
The effect of anomie on academic dishonesty among university students

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Abstract

Anomie describes the individual's lack of integration in social life. The construct has been linked to various types of activities and concepts but no research appears to have been undertaken linking it to academic dishonesty. The literatures on anomie and academic dishonesty are examined, measurement instruments are identified and a survey is carried out among undergraduate students of a business school. The psychometric properties of the instruments are confirmed and correlates are investigated. The point is made that besides seeking ways to curb academic dishonesty, universities need to foster the development of an internalized code of ethics among students. Limitations are noted and directions for future research are indicated.

Academic dishonesty is a major concern among universities and its importance is underlined by the existence of regulations that envisage sanctions when such behaviour is reported or detected. That academic dishonesty is widespread is not in doubt with 60 to 70 per cent of students involved in cheating (Maramark and Maline, 1993). Moreover, a survey of 15,000 students of engineering, business, science and humanities in 31 of the top US universities reveals that at 87 per cent, business students provided the highest cheating rate (Meade, 1992). Despite suggestions by much of the media that academic dishonesty is significantly on the increase, the academic literature provides mixed findings. Some in-depth studies point to no real evidence to support a measurable increase in the incidence of such behaviour over the years (Spiller and Crown, 1995; McCabe and Bowers, 1994). What is of considerable concern is a study by Sims (1995) who reports that those who admit to dishonest academic acts when at university go on to engage in work-related dishonest activities.

Little research appears to have been done to try and identify variables that have an effect on academic dishonesty. This study focuses on the effect of anomie on the performance of cheating and plagiarism acts among university students. Anomie which describes the individual's lack of integration in social life (Srole, 1956) has been extensively used in the sociological and psychological literature to explain deviant behaviour. Research is carried to measure the levels of anomie and student performance of dishonest academic acts among a sample of students at an Australian University. Results are reported, implications are drawn and suggestions are made for ongoing research.

Anomie

Etymologically anomie comes from the Greek *anomia* and literally means "the absence of law". The word has been variously used. Thus, it represents ruthlessness in *Euripides*; anarchy and intemperance in *Plato*; sin and wickedness in the *Old Testament*; and, relatively more recently, as a human condition of instability in Durkheim who borrowed and reconceptualised the term from the earlier work of his fellow French philosopher Jean Marie Guyau (Orrù, 1987). Durkheim's (1893) theory of anomie viewed morality as being of a social nature, thus existing externally to the individual and constraining individual behaviour. Durkheim argues that:

all rules of conduct whose transgressions are sanctioned are moral rules. Moreover, an act, which is not obligatory, cannot be a moral act.

In this respect, acts left to individual discretion would, by definition, be outside the realm of morality. For Durkheim, who was preoccupied with order in society, it was society that was the source of morality and the individual has no choice but to obey the rules of conduct prescribed by society. Anomie, therefore, becomes any form of deregulation or lack of cohesion that society may suffer from. In line with the European academic tradition, Durkheim is critical of what he considered the ill-conceived cultural objectives of industrial societies, questioning the prevalent value system and its ability to sustain cohesion. In contrast, US academics have tended not to question the basic goals of society as these were widely accepted. They have been more concerned with the consolidation of the liberal society.

Two main theories of anomie developed in US literature. Robert Merton (1957) emphasised the social-structural aspects of anomie while Leo Srole (1956) focuses on the psychological characteristics of anomie. In his theory, Merton is not concerned with the anomie that results from unclear definition of

cultural goals but from anomie that arises because of the gap between cultural goals and institutional means. He was particularly concerned with the characteristics of US society with its disproportionate emphasis on cultural goals (such as the American dream, wealth and power) over institutional means. It is the culturally-induced pressure to be successful that results in the ensuing anomie and raises the possibility that certain social groups engage in rule breaking behaviour. Merton lists five types of adaptation that can take place: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. Therefore, unlike Durkheim, the ends are acceptable and it is the adaptation that is the problem. For Durkheim the ends themselves are the problem. As a result much of the research reported in the US sociology literature has tended to focus on various types of illegitimacy adjustments.

