"No Harm, No Foul?"

Evaluations of Cheating Across Contexts

Fiona C. DeBernardi

Primary advisor: Audun Dahl, PhD

Second reader: Rebecca Covarrubias, PhD

Senior Thesis, Psychology Department

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Author Declarations

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Author Contributions

F. C. DeBernardi helped design the study, collect data, and analyze the data using R. All work was supervised by Dr. Waltzer and Professor Dahl. DeBernardi contributed to literature review for the paper and drafted the manuscript. The draft was reviewed and edited by Dr. Waltzer, Professor Dahl, and Professor Covarrubias.

Data Availability

The materials, data, and analyses used for this research are publicly available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/ug8qe/?view_only=6b78b46ecf3f49f0bc56e37785b1a22f

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Abstract (209 words)

Although most people judge that cheating is generally wrong, they also judge that cheating is sometimes okay. This research project examined the conditions under which people view cheating as acceptable. In prior studies, we found that students evaluated academic cheating more positively when the protagonist faced external pressure (high obligations to others, low access to resources, and low teacher flexibility; DeBernardi et al., 2021). The present study examined whether such effects were specific to academic cheating or whether similar considerations also rendered other forms of non-academic cheating more acceptable in the eyes of students. Undergraduates (N = 170) read hypothetical vignettes about cheating, varying along the following dimensions: *(1) risk of harm to others, (2) pressure* and *(3) authority flexibility.* We selected these variables based on prior work indicating these factors often accompany cheating situations (Jensen et al., 2002; Waltzer & Dahl, in press). We found that when scenarios had low harm, low authority flexibility, and high pressure, participants were more likely to evaluate the scenario positively and be willing to cheat in the same situation. The findings suggest that the same variables that render academic cheating more acceptable also apply to other non-academic kinds of cheating, which may explain why people choose to cheat in some situations but not others.

Keywords: decision making; moral psychology; pressure; moral reasoning

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Most people would say they think cheating or lying is wrong, yet most people also cheat or lie at some point in their life (Ashworth et al., 2003; Davis et al., 1992; DePaulo et al., 1996; Murdock et al., 2016). To explain this contradiction, prior work on academic cheating has suggested that students disengage from, or turn off, their moral sense when they cheat (Bandura, 2016). This study tests the alternative proposal that people think cheating is okay under specific and predictable circumstances—often the very kind of circumstances under which people cheat (e.g., high-pressure situations; DePaulo & Bell, 1996; Levine et al., 2010; Talwar et al., 2007).

The main goal of the present study was to examine the factors that guide judgments about non-academic cheating, going beyond prior work on judgments about academic cheating (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Waltzer & Dahl, 2021, in press). It focused on two factors found to influence judgments about academic cheating: *pressure* and *authority flexibility.* In addition, we examined one factor that distinguishes academic cheating from many other kinds of cheating: the extent to which it poses *risks for the welfare of others*. To investigate the effects of these three factors, we asked undergraduate students to complete a survey about hypothetical events. Lastly, to explore whether judgments shape intentions to act, we assessed participants' reported likelihood of cheating in these hypothetical situations.

The Moral Psychology of Cheating

We define *cheating* as a deceitful violation of a rule that would confer an advantage on the agent if completed successfully. This definition of cheating includes acts ranging from financial fraud and tax evasion to academic cheating on an exam. This study concerns judgments about intentional cheating. Although many acts of cheating are unintentional, evaluations of these events appear to be quite different from intentional cheating (Barnhardt, 2016; Cushman,

2008; Waltzer & Dahl, in press; Young & Saxe, 2011). For instance, the agent may see no reason to negatively evaluate their own actions when they do not think they cheated (Barnhardt, 2016; Waltzer & Dahl, 2020, in press).

Evaluations of cheating are not as straightforward as one might think. People usually think cheating is wrong because they find it immoral, are concerned about fairness, or worry it will harm others (Gert, 2004; Green, 2006; Miller et al., 2011; Passow et al., 2006). Although people generally think that lying and cheating are wrong, the presence of certain situational factors can make people judge it as more acceptable (DePaulo & Bell, 1996; Jensen et al., 2002; Talwar et al., 2007). For instance, students find it more acceptable for someone to cheat when they are facing life pressures (e.g., working overtime to support family, having health issues) than to cheat simply because one does not feel like doing the work (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Diekhoff et al., 1996; Haines et al., 1986; Jensen et al., 2002).

Cheating Beyond the Academy

Cheating includes many forms of violations beyond academics. In 2001, an energy company called Enron scammed people into investing in their company by making it appear that their company was doing better than it actually was. The Enron scandal caused thousands of their employees to lose their jobs and shareholders to lose a combined $300 billion dollars (Di Miceli da Silveira, 2013). This scandal is an example of how cheating can have consequences for large groups of people.

Some types of cheating, like Enron's financial fraud, have direct consequences on the security and wellbeing of others. For this study, we refer to this form of cheating as a "*high harm*" type of cheating because there is a directly identifiable victim. Examples of highly

harmful types of cheating include *scamming*, *con artistry*, or *faking health-care qualifications* (e.g., a therapist pretending to have credentials to treat people who are unwell).

