU staff said that the students cheat while the figure was 66.4 % for those at CWU.

This is not only because Iranian staff members do not recognize so-called cheating in the USA but also because students in Iran has different ideas about cheating from US students. This is mainly because of different standards of codes of academic honesty between SBMU and CWU. CWU has clear standards of academic honesty so that students at CWU tend to know clearer ideas about dishonest conducts (CWU Code of Conduct, 2010). On the other hand, SBMU students with poorer standard of academic honesty may not clearly know what exactly will become academic dishonesty.

### **Conclusion**

Our research discovered not only factual similarities and differences but also cultural concerns in the similarities and differences in academic dishonesty between the academic staff members of Central Washington University (CWU) in the USA and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (SBMU) in Iran. While there will be another interpretations and understanding of academic dishonesty between Iran and USA by different studies, our study will be one of the very first studies to point out the importance of both facts and cultural influences in academic dishonesty between the two nations.

What really amazed us was that the strong possibility that Iranian staff members actually did not recognize students' actions that would be considered academic dishonesty by the US staff members. If they do not exactly know what US style academic dishonesty is, it is really no use to conduct comparative studies to find which country will have more academically dishonest students. We started thinking that we must compare definitions of academic dishonesty before we start analyzing factual data. We are also thinking that using "cultural difference" in cross-cultural comparative studies on academic dishonesty must be really carefully done. This is a very important point since careless uses of "cultural differences" in such studies will give biases instead of showing unbiased facts. We simply believe that it is so dangerous to conduct cross-cultural comparative studies on academic dishonesty between students with completely different definitions of academic dishonesty.

After all, our study is actually warning other researchers who are focusing highly on cultural differences to study cross-cultural differences in academic dishonesty. We will need to know not only cultural differences in academic dishonesty but also difference in definitions of academic dishonesty to produce more accurate analyses and findings.

References Available upon Request