MacIver (1950) defines psychological anomie (or anomy as he calls it) as “the breakdown of the individual’s sense of attachment to society”. Contrary to Merton who argues that anomie arises exclusively from capitalistic competitiveness were “those who having lost their ethical goals ... transfer this drive into extrinsic values to the pursuit of means instead of ... ends, and particularly to the pursuit of power”. MacIver (1950) highlights two additional aspects. First, in terms of culture clash represented by “those who having lost ... any system of value ... having lost the compass that points their course into the future, abandon themselves to the present”. Second, rapid social change represented by “those who have lost the ground on which they stood, the ground of their former values”. Srole’s (1956) psychological theory of anomie builds on the work of MacIver but focuses at the individual level. To distinguish anomie at the psychological level from that at the sociological level Srole used the term anomia. He identifies five dimensions of anomia that he operationalised into a five-item scale. At a macro level Srole’s theory of anomie looks at social integration and anomia is seen to be a structural condition of modern social life. At the micro level the scale he developed seeks to determine the individual’s level of integration with the social system.

Srole’s scale of anomia is the most widely used instrument in the social sciences. Srole improved the original five-item scale with the addition of a further four items (Robinson and Shaver, 1973). The resultant nine-item instrument was adopted in 1973 and in subsequent years for use in the annual General Social Survey of the US National Opinion Research Centre. Dodder and Astle

(1980) make use of the data from the 1973, 1974 and 1976 national surveys generating a total sample of 4,487 respondents. They find that, while on its own the original five-item scale is unidimensional, the nine-item scale reveals a two-dimensional construct whose factors the authors label: “valuelessness” and “cynicism”. Poresky *et al.* (1981) use longitudinal data among a sample of 58 rural women to compare the internal stability of the Srole scale with the enlarged nine-item scale. Three-year test-retest correlations were 0.56 and 0.45 indicating higher reliability and stability for the nine-item scale. Perhaps more important are Dodder and Astle’s (1980) findings that the nine-item anomia scale provides stronger correlations with “virtually every variable” grouped under the three headings of *demographics*, *satisfaction* and *social involvements*, that together make up 31 variables that are traditionally associated with anomie. For example, the demographic characteristics indicate those with higher levels of occupational prestige, higher levels of education, higher levels of income and more satisfactory finances are associated with less anomie. The ability to use these, and other geo-demographic variables, to pinpoint profiles of individuals susceptible to fraudulent behaviour can be particularly useful.

Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty involves acts of cheating and plagiarism (Roig and DeTommaso, 1995). Research has identified a number of causes and situational factors that have an effect on academic dishonesty. Pressure to obtain good grades, student stress, and weak sanctions have been among the key variables highlighted (Davis *et al.*, 1992; Davis and Ludvigson, 1995; Davis *et al.*, 1995). The low chance of being caught is made worse by the attitude of academic staff and students. Academic staff are reluctant to report offenders and let them be dealt with by the system preferring to deal with academic dishonesty cases on a personal basis (McCabe, 1993) while students are unwilling to expose peers (Jendrek, 1992). However, the existence of honour codes in many US universities is reported to be associated with increased academic honesty (McCabe and Bowers, 1994; May and Loyd, 1993). Personality traits, personal beliefs and values play an important role with religiosity (Sutton and Huba, 1995), and individuals with Type A characteristics being less prone to academic dishonesty (Davis *et al.*, 1995). On the other hand, procrastination (Roig and

DeTommaso, 1995) and social forms of alienation (Calabrese and Cochran, 1990) have also been linked to higher levels of academic dishonesty. Finally, gender also plays an important role, with women being less tolerant and less likely to pursue acts of academic dishonesty (Ameen *et al.*, 1996; Davis and Ludvigson, 1995). Most of the above findings come from studies carried out in the USA and some of these may differ by country. For example, Davis *et al.* (1994) report on a study that finds that Australian students had higher learning-oriented (LO) attitudes and lower grade-orientated (GO) behaviour than their US counterparts indicating that grade pressure may be less salient among Australian students.