Other types of cheating may have consequences to society, but participants might see the harm as widely dispersed, or non-existent, rather than severely impactful for anyone in particular. We refer to cheating that does not have a direct victim as a "*low-harm*" type of cheating. Some examples of this type of cheating include *tax evasion*, *art forgery*, or *counterfeiting*. This kind of cheating may have consequences to certain institutions, businesses, or groups (e.g., counterfeiting might harm a casino's reputation), but the cheating act does not directly target specific individuals.

There is also variability in the social ramifications and societal consequences of different types of cheating. Students who cheat in school go on to become professionals in a variety of important fields; one study found that cheating in high school or college predicted cheating in medical school (Baldwin et al., 1996). Cheating in school has been correlated with later dishonesty and lying in the workplace (e.g., unethically earning a promotion, lying to make a sale, taking credit for others' work; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Sims, 1993). Certain forms of real-world cheating can create unfair situations in the workplace, harm others financially, and diminish public trust in businesses, government, and personal relationships (Cole & Smith, 1995; Heyman et al., 2019; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Stevens et al., 1994). Because cheating can lead to long-term consequences, it is important to understand which situational factors may lead to cheating so that interventions can be developed.

Three Factors Expected to Influence Judgments about Non-Academic Cheating

Just as cheating situations are variable, people's judgments about right and wrong vary depending on the situation. In certain cases, people make exceptions to deeply-held moral

principles, and many times, people can be uncertain about their judgments. For instance, people are less likely to suggest the death penalty when they are given contextual details of a criminal's past (e.g., a history of abuse, mental illness, addiction) (Barnett et al., 2004; Bell Holleran et al., 2016; Espinoza & Willis-Esqueda, 2015). Many people also express uncertainty over whether an action is right or wrong (Waltzer & Dahl, in press). These findings suggest that people judge certain transgressive actions as more acceptable when there are mitigating circumstances.

Harmfulness. One reason people think academic cheating is okay under certain circumstances is because they believe it does not hurt anyone (Ashworth et al., 1997; Haines et al., 1986; McCabe, 1992; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Therefore, it would follow that if a person thought cheating was harmful, they would no longer consider it to be okay. Unlike many forms of academic cheating, which have less obvious impacts on people besides the cheater, non-academic cases of cheating can often directly harm other people, as illustrated earlier (e.g., scamming). To see whether people judge harmful kinds of cheating differently from academic cheating, this study will manipulate the presence of harm. This will allow us to examine whether other situational factors (e.g., life pressures or flexibility of an authority figure) might only matter for a person's decision making when the cheating act is non-harmful. To validate that the harmful cheating acts were actually perceived as harmful, we asked participants to rate risk of harm after reading each vignette.

Exceptional Pressures: Resources and Interpersonal Obligations. One factor that matters for peoples' judgments of academic cheating is whether the student is under pressure (Bertram Gallant, 2014; Davis et al., 1992; McCabe et al., 2001; McCabe et al., 1999; Passow et al., 2006; Stephens & Nicholson, 2008). Life pressures can include low access to resources (e.g., no access to a computer) or high obligations to other people (e.g., taking care of sick family

members). For this study, we refer to the combination of these two variables as *pressure*. It is important to look at pressure as a variable because students who are under stress, busy, or have low access to resources are more likely to cheat in school (Bertram Gallant, 2014; Davis et al., 1992; McCabe et al., 1999, 2001). With COVID-19, many students also reported that they experienced heightened pressure related to the pandemic and remote learning (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Lederman et al., 2021). People also say that academic cheating is acceptable under high pressure conditions or when it benefits another person, like working many hours at a job to support your family (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Haines et al., 1986; Heyman et al., 2009). Even though people might think cheating is usually wrong, in a case where someone has to take care of family or make ends meet, people might think it is more acceptable to cheat. This study manipulates whether the character has pressure (*obligations to others or low access to resources*) to see whether these factors influence participants' judgments.

Authority Flexibility. Another example of a mitigating circumstance is when the relevant authority is inflexible or unaccommodating to a person's needs for leniency. Previous studies on academic cheating have suggested that people judge academic cheating to be more okay when the instructor is unfair or unhelpful towards students (e.g., "I think it is justified if the instructor has not been very helpful in teaching," DeBernardi et al., 2021; see also Haines et al., 1986; Jensen et al., 2002). Some researchers have suggested this is because students think that if an authority figure is inflexible or dishonest, it is more acceptable for them to also be dishonest (LaBeff et al., 1990; Jensen et al., 2002; Waltzer & Dahl., in press). Because teacher inflexibility was found to matter for judgments of academic cheating, we manipulated the variable of *authority flexibility* to see whether an inflexible authority has an effect on judgments about non-academic cheating acts.

