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Cheating and fear of negative evaluation

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Previous research on the personality correlates of cheating behavior has found that both need for approval and test anxiety are positively correlated with cheating. In both instances the explanation has been that subjects high on these measures cheat more because they are more concerned about negative evaluation and poor performance. The present study sought to extend this pattern of results to a direct measure of fear of negative evaluation. Contrary to the hypothesis, subject scores on the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale were found to be negatively correlated with cheating. An explanation is offered in terms of situational differences between the present study and previous studies.

In recent years several studies have been conducted exploring personality correlates of cheating behavior in college students. One variable which has been found to be correlated with cheating behavior is the need for approval measured by the Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Thus, Jacobson, Berger, and Millham (1970) found that need for approval in interaction with self-satisfaction was positively correlated with cheating behavior. More recently, Millham (1974) reported that cheaters have significantly higher scores on need for approval than do noncheaters. These findings are explained by the assumption that the need for approval is a defensive need to avoid negative evaluation. Subjects high in need for approval cheat more readily because they are more concerned about the negative evaluation associated with poor performance.

Another variable which has been found to be associated with cheating behavior is test anxiety. Smith, Ryan, and Diggins (1972) have reported that self-reported frequency of cheating is positively correlated with test anxiety as measured by the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (Mandler & Sarason, 1952) for both males and females. Similarly, Heisler (1974) has found that high test anxious subjects cheat more than low test anxious subjects with test anxiety measured by the Test Anxiety Scale (Sarason, 1958). In contrast, Bronzaft, Stuart, and Blum (1973) found that cheating was unrelated to test anxiety as measured by the Achievement Anxiety Test (Alpert & Haber, 1960). The correlation between cheating and test anxiety has been explained in much the same way as the correlation between cheating and need for approval. Test anxiety is regarded as a measure of fear of failure; it is assumed that the more concerned the subject is about poor performance, the more likely it is that the subject will cheat.

The present study is concerned with the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and cheating. Watson and Friend (1969) developed a Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale to measure "apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p. 449). Watson and Friend (1969) report studies supporting the construct validity of the scale, and additional support for its construct validity is provided in studies by Smith and Campbell (1973) and Smith and Sarason (1975). If one assumes that the prospect of poor performance arouses fear of negative evaluation, then it might be predicted that subjects high in fear of negative evaluation would be more likely to cheat to avoid the negative evaluation consequent upon poor performance. Thus, fear of negative evaluation, like the need for approval and test anxiety, should be positively correlated with cheating behavior.

METHOD

Subjects were 25 female undergraduates at Wellesley College who participated in order to fulfill a requirement of the introductory psychology course. Subjects were run individually and the study was conducted by two female undergraduates.

Subjects were led to believe that they were participating in two separate studies. In the first part of the procedure, subjects were asked to complete the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale plus another lengthy personality scale. They were told that the purpose of this procedure was to collect norms on these measures for Wellesley undergraduates. After completing the scales, subjects went to a different room, where they met the other experimenter who ostensibly was conducting a study of cognition. Here subjects were presented with a set of 16 anagrams and allowed 5 min to work on them. The experimenter explained that she would be leaving and asked each subject to time herself with the clock on the wall. Each subject was told that upon completion she should enter her name and the number of anagrams solved correctly on a data sheet which was provided. Subjects were also requested to discard their anagram lists in the wastebasket so that other subjects would not accidentally see the anagram solutions prior to participation. Oddly enough, all subjects complied with this request. After each subject had departed, the experimenter retrieved the anagram sheet to compare with the score entered on the data sheet.

Of the 16 anagrams presented, only 8 were solvable. Subjects were all presented with the same fictitious data sheet which contained five previous entries with scores ranging from 10 to 14. Thus, subjects were led to believe that earlier participants

had received scores which, in fact, were impossible. The dependent variable of interest was the amount of cheating, defined as the number of anagrams which the subject claimed to have solved in excess of the number actually solved.

RESULTS

Scores on the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale ranged from 4 to 29, with a mean of 14.05 and a standard deviation of 6.50. The mean of anagrams correctly solved was 5.25, with a standard deviation of 1.71. The mean number of anagrams reported was 6.35, with a standard deviation of 2.11. Of the 25 subjects, 12, or 48%, reported scores above the number actually solved. In order to determine whether a significant amount of cheating had occurred, a t test for dependent measures was conducted. The mean number of anagrams reported solved was significantly higher than the mean number actually solved [$t(24) = 3.04$, $p < .01$, two-tailed]. Thus, the experimental situation was effective in eliciting a substantial amount of cheating behavior.

The hypothesis of the study was tested with a product-moment correlation between scores on the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale and the difference score between anagrams reported solved and anagrams actually solved. Contrary to the hypothesis, a substantial negative correlation was obtained between the measures [$r(23) = -.517$, $p < .01$, two-tailed]. As expected, the number of anagrams actually solved was not significantly correlated with the difference score ($r = -.201$), nor was the number of anagrams solved significantly correlated with scores on the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale ($r = -.043$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study show that subjects high in concern about negative evaluation cheat less than subjects who are less concerned about negative evaluation. These results are contrary to much of the previous literature which suggests that concern with failure or negative evaluation is positively correlated with cheating.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy in results is that in the present study the possibility of detection was greater than in the earlier studies. In the earlier studies, subjects were either anonymous or they were led to believe that the score which they provided was the only available record of their performance. In contrast, in the present study, subjects were obviously aware that there was another record of their performance which they were discarding in the wastebasket. If subjects were aware of the possibility of detection, then it is not surprising that those subjects most concerned about negative evaluation would be least likely to cheat. Alternatively, subjects more concerned about negative evaluation may have been more likely to think about the possibility of detection. In either case, this finding is congruent with previous research (e.g., Tittle & Rowe, 1973) which suggests that fear of detection is the most effective deterrent of cheating.

The present study suggests that the relation between personality variables and cheating behavior is more complex than previous research suggests. In situations in which there is a real risk of detection, as in many exam situations, the present study suggests that fear of negative evaluation will be negatively correlated with cheating. In other situations where the risk of detection is minimal, previous research suggests that fear of negative evaluation will be positively correlated with cheating. While this explanation can account for the discrepancy between the present study and earlier research, it is obvious that further research is needed in which situational and personality variables are manipulated in the same study.

Finally, it is interesting to note that, although subject scores on this task did not have any real-life consequences for the subjects, a substantial amount of cheating did occur. It seems likely that, in situations with more important consequences, cheating would be even more prevalent. Thus, the present study supports previous research which has often demonstrated that cheating behavior is very widespread among college students (e.g., Smith et al., 1972).

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