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Students' Attitude Toward Cheating in Switzerland, Ukraine and Poland

Abstract

The article discusses the problem of academic dishonesty, which has been growing in Western Europe, North America, in the transitional economies of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, cross-cultural comparisons remain scarce, particularly with regard to the former communist countries.

This paper presents an exploratory study on academic misconduct in Switzerland, Ukraine and Poland. The Academic Dishonesty Scale was used. A sample of 870 university students participated.

The results reveal no differences between Ukrainian and Polish students in terms of attitudes toward cheating. Swiss students expressed significantly more negative attitudes. The results offer implications for the practice of moral awareness.

Keywords: *academic misconduct, attitude toward cheating, subjective social norms, cultural comparison*

Introduction

Research suggests that academic misconduct among students is a growing problem as demonstrated in the context of Western Europe, North America (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), in the transitional economies of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Grimes, 2004). Indeed, academic misconduct by young adults during their studies risks seeping through

to the workplace (Haswell, Jubb, & Wearing, 1999) , threatening individual careers and organizational performance (Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore, 2009).

Academic unethical behaviour has often been studied in Western Europe and in the United States. These findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other cultural contexts (Parboteeah, Bronson, & Cullen, 2005). Students from the former communist countries might differ in their attitudes regarding academic cheating, because of different cultural and institutional heritage. Research on that problem in Central and Eastern Europe still remains scarce and is limited to a few publications in local languages.

To address the gap, we will compare academic misconduct in Switzerland, Ukraine and Poland to gain insights beyond situational and individual determinants. Indeed, past research points to an important role of culture in predicting deviant behaviours. For example, a comparison of students from the United States with those from Central Eastern Europe reveals that college members in the transitional economies attach lower levels of importance to individual actions of dishonesty than American respondents (Grimes, 2004). That is why the sharing of information and other activities that are viewed as "cheating" on an exam or classroom assignment might not necessary carry the same stigma in the transitional economies.

We believe our investigations can help understand how the cultural and institutional contexts in academia may influence the acceptance of cheating in three countries which differ in terms of political systems and culture: Ukraine, Poland and Switzerland. Ukraine is not a European Union member state and it is a country on the verge of transformation, still economically and socially unstable. Poland is a relatively new European Union member state and a post-socialist country undergoing changes resulting from political, economic and social transformation for more than twenty years now. Switzerland is a country on equal terms with EU member states, with a consolidated capitalist system. It has a well-established, highly competitive economy, with leadership in innovation. It could be assumed that students' attitude towards cheating and the norms that apply in that culture should differ from the Ukrainian and Polish ones. We argue that while the attitude of Swiss students may differ significantly from that of Ukrainian and Polish students, there may be differences between Ukrainians and Poles resulting from the relatively long time of Poland's adjustment to European standards, as well as similarities related to the many years of socialism in both countries.

A review of the literature suggests that there is widespread consent to cheating in Poland. For instance, the study conducted on a sample of 6500 Polish students, mostly teenagers, by the Foundation for the Development of Education

demonstrates that only a minority of young Poles perceive cheating at university as unethical. In a web panel survey conducted in 2012 among Polish teenagers, using the Zadane.pl social networking site, 37.40% of students were witnesses of school misconduct often and very often, 67.72% of students said that the topic of unethical behaviour was not discussed in their schools at all and 66.05% of them believed that dishonesty was the best way of coping with difficult situations and that it was treated as an expression of cleverness rather than in the categories of immoral acting.

Positive attitudes towards misconduct are probably widespread among Ukrainian students. In fact, only with the collapse of communism and the introduction of free-market rules have scholars taken ethical behaviour in academia seriously. And, while some academic research was recently conducted by Polish scholars, it has not received much attention in Ukraine (Hapon & Gorbaniuk, 2011). Ukrainian academics in particular blame the widespread acceptance of academic misconduct on the post-totalitarian context (Koshmanova & Hapon, 2007) wherein, despite officially proclaimed democracy, human rights remain threatened. Social injustice in Ukraine is evident – broken promises regarding much needed reforms, a weak legal system, scandals of fake degrees possessed by civil servants and government officials.