The Present Research

This study aimed to understand whether mitigating factors could lead people to make moral exceptions about cheating in a variety of real-world scenarios. One concern in research on academic cheating is that participants might only justify cheating because they want to excuse their own actions or defend their peers (Diekhoff et al., 1996; Haines et al., 1986; Jensen et al., 2002). To ensure that students are not defending their own cheating actions or just defending their peers, we asked them to judge third-party, hypothetical cheating scenarios. This way, the participants would have no personal stake in the scenarios. To test the role of different mitigating factors, each scenario varied across three dimensions: (1) *risk of harm to others* (2) *pressure* and (3) *authority flexibility.* Our research questions and hypotheses focused on participants' responses to these variables (See Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Research Questions and Hypotheses

	Mitigating Factor	Research Question	Hypothesized Results
1	Risk of harm to others	Does concern for others' welfare guide a person's judgments?	People would rate harmful cheating acts as less okay
2	Pressure	Can exceptional pressure make cheating more acceptable?	Students would rate scenarios with exceptional pressures as more acceptable
3	Authority flexibility	Does authority flexibility affect people's judgments?	Students would rate scenarios with low authority flexibility as more acceptable
4	-	Does a person's evaluations guide their behavior?	Moral judgments would guide a person's behavior.

Method

Participants

College students (N = 170, 73% girls, 22% boys, 4% non-binary, M_{age}= 19.89 years, SD = 1.94) were recruited from the psychology department at the University of California, Santa

Cruz (UCSC). Participants were offered credit in their psychology classes for participating in the survey. Credit for the surveys was granted through SONA, an online subject recruitment system used by UCSC. We collected 173 survey responses, but three participants were excluded due to failing attention checks, for a final $N = 170$.

Most participants (85%) were born in the United States and 70% of them spoke English as a first language. Participants were *White/European* (34%), *Chicano/Latinx* (25%), *Asian American* (23%), *mixed race* (14%) *Black/African American* (2%), and *other* (2%). About half of participants (47%) were first-generation college students. The breakdown of student majors was as follows: *social science* (71%), *double* (18%), *physical and biological sciences* (5%), *humanities* (1%), and *other* (5%). The breakdown of students' year in college was as follows: first year (33%), second year (12%), third year (29%), fourth year (24%), fifth year (2%), and other (less than 1%).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey that would take them approximately 45 minutes. Participants gave their consent to participate, read and responded to questions about each vignette, answered questions to check their attention to the vignettes, and then answered demographic questions.

There were 3 variables that were manipulated, creating a 2 (high vs. low risk of harm to others) x 2 (high vs low authority flexibility) x 2 (high vs. low pressure) within-subjects design. Each participant saw two scenarios in each condition (16 vignettes total). The order of presentation for all scenarios was randomized and each of the names in the vignettes were randomized. Each story described the background of the person's pressure, described a dilemma or goal the person had, and showed whether the relevant authority was flexible or inflexible. At

the end of each scenario, it described a cheating action that the protagonist was contemplating doing. An example of a vignette shown to participants can be seen below (Figure 1).

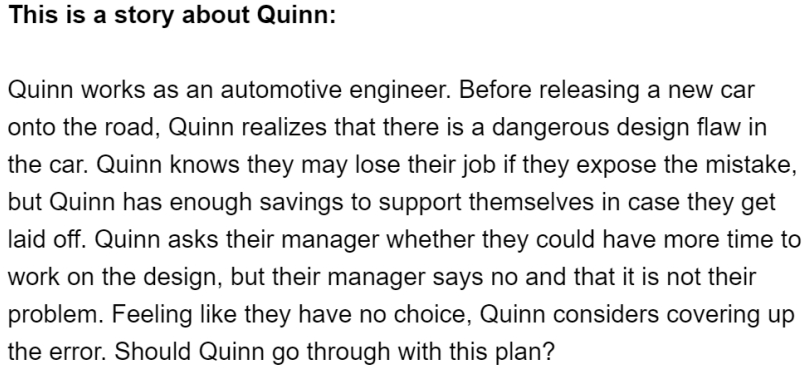

Figure 1. This is an example of a vignette shown to participants. In this story, the harm variable is high because there is a dangerous design flaw in the car, the authority figure is the manager and is inflexible because they will not compromise, and Quinn's pressure is low because they can afford to lose their job.

Manipulated Factors

Risk of harm. A harmful cheating act was defined as an act that is likely to have a direct victim. Eight of the vignettes given to participants described a high harm cheating example (likely to have a direct victim), and the other eight described a low harm example (cheating that is unlikely to have a direct victim). Pilot data (n = 22) was used to validate that participants actually perceived the harmful stories as harmful. See Table 2 for the eight high harm scenarios and the eight low harm scenarios.

Pressure. In each story, the character had either *low pressure* or *high pressure. Low pressure* was defined as having access to resources, financial stability, or low obligations to others (e.g., not needing to support family). For example, in one vignette about an athlete, the protagonist is financially stable and has a healthy family. *High pressure* was defined as having no

access to resources, financial instability, or high obligations to others (e.g., having to support a sick family member). For example, one protagonist cannot afford to lose their job because they have a big family to support.