Methodology

To measure anomia the nine-item instrument, which is an elaboration by Srole of his original five-point measure, has been used. Each item in the scale is described at either end by 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). The higher the sum of the scale the higher is the individual's level of anomie and, therefore, the lower one's lack of integration with the social world. Academic dishonesty was measured with a 24-item instrument developed by Roig and DeTommaso (1995). Nine of the items captured the cheating component while 15 of the items sought to measure plagiarism. A split half reliability of 0.87 and a coefficient alpha of 0.81 are reported for the instrument by the authors. To standardise our questionnaire seven-point, rather than five-point, scales were used. An increase in scale points generally helps scale reliability (Churchill and Peter, 1984). The scale was anchored by 1 (never) and 7 (very frequently) at either end. Thus, a high score on this scale reflects higher levels of cheating and plagiarism.

The survey was conducted during September 1997; 300 students at an Australian University were chosen at random from the business school's entire undergraduate population of over 4,000 students and a questionnaire consisting of 33 items, together with a number of classificatory variables, was sent out. A covering letter confirming anonymity together with a stamped self-addressed envelope were included. By the cut off date, three weeks later a total of 122 replies were collected representing an effective response rate of 40.6 per cent.

Results

The overall response was almost equally split between first, second and third year undergraduate students. The mean age of respondents was 21.5 with a standard deviation of 2.59, and 39 per cent were female. The age and gender parameters were in line with those of all students in the business school. Details of the items used with means and standard deviations are shown in the Appendix. Analysis of the item to total correlations indicated that in the case of academic dishonesty items 18, 28, 29, 30 and 31 had values less than 0.35 and were eliminated (McKelvey, 1967). At 0.71 and 0.91 respectively the coefficient alphas (Cronbach, 1951) for the anomie and academic dishonesty constructs were greater than 0.70 and therefore acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

To further establish the psychometric properties of the instruments the aspect of validity was investigated. Discriminant validity is indicated in a factor analysis when the factors and their items are found to be truly different from one another (Carman, 1990). Principal component factor analysis followed by a varimax rotation was applied simultaneously to all the items in the measures. The results (see Table I) show that

Table I
Factor analysis of the items used in the study

	Anomie	Cheating	Plagiarism
Q1	0.523		
Q2	0.527		
Q3	0.588		
Q4	0.388		
Q5	0.581		
Q6	0.463		
Q7	0.450		
Q8	0.733		
Q9	0.676		
Q10		0.777	
Q11		0.812	
Q12		0.836	
Q13		0.854	
Q14		0.718	
Q15		0.731	0.389
Q16		0.608	0.479
Q17		0.362	0.348
Q19			0.894
Q20			0.805
Q21			0.838
Q22			0.839
Q23			0.870
Q24			0.514
Q25			0.579
Q26			0.683
Q27			0.570
Q32			0.764
Q33			0.536

Note: Factor values less than 0.35 are not shown.

these load on three separate factors entitled anomie, cheating and plagiarism, providing evidence for discriminant validity.

Evidence of nomological validity comes from a factor analysis and is indicated if items expected to load together actually do so (Carman, 1990). Principal component factor analysis followed by a varimax rotation confirmed a factor structure for anomie that is similar to that reported in Dodder and Astle (1980) with a “Cynicism” (CY) and “Valuelessness” dimensions which in the case of the latter splits into two sub dimensions (V1 and V2) in Table II. Roig and DeTommaso (1995) do not provide factor details. Factor analysis of the items in their instrument indicate two cheating and three plagiarism dimensions that differ in the degree of their gravity with CH1 being more severe than CH2 and similarly for PL1, PL2, and PL3 (see Table III).

Table II
Factor analysis of the anomie items

	Valuelessness	Valuelessness	Cynicism
	1	2	
Q1	0.832		
Q2		0.821	
Q3	0.802		
Q4		0.394	
Q5			0.636
Q6		0.628	
Q7			0.677
Q8	0.461		0.512
Q9			0.740

Table III
Factor analysis of the cheating and plagiarism items

	CH1	CH2	PL1	PL2	PL3
Q10	0.860				
Q11	0.866				
Q12	0.826				
Q13	0.809				
Q14	0.530	0.600			
Q15	0.499	0.685			
Q16	0.366	0.668			
Q17		0.739			
Q19			0.876		
Q20			0.821		
Q21			0.839		
Q22			0.889		
Q23			0.823		
Q24			0.428		0.426
Q25			0.379	0.775	
Q33				0.862	
Q26					0.772
Q27					0.838
Q32			0.416		0.731