Corruption is involved in the process of transition of the education system to a free-market model. According to Osipian (2008) the number of respondents who admitted paying a bribe to enter a college or university in Ukraine declined from 19% in 2005 to 13% in 2006. "There are a variety of forms of corruption that can be found in higher education in Ukraine, including bribery, embezzlement, extortion, fraud, nepotism, cronyism, favouritism, kickbacks, violation of rules and regulations, ignoring admissions criteria in the admissions process, cheating, plagiarism, research misconduct, discrimination, and abuse of public property" (Osipian, 2008, p. 324). In such a context, both students and academics demonstrate a high openness to cheating. In the light of these findings, Bieły (2012) called for an active response to the widespread phenomenon of academic dishonesty. He laments that neither the Ministry of Education, nor local or regional education representatives are proactively addressing misconduct. Indeed, control measures, such as anti-plagiarism computer software, video monitoring, or metal detectors, cannot solve the problem, but fundamental changes in individuals appear to be needed through lectures on ethical behaviour, and developing research on cheating and its sources (Podoliak & Jurczenko, 2006).

The study presented in this paper is based on Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1985) and on Fishbein's and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action (1975). According

to Ajzen, behaviour is determined mainly by one's attitude towards the specific phenomenon and by individual norms related to the attitude which prevails in one's surroundings. *Attitude towards behaviour* is the result of one's earlier experience and of the assessment of the potential positive and negative effects of such behaviour, while *subjective social norms* relate to other people's expected reaction to our behaviour, to social pressure to behave in a specific manner. According to Ajzen (op. cit.), attitude and subjective norms determine the individual's intentions and further action.

Research confirms the significance of the attitude towards cheating and proves its influence on the individual's involvement in action – approval of unethical behaviour is a predictor of such behaviour (Beck and Ajzen, 1991; Harding, Mayhew, Finelli, & Carpenter, 2007). Similarly large is the role of subjective beliefs of whether cheating is appropriate and ethical, i.e. the social norms one has. Research (Beck and Ajzen, 1991; Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore, 2009) shows that beliefs on the opinions that relatives, friends and classmates have about cheating are connected with the individual's inclination to break norms.

Purpose and hypotheses

The aim of the exploratory study, which is preliminary and starts a bigger international project between Swiss, Ukrainian and Polish scholars, was to compare students' attitudes towards academic cheating and their subjective social norms. The research whose results are described in this paper is built on the findings of Alleyne and Phillips (2011), who reveal that attitudes towards cheating and subjective social norms related to that phenomenon and taken into account by the individual are important factors influencing tendencies to unethical behaviour. That is why we focused on the attitudes and on social norms. This research, however, involves students from three different countries, and its significant goal, apart from evaluating selected elements of Ajzen's model (op. cit.), is to identify cross-cultural differences.

We propose that:

Hypothesis 1: Swiss and Ukrainian students differ in their attitudes towards cheating.

Hypothesis 2: Swiss and Polish students differ in their attitudes towards cheating.

Hypothesis 3: Ukrainian and Polish students differ in their attitudes towards cheating.

Hypothesis 4: Swiss and Ukrainian students have different subjective social norms connected with cheating.

Hypothesis 5: Swiss and Polish students have different subjective social norms connected with cheating.

Hypothesis 6: Ukrainian and Polish students have different subjective social norms connected with cheating.

Method

To examine students' *attitudes towards cheating* and their *subjective social norms* we used the subscales of the Academic Dishonesty Scale – the French, Ukrainian and Polish version of them. The method was based on Philmore Alleyne and Kimone Phillips' measure (Alleyne & Phillips, 2011), adapted for the research by the authors. The different language versions of the scale were developed using a back-translation process (Brislin, 1986) in accordance with a standard procedure involving translators of the English language and academic lecturers from Switzerland, Ukraine and Poland, proficient in English. Both constructs were measured using 7-point Likert-type scales.

Attitudes toward cheating were measured using the following five evaluative semantic differential scales: good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant, wise-foolish, useful-useless, and profitable-unprofitable. High scores indicate favourable or accepting attitudes of academic misconduct behaviours, while low scores indicate unaccepting and unfavourable attitudes.