Table 2

High Harm Versus Low Harm Cheating Acts

Shorthand	**Risk of Harm**	**Description of Scenario**
Vaccine	High	A person wants to claim they are priority to get the vaccine ahead of vulnerable populations.
Pilot	High	A pilot is considering faking a drug test to avoid getting fired.
Credentials	High	The character considers falsely claiming they have credentials to open up a private therapy practice.
Relative scam	High	The character considers pretending to be people's relatives and asking them for money.
Debt collector scam	High	The character considers pretending to be a debt collector to collect money.
Building scam	High	A contractor considers using cheaper construction materials that are known to cause cancer without telling customers.
Auto engineer	High	An engineer considers covering up a dangerous design flaw.
College	High	A student thinks about faking vaccine proof to attend college in-person.
Art forgery	Low	An artist considers imitating famous artwork and selling it as if it is their own.
Tax fraud	Low	A fast food worker considers omitting cash tips when filing their taxes.
Casino	Low	The character considers using fake poker chips at the casino.
Parking	Low	The character considers using their sibling's handicap tag to get closer parking to their job.
Bakery	Low	A baker considers presenting a store bought pastry as their own to get a positive review from a food critic.
Birthday	Low	The character is considering pretending it is their birthday to get a free cake from a restaurant.
Professional athlete	Low	An athlete considers using steroids so they can make the performance cutoff to stay on their team.
Fake ID	Low	The character considers using a fake id to get into a bar to talk to a CEO of a company who frequents that bar.

Flexibility. In each story, the relevant authority figure had either *high flexibility* or *low flexibility*. An authority figure was considered to have *low flexibility* if they were very strict with rules or refused to make exceptions for people's needs (e.g., a school does not let a person take remote classes because they enrolled one day too late). An authority figure was considered to have *high flexibility* if they were accommodating and helpful (e.g., a boss says the person can come in to work an hour late).

Dependent Measures

After each vignette, participants were asked several questions about their evaluations of the scenario. Participants were asked whether the action was *okay*, *why* it was okay, how *good or bad* the action was, whether it was *harmful*, whether it was *understandable*, and how *likely* they themselves would be to cheat in that scenario. These evaluative measures are summarized in Table 3.

Attention Checks

To make sure that participants were actually reading the vignettes, participants were asked to answer a question about what happened in the scenario. For example, after a story about a character who forged art, we asked participants whether this statement was true or false: *"in the story you just read, [name] wants to attend an art show."* Participants were required to answer 11/16 of the attention checks correctly to be included in the data.

Data Coding

Participants' open-ended responses of why they thought the action was okay were coded by two coders. First, we coded whether the response had any statements in favor of cheating; responses were coded as a "1" if they made some positive statements in support of cheating and

as a "0" if they gave no statements in support of the action whatsoever. Of the responses that received a "1", we coded any reasons that were provided (Table 4). Schemes were developed to measure whether participants were unsure about their responses and what factors made cheating more justified. We found agreement by calculating Cohen's Kappa on a random subset of the data (20%) which we coded independently (McHugh, 2012). After agreement was reached, the data was coded by one coder with consultation of the second coder.

Table 3

Survey Questions and Response Formats

Prompt	**Question wording**	**Response Options**
OK	In your personal opinion, would it be okay if [name] [does action]?	Yes, no
Why	Please explain why.	Open ended
Harm	If [name] [does action], what are the chances that… ►[name] would be harmed? ►anyone besides[name] would be harmed?	Scale from -10 ("*Extremely unlikely*") to 10 ("*Extremely likely*")
Rate	How good or bad would it be if [name] [does action]?	Scale of -10 ("*Really bad*") to 10 ("*Really good*")
Understandable	Please rate your agreement: It would be understandable for [name] to [do action].	5-point likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree,* 2 = *Somewhat disagree,* 3 = *Neutral,* 4 = *Somewhat agree,* 5 = *Strongly agree)*
Likely	If you were in the same situation as [name], how likely would you be to [do action]?	Scale of 0 ("*Extremely unlikely")* to 100 ("*Extremely likely*")

Uncertainty

Uncertainty in evaluation was coded when the participant was unsure of whether they thought the action was okay or not or provided reasons for and against the action (e.g., *"This doesn't seem that bad to me but it is still unethical.").* Agreement was high, (κ = .83*).*

Presence of Positive Evaluation

Before the reasons for the responses were coded, statements were coded for whether they had any reasons in support of the action. Presence of a positive evaluation was coded when a participant gave reasons in favor of the action or sympathized with the protagonist (e.g., "*it is understandable")*. Statements that were coded as not having any presence of a positive evaluation gave no reasons in support of the action (e.g., "*Scamming is not ok*"). Agreement was high (κ = .93*)*.

Because we wanted to examine which variables are mitigating, we coded the reasons in favor of the cheating act. Each statement that contained a positive evaluation was coded into one or more schemes that captured the provided reasoning in favor of the action (See Table 4). The variables we manipulated in the vignettes were also present in the coding schemes for the open ended data. Harm was represented through the *welfare of others* category and authority flexibility was represented through the *evaluation of authority* category. The *pressure* variable was represented through the *welfare of others*, *welfare of protagonist*, *general pressure*, and *resources* categories.