Note: Factor values less than 0.35 are not shown

Having provided some evidence of the psychometric properties of the two instruments, the relationship among the variables were investigated. Correlations between the sum for anomie, cheating and plagiarism indicates that although, as one would expect, cheating and plagiarism are correlated, anomie is only correlated with the cheating measure ($r = 0.231$; $p < 0.01$) – Table IV. Anomie is found to be correlated with both dimensions of cheating. The results of a regression between anomie and cheating provide a small but significant adjusted R^2 of 0.05 ($F = 6.92$, $p < 0.01$). Analysis of the correlations of the dimensions of anomie and cheating indicates that it is the second sub-dimension of valuelessness (V2) that is correlated with the mildest level of cheating (CH1) – Table V. Correlations of the dimensions of anomie with those of plagiarism provides only a very weak association between V1 and PL2 (see Table VI).

A comparison of the means using t -tests for the variables of anomie, cheating and plagiarism were also run to determine if there are differences in these variables on the basis of gender, age and year of study. The results provided a significant difference only in the case of gender with males exhibiting a higher tendency towards plagiarism ($t = 3.79$; $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion

In this study academic dishonesty has been measured in terms of literal reality rather than as an abstract concept. The mean results obtained for the different items show a general decrease in the average score as one moves down the items in the instrument and the seriousness of the activity increases. To a considerable degree this is also evident from the factor analysis and the loadings show a transition from cheating to plagiarism with a number of items that represent the transitional phase loading on both factors. Means in the 3.5 are only obtained for the initial cheating items. The results provide reasonable reliability and validity support for the concepts being investigated. It is interesting that men are more likely to indulge in plagiarism than women, and this is in line with earlier findings (Ameen *et al.*, 1996; Davis and Ludvigson, 1995). However, the results of cross analysis only provide evidence of a weak association between one aspect of valuelessness in anomie and the mildest, but most prevalent, form of cheating. Though at first sight this may seem to offer poor support for a link between anomie and

academic dishonesty, it must be realised that here it is the general student population at the business school of a particular University that is being investigated and not the population of students that regularly indulge in academic dishonesty. Had it been possible to identify this population it is likely that a much stronger link would have emerged.

Clearly these results apply to the population under study and different populations may provide different results. A major limitation of this study concerns asking students about their actual academic dishonesty. Despite assurances of anonymity it is likely that respondents will be tempted to under report. However, in the more serious plagiarism section, item 22 is reported with a fairly high mean of 3.56. This deals with "using part of, or the entire paper, previously submitted in another course, to satisfy the requirements of a different course" pointing to the fact that students can answer honestly even for serious aspects of academic dishonesty. It indicates that the instrument

Table IV
Correlates of anomie with cheating and plagiarism

	Anomie	Cheating	Plagiarism
Anomie	1.00		
Cheating	0.231*	1.00	
Plagiarism	0.096	0.473**	1.00

Key: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table V
Correlates between dimensions of anomie and cheating

	V1	V2	CY	CH1	CH2
V1	1.00				
V2	0.216*	1.00			
CY	0.369**	0.371**	1.00		
CH1	0.074	0.218*	0.171	1.00	
CH2	0.139	0.163	0.133	0.603**	1.00

Key: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table VI
Correlates between dimensions of anomie and plagiarism

	V1	V2	CY	PL1	PL2	PL3
V1	1.00					
V2	0.216*	1.00				
CY	0.369**	0.371**	1.00			
PL1	0.087	0.037	0.080	1.00		
PL2	0.196*	-0.095	0.005	0.613**	1.00	
PL3	0.094	0.100	0.163	0.517**	0.347**	1.00

Key: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

can be used to obtain an indication of the academic dishonesty that is current. It enables areas of the more serious types of abuses to be pinpointed following which consideration can be devoted to determine how best to clamp down on the particular behaviour. Thus, in the case of item 22 it would seem to point to the need for better coordination in setting and changing assignment areas in this particular school. Building systems to block the possibility of undesirable practices needs to be pursued. However, the development among students of an internalised code of ethics that opposes academic and other form of dishonesty is even more crucial as this will remain with students throughout their life. It will protect them from temptation in situations where controls may be weak or non-existent. Universities, and particularly business schools, need to put increased emphasis on ethical behaviour. Concurrently research efforts aimed at identifying antecedent variables that have a critical effect on academic and other form of dishonest behaviour must be vigorously pursued.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Instruments used with means and standard deviations