To check *subjective social norms* a three-item subscale was used: 1) "If I cheated on a test or exam, most people who are important to me would: (disapprove – not care)", 2)"People who are important to me think that cheating on a test or exam (is not OK-is OK)", and 3) "If I cheat on a test or exam, most people who are important to me (will look down on me-will not think anything wrong about me)." High scores indicate perceptions that significant others endorse academic dishonesty, while low scores indicate perceptions that significant others do not endorse the practice.

The reliability of the *attitudes towards cheating* subscale (Cronbach's α) for the French version was 0.79, for the Ukrainian version – 0.80, and for the Polish version – 0.79, the reliability of the *subjective social norms* subscale for the French version – 0.81, the Ukrainian version – 0.70, and the Polish version – 0.80.

Examination of the estimates indicated that the reliabilities were acceptable. More specifically, Cronbach's α values obtained in this manner were higher than 0.70, often cited as indicative of a reasonable level of reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Sample

The research was conducted in Switzerland, Ukraine and in Poland, in 2012. The results of the survey were collected from 870 randomly selected university students. Table 1 provides a brief demographic profile of the students included in the investigative sample.

Table 1. Profile of student samples by nation

Nation	Mean Age	Gender %	Course type %	Year %	Faculties %	Religiosity
Ukraine (N=200)	19,3	(F)80	(FtC)90	I – 19	(H+S)65	3.06
				II – 46	(E)10	
		(M)20	(PtC)10	III – 25	(S+M)25	
				IV – 10		
Poland (N=317)	24	(F)68	(FtC)48	I – 35	(H+S)61	3.05
				II – 31	(E)10	
		(M)32	(PtC)52	III – 16	(S+M)29	
				IV – 18		
Switzer-land (N=353)	24,2	(F)35	(FtC)58	I – 47	(H+S)13	2.56
				II – 22	(E)41	
		(M)65	(PtC)42	III – 18	(S+M)46	
				IV – 13		

Legend: (F)-Female, (M)-Male; (FtC)-Full-time course, (PtC) – Part-time course; (H+S)-Humanities+Social sciences, (E)-Economics/Business, (S+M) – Science+Medical

The data in Table 1 reveal the samples are similar in terms of the university years. All the courses studied were represented in every national sample: humanities/social sciences, economics/business and science/medical studies.

The students from Ukraine are, on average, almost five years younger than their cohorts from Poland and Switzerland. This results from the differences between education systems.

Because ethical standards may be influenced by religious beliefs, the respondents were asked to judge their religiosity on a Likert-type scale (1-"I'm not religious at all" to 5-"I'm very religious"). The Swiss students were less religious on average than the Poles and Ukrainians.

Results

Student's t-test for independent samples was used to verify all the hypotheses. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Tests for differences in mean scores between nations

Variable	Nation	Mean	Std. dev.	t-value		
				U-P	U-S	P-S
Attitude towards cheating	Ukraine	17.14	6.10	-1.16	8.40*	10.94*
	Poland	17.77	6.07			
	Switzerland	12.92	5.42			
Subjective social norms	Ukraine	14.40	4.14	1.06	16.42*	17.38*
	Poland	14.00	4.07			
	Switzerland	8.70	3.82			

Legend: U-Ukraine, P-Poland, S-Switzerland; * Statistically significant at $p<0.01$;

Average results were compared related to the studied individuals' attitude towards cheating and significant differences were found between the Swiss and Ukrainian samples and between the Swiss and Polish samples, making it possible to accept hypotheses 1 and 2. The average results for the Polish and Ukrainian samples, on the other hand, did not differ from each other in a statistically significant manner, and consequently, hypothesis 3 needs to be rejected. The results prove that the students have the most positive attitude towards cheating in Poland, insignificantly less positive in Ukraine, and the least positive attitude in Switzerland.

An analysis of the results also makes it possible to accept hypotheses 4 and 5 – the average results concerning *subjective social norms* in the Swiss sample differ significantly from the average results of the Ukrainian and Polish samples. Hypothesis 6 is therefore rejected – the students from the Polish and Ukrainian samples do not differ significantly in terms of their judgment of subjective social norms about cheating. The average results show that the students in Switzerland have more restrictive subjective social norms about cheating than the Polish and Ukrainian students.