Data Analysis

We analyzed students' evaluations (in Table 3: *OK*, *Likely*, *Rate, Harm*) of the scenarios using Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMMs; Hox, 2010). Logistic link functions and binomial error distributions were used to analyze responses to the *okay* prompt. For continuous variables (*Likely, Harm,* and *Rate*), identity link functions and normal error distributions were used. To see if people perceived the stories we intended to be harmful as harmful, we compared their answers to the *harm* prompt (Table 2) to whether the story was high harm or low harm.

Table 4

Coding Schemes and Agreement Scores (Kappa, κ)

Category	κ	Description	Example quotes
Welfare of protagonist	.87	This category was coded when participants indicated that a cheating act was more acceptable because it benefitted the character or helped them to avoid a consequence. Includes: low likelihood of being caught, financial benefits, or attainment of a goal.	*"it is okay because he is taking advantage of a free opportunity"*
Welfare of others	.88	This category was coded when a participant indicated the action was okay because it would not bring harm to others or because it would help others.	*"no harm, no foul"* *"They have a family to support"*
Evaluation of Cheating Act	.85	Authority evaluation was coded as a "1" when participants justified the cheating act by reasoning that the relevant authority was being inflexible or unfair	*"I feel like this is more so a personal decision"* *"it's not a big deal"*
Evaluation of authority	.89	The response focuses on the value of the task as it pertains to the student's goals and wellbeing. Includes any form of criticism against the authority in the story (police, coach, government, instructor)	*the employee seems rude* *the 12 seconds time restriction seems very arbitrary*
Resource	.92	Resources were coded when a lack of access to a certain item, opportunity, or service made a person's cheating act more acceptable, in the opinion of the participant.	*"he is financially not able to cover going to school."*
Online	.93	This category was coded when a participant thought cheating in an online class, quiz, or assignment was more acceptable than cheating in an in-person class.	*N/A*
Frequency	.91	Frequency was coded when a person indicated that the cheating act was more acceptable if done rarely (e.g., "I think it would be okay to do it once") or to a small extent. Includes if the participant mentions others cheating frequently.	*"I think it would be okay to do it once"* *"the difference is negligible now that the vaccines are more available"*
General Reference to Pressure	.90	Pressure was coded when a participant referenced a barrier in the character's life that did not fall into another category.	*"the situation is unfair and unfortunate."*

Results

Validation of Perceived Risk of Harm to Others

First, we wanted to validate that the highly harmful scenarios were actually perceived as harmful by the participants. Participants perceived higher harm in the high-risk scenarios, as

measured by their responses to the question, "If [name] [does action], what are the chances anyone besides [name] would be harmed?" (rating from -10 = extremely unlikely to 10 = extremely likely). On average, participants said there was a higher chance of someone being harmed in the high risk scenarios (M = 6.31) compared to the low risk scenarios (M = -3.69), $D(1) = 1730.9$, $p < .001$.

Effect of Harmfulness on Evaluations

We next wanted to know whether the scenario's harmfulness affected participants' evaluations of the scenarios. As seen in Table 5, the effect of harmfulness was somewhat greater for low-pressure situations $D(1) = 5.66$, $p = .017$. However, there was no interaction between the harm and flexibility variables. Nonetheless, harmfulness significantly affected OK judgments at both levels of pressures, Ds > 141.62, ps < .001. On average, 7% of participants thought the high-harm scenarios were okay whereas 32% thought the low-harm scenarios were okay.

Table 5

Participants' "OK" Judgments: Interaction of Wellbeing and Harmfulness

		Pressure	
		low	**high**
Harmfulness	**high**	4%	10%
	low	28%	37%

Harm also had a significant effect on participants' evaluative ratings of whether the scenario was good or bad, on a scale of -10 ("Really bad") to 10 ("Really good"). When risk of harm was high, participants were less likely to rate the act positively. When risk of harm was

low, participants were more likely to rate the act positively. Participants' average ratings of the high-risk scenarios were lower (M = -7.50) than their ratings of the low-risk scenarios (M = -3.16), $D(1) = 824.51$, $p < .001$.

Effect of Pressure on Evaluations

Pressure significantly affected participants' *OK* judgments at both levels of harm, Ds < 18.48, ps < .001. When the protagonist in the story was under high pressure, participants were more likely to say their actions were okay. Twenty-four percent of participants said the actions of the character were okay in the high-pressure story versus 16% in the low pressure story.

Pressure also mattered for people's ratings of the scenarios, $D(1) = 35.05$, $p < .001$. In the low pressure scenarios participants' mean rating was -5.70 versus the high-pressure stories (M = -4.94).

Effect of Authority Flexibility on Evaluation

We also wanted to see whether participants' evaluations changed depending on whether the authority figure in the story was flexible. Indeed, high authority inflexibility caused more positive evaluations.

Authority flexibility significantly predicted participants' judgments of whether the act was okay or not okay. Participants were more likely to judge the action as okay when the scenario had an authority figure with low flexibility (22%) compared to when there was a highly flexible authority (17%), $D(1) = 16.83$ $p < .001$.