	Mean	Std Dev
Anomie		
1. Next to health, money is the most important thing in life	4.53	1.68
2. You sometimes can't help wondering whether anything is worthwhile any more	3.87	1.72
3. To make money, there are no right and wrong ways any more, only easy ways and hard ways	3.21	1.76
4. Nowadays, a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself	3.19	1.79
5. In spite of what some people say, the lot (situation/condition) of the average man is getting worse, not better	3.95	1.41
6. It's hardly fair to bring a child into the world with the way things look for the future	3.53	1.66
7. Most people in public office are not really interested in the problems of the average person	4.77	1.31
8. These days a person doesn't really know whom s/he can count on	4.39	1.72
9. Most people don't really care what happens to the next person	4.15	1.70
Cheating and plagiarism		
<i>In writing a paper or doing homework (e.g. essay) for a university course I have:</i>		
10. Taken one or two sentences from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), changed them slightly (e.g. transposed the subject and predicate, or changed an article or preposition), and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	3.87	1.64
11. Taken several sentences from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), changed them slightly (e.g. transposed the subject and predicate, or changed an article or preposition), and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	3.27	1.71
12. Taken one or two sentences from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), changed them moderately (e.g. transposed the subject and predicate, changed articles and prepositions, used synonyms to substitute some but not all of the terms, added a few words and short phrases) and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	3.76	1.58
13. Taken several sentences from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), changed them moderately (e.g., transposed the subject and predicate, changed articles and prepositions, used synonyms to substitute some but not all of the terms, added a few words and short phrases) and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	3.34	1.68
14. Taken a single brief phrase or sentence from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), left it unchanged inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	2.76	1.67
15. Taken two or more phrases or sentence from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), left them unchanged and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	2.46	1.61
16. Taken two or more paragraphs from someone else's written work (e.g. a published source, another student's paper or homework), left them unchanged and inserted this information in my paper (or written homework assignment) as my own writing	1.94	1.48
17. Paraphrased information from a secondary source (e.g. a published article that reviews the pertinent literature or book) but did not cite this source in my reference section. Instead, I cited one or more references listed in this secondary source which pertained to the information I had paraphrased	2.76	1.61

(continued)

Appendix

	Mean	Std Dev
18. Paraphrased information from an abstract (e.g. ABInform) or some other summary but cited the actual journal article instead of the abstract	Deleted	
19. Taken another student's term paper from a previous semester and submitted it under my name	3.56	1.89
20. Taken another student's term paper from a previous semester, changed a few paragraphs, and submitted it under my name	1.34	1.01
21. Bought a term paper and used it entirely, or large portions of it, as my own writing	1.53	1.12
22. Used part of, or the entire paper, previously submitted in another course, to satisfy the requirements of a different course without permission of the instructors involved	1.36	1.00
23. Paid another student or person to write large portions or all of my paper or homework or my entire paper or homework	1.42	1.06
24. Added sources not read to the reference section of my paper or written homework assignment	1.20	0.88
25. Claimed that a paper was turned in when, in fact, it had not been	2.34	1.62
<i>While taking an examination I have:</i>	1.31	0.93
26. Copied answers from another student during an exam	1.49	1.14
27. Reviewed an inappropriately attained copy of a test prior to taking the test and memorised the answers to the questions	1.62	1.25
28. Used hidden notes, books, or calculators during an exam even though such use was prohibited	Deleted	
29. Made up a false excuse (e.g. feigning illness) in order to avoid taking a test	Deleted	
30. Not reported a mistake in grading which resulted in a grade higher than I should have received	Deleted	
31. Used a system of hand and/or foot signals to give and receive answers during an exam	Deleted	
32. Traded exam papers with a friend during an examination and compared and corrected your answers	1.21	0.89
33. Brought completed exam booklets to an examination and submitted as my actual answers	1.08	2.34