Discussion

The purpose of this joint study was to compare students' attitude and their social norms connected with academic misconduct across cultures. The obtained results show that the Poles and Ukrainians evaluate cheating more positively than the Swiss, more often agreeing with the opinion that it is *good, wise, useful, pleasant* and *profitable*. The results concerning subjective social norms reveal that the highest consent to cheating exists in Ukraine and Poland, while the Swiss express more negative attitudes. Indeed, the Poles and Ukrainians claim that their cheating at university would not be negatively perceived by significant others – friends and relatives.

And more surprisingly, despite growing institutional differences between Poland and Ukraine, cultural similarities persist in terms of cheating and existing social norms. Our study suggests that the Poles still might not have sufficient ethical awareness, and consent to such behaviour still exists and is perceived as high. On the other hand, in Western countries, the attitude towards dishonesty is different and different norms prevail there: the social consent to such behaviour is significantly lower despite the Swiss being the least religious among the nations studied.

Academic lecturers, who wish their students to behave in an ethical way, need to understand the extent to which students care about justice judgments. The results of our study help develop specific measures allowing for a decrease in academic misconduct taking into consideration cross-cultural differences. A better understanding of the impact of national culture on academic misconduct may help prevent unethical behaviours of generally honest students through a culturally sensitive code of ethics, training and other awareness increasing initiatives. Our findings are particularly valuable in light of growing academic mobility programs and they may contribute to promoting academic integrity and address this interesting question for international academic ethics.

Conclusions

To recapitulate, the attitude of Polish and Ukrainian students towards cheating and their subjective social norms related to the phenomenon do not differ to a significant extent. There are differences between the attitudes adopted by the students from the former Eastern Bloc countries, where transformation is still in progress, and the students from Switzerland. It clearly has to take more time until people living in conditions where unethical behaviour often used to be considered as a sign of resourcefulness and constituted the only possible way of achieving

important goals can look at such conduct in a different way, i.e. consider it as dishonest and judge it negatively.

According to Chyrowicz (2009, pp. 18-19), sociology of morality, a branch of knowledge dealing with the study of morality of various communities over time and of changing sociocultural conditions, demonstrates the "diversity and variability of moral customs and rules". This means that changes in mentality and models of behaviour, including the norms indicating which behaviour is right and ethical and which is not, are possible. Our study suggests that strong efforts need to be taken to increase awareness among students from former communist countries in terms of cheating and other forms of ethical behaviours. Such efforts aiming at changes in mental models need to avoid stigmatising unethical behaviour, open judgment and sanctions.

Grimes (op. cit.) believes that the main aspect which successfully prevents people from cheating is the fear of getting caught. Other researchers point out that this fear is not a sufficient obstacle, however, and does not prevent people from cheating to the same extent as a substantial punishment (Haswell, Jubb, & Wearing, op.cit.). In our opinion, the education systems in countries such as Poland and Ukraine, apart from taking care to ensure a correct attitude on the part of the teachers and students, and apart from the efforts made to train them and to shape their opinions, should also provide specific and severe measures undertaken in relation to cheating and plagiarism. The education systems in Poland and Ukraine might require significant changes to the existing social norms and widespread attitudes towards cheating.

Summing up, we believe that educating young people with regard to ethical conduct, making them aware of the problem, even though it might not bring the expected results immediately, makes them more likely to take ethical decisions in the future (Bloodgood, Turnley & Mudrack, 2010). Finally, we are convinced that promoting high ethical standards at universities and schools not only illustrates the concern for the students, but also demonstrates the faculty's commitment to developing a new class of future, ethical professionals.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the cross-cultural comparison of Switzerland, Poland and Ukraine has only an exploratory character. The next step of our cross-cultural research on academic cheating, with a focus on intercultural differences in attitudes towards unethical behaviour, should be to compare lecturers' reactions to cheating and students' perception of teachers' behaviour. Some situational antecedents to academic misconduct need to be uncovered, such as the quality of teaching and the influence of courses of ethics. We suggest that future research should further investigate some individual variables which influence ethical behaviour, such as individual moral philosophy and justice sensitivity.

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