Authority flexibility also predicted participants' evaluative ratings of the actions. Participants' average ratings were more positive when the authority figure had low flexibility (M = -5.06), than when the authority figure was flexible (M = -5.60), $D(1) = 20.43$, $p < .001$.

Open-Ended Explanations of Evaluative Judgments

As expected, people's judgments about cheating events were not always straightforward. Most participants (76%) expressed evaluative uncertainty over whether the cheating acts were okay or not okay. Even when people said the actions were not okay overall, in 10% of the scenarios they still gave positive statements about the cheating act. For instance, one participant said the act was wrong, but in their explanation they reasoned, "Although I still believe that this is wrong, it's not the worst [thing to do] in order to support his relative."

Out of statements that gave a reason for the action, the most common reasons given in support of the cheating act were *welfare of others* (38%)*, welfare of protagonist* (20%), and *evaluation of cheating act* (19%) (See Figure 2). I analyze these three reasons types below.

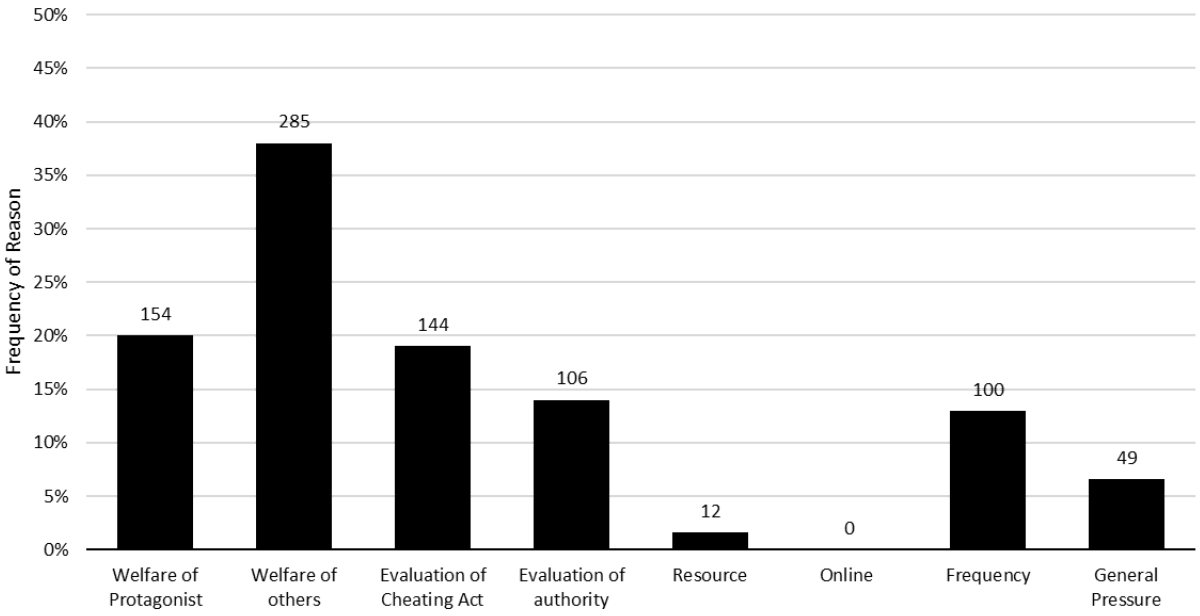

Figure 2. This bar plot shows the reasons given for why the cheating act was okay.

Risk of harm to others. Thirty-eight percent of responses mentioned that a lack of harm towards others made the cheating acts more justified. This was captured by the *welfare of others*

variable. For example, one participant reasoned that using a fake ID to get into a bar was justified because the action "would not harm anyone." Reasoning that cheating was more acceptable because it would not harm others, or because cheating would help others, was more common in the low harm scenarios (42%) versus the high harm scenarios (28%), $D(1) = 12.98$, $p < .001$.

Pressure. In 68% of trials, participants' reasons focused on how pressure on the protagonist made cheating more justified. As a reminder, our *pressure* variable included a character's access to resources and obligation to others. Pressure in the scenarios was captured through the following reasons: *welfare of others* (38%)*, welfare of protagonist* (21%)*, general pressure* (7%)*, resources* (2%)*.* One participant said "it is a tough scenario and I feel for the position they are in" and another said it was justified because "he has a family to support." Participants were more likely to say *welfare of protagonist* was a reason cheating was okay when pressure was low (18%) versus when pressure was high (23%) $D(1) = 3.67$, $p = .05$. Although the response was rare in the data, participants were more likely to say that *general pressure* was a reason cheating was okay in the high-pressure scenarios (9%) than in the low pressure scenarios, $D(1) = 9.24$, $p = .002$. Participants were not more likely to say that *welfare of others* or *resources* were reasons cheating was okay in either the high or low pressure condition, Ds < 1.68, $ps > .200$.

Authority flexibility. Authority flexibility was captured by the *evaluation of authority* variable. Fourteen percent of the reasons given said the presence of an inflexible authority figure made cheating more acceptable. One participant thought the cheating act was justified because the protagonist's "boss is putting her in an impossible situation" and another participant reassigned blame, stating "I would see it as the boss's fault". In the low flexibility condition,

more participants gave *evaluation of authority* as a reason (21%) for cheating than in the high flexibility condition (5%), $D(1) = 43.77$, $p < .001$.

Relation Between Evaluations and Prospective Actions

We also wanted to test whether participants' evaluative ratings predicted their self-reported likelihood of cheating if they were in the same situation. We found that participants were significantly more likely to say they would cheat in the same situation when their evaluations were positive (Pearson's $r = .74$), $D(1) = 2206.10$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3).

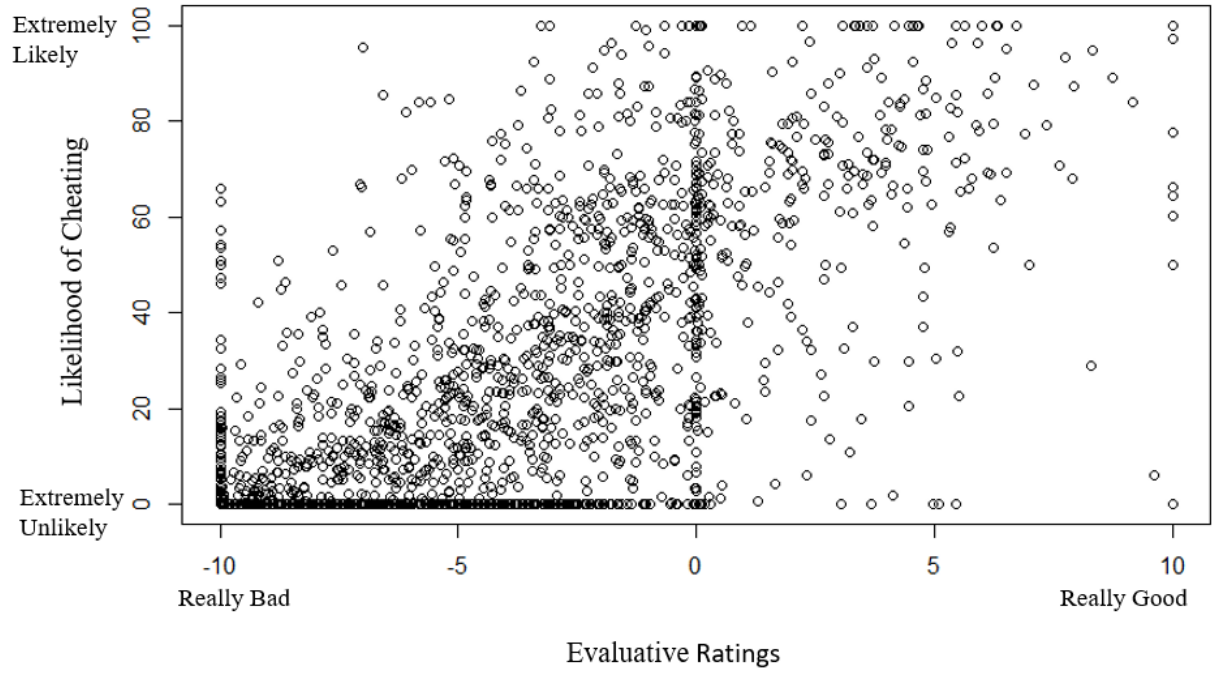

Figure 3. Scatterplot depicting the association between participants' evaluative ratings of the cheating act and their prospective likelihood of doing the same action in the scenario.

Discussion

It is important to study how people evaluate and engage in cheating beyond the classroom because cheating can affect people's livelihoods, create fairness problems, and diminish public trust in institutions (Cole & Smith, 1995; Heyman et al., 2019; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Stevens et al., 1994). The purpose of this study was to see whether situational factors (*harm, pressure, authority flexibility*) play a role in participants' evaluations of real-world cheating. We found that people evaluate real-world cheating acts more positively when the cheating was less harmful, the character faced high pressure, and the authority figure was inflexible. The findings provide support for the idea that when people make exceptions to their moral principles (e.g., generally being honest), it is not because they are abandoning their values, but because they are taking into consideration the contextual factors of the situation.

Contextual Influences on Decisions About Cheating

We hypothesized that the extent to which a cheating act posed a *risk of harm to other people* would significantly guide people's evaluations of that act. As expected, we found that people were much less likely to accept cheating when there was a high chance of directly harming other people. This finding supports previous literature on academic cheating; people think academic dishonesty is more okay when they think it does not hurt anyone (Haines et al., 1986; McCabe, 1992; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Like academic cheating, people also believe that non-academic cheating is more okay when it does not harm anyone. These results suggest that when a person decides to cheat in a given situation, it may be because they judge that the cheating will not harm anyone.

In addition to harm, we also expected *exceptional pressure* to play a role in people's evaluations of cheating. Although prior literature acknowledges pressure as a factor that pushes students into cheating, these previous works have paid less attention to how students evaluate

cheating in such situations of pressure (Jensen et al., 2002; McCabe et al., 1999; Stephens, 2016). In contrast, our framework views pressure as influencing a person's evaluations, rather than causing them to abandon their values. As expected, we found that participants judged the cheating act to be more acceptable when the character was facing a high-pressure circumstance. This finding helps explain why students may be more inclined to cheat when they are under pressure: in many cases, high-pressure circumstances lead to more accepting evaluations of cheating, which in turn lead to more willingness to cheat.

Along with harmfulness and pressure, the third variable we tested was *authority flexibility*. We hypothesized that students would judge cheating as less acceptable if the relevant authority figure was flexible. As expected, when the authority figure in the vignette was accommodating, participants were less accepting of the cheating act. This finding also supports previous literature on academic cheating as participants are more likely to justify their actions if the teacher is unfair or unhelpful (DeBernardi et al., 2021; Haines et al., 1986; Jensen et al., 2002). People evaluate real-world cheating similarly; when an authority figure is unfair or unhelpful, cheating is thought to be more acceptable.

All three of the variables (*harm, pressure,* and *authority flexibility*) had an effect on people's evaluations, and those evaluations in turn predicted people's responses about whether they would cheat in the same situation. We found that when people evaluate a cheating action more positively, they are more likely to say that they would cheat in the same scenario. Although some research questions whether there is any connection between a person's evaluations and behavior, the findings of this study suggest that judgments actually do align with actions (Haines et al., 1986; Houston, 1976, Lee et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2012). Thus, the judgment-action gap is smaller than previously thought. Even though people generally think it is wrong to cheat,

they choose to cheat mostly in the situations in which they have deemed cheating to be more acceptable.

Implications for Moral Psychology Research

The findings of this study have implications for research on moral reasoning related to cheating. Our findings suggest that people make choices about non-academic cheating in similar ways to academic cheating, as the same factors that guide academic decisions are also present in non-academic settings. It is important to understand how people make decisions about cheating because intervening on these factors could help individuals to avoid cheating.

To ensure that students are not simply defending their own actions or making excuses for themselves, we asked participants to make third-person evaluations. We found that participants thought cheating was justified in certain circumstances, even though they had no self-serving motivations (e.g., defending themselves or peers). People find cheating more acceptable in some situations, regardless of if it is their own cheating act or if they are evaluating another person's cheating act. This finding suggests that when people make judgments about their own cheating act, they are giving genuine reasons and not simply defending their actions.

In addition to informing research on cheating, the findings of this study contribute to research on the judgment-action gap. Some research asserts that people who cheat must not care very much about their values (Bandura, 2016), act mindlessly (Stephens, 2016), or provide excuses after the fact to defend themselves (Diekhoff et al., 1996; Haines et al., 1986; Jensen et al., 2002). Our research suggests that people still care about their values, but consider their actions in the context of other variables (*harm, pressure,* and *authority flexibility*). When a person decides to act dishonestly, it is because they have judged it to be more okay to be

dishonest in a situation where these variables are present. Through this view, there is not a judgment-action gap as people's evaluations actually do align with their actions.

Limitations and Future Directions

One potential limitation of this study is that the student population that we sampled might evaluate the scenarios differently than the general population. For instance, the student population might judge the vignette where someone forges their degree more negatively since students are in the process of working hard towards their own degrees. That said, previous research has shown that students often show similar patterns of responses to moral dilemmas as do non-student adults (Dahl et al., 2018; DeBernardi et al., 2021). Still, it would be important to expand prior research on evaluations of cheating to include participants from other communities.

Another limitation of this study was that the *pressure* variable was a combination of a character's access to resources and obligation to others. Because we combined these factors, it is not possible to know which one played a larger role in people's evaluations of a scenario. In future research, we could separate these factors to evaluate which elements of the *pressure* variable mattered most in people's evaluations.

One common response in the open-ended data was that the identity of the victim mattered for their evaluation. For instance, in a vignette about scamming, one participant said "It depends on who they are taking money from. If it's rich people then I think it's more okay." It would be interesting to see whether the identity of the victim guides people's actions because it could further inform why people cheat in some situations but not others. We might find that people think cheating is more dishonest when the victim is more vulnerable to the consequences of cheating. Future research could systematically manipulate the identity of the victim (e.g., *socioeconomic status, moral standing of the victim*).

Conclusion

My findings suggest that under some circumstances, specifically in the presence of low harmfulness, high pressure, and little authority flexibility, a substantial proportion of participants judged that it would be okay for a person to cheat. By considering this issue in the context of our findings, students who face increased pressures during the pandemic may see it as more acceptable to cheat. Through this lens, there may be potential for educators to mediate cheating through reducing pressure on students.

The present research informs how people make decisions about cheating in a variety of real-world contexts. In contrast to research that says people do not care about their values or act mindlessly when they cheat, the findings of this study suggest that people only cheat in situations in which they deem cheating to be more acceptable. These findings not only contribute to the judgment-action gap debate, but they also have the potential to inform real-world practices in education and business.

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