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Study of a cognitive dissonance intervention to address high school students’ cheating attitudes and behaviors

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Abstract
Forty-four high school students took part in focus-type group that used an induced hypocrisy paradigm developed from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) to reduce cheating behavior. Posttesting following the intervention showed that, contrary to expectations, these students’ attitudes toward cheating and self-reported cheating behaviors did not decrease relative to those of 65 control participants who did not participate in the group intervention. All participants reported a greater intention to cheat in the future at
posttest as well as an increase in cheating behavior. Although participants did not view cheating favorably, a large majority admitted cheating and indicated that they had never been caught.

II. Study Description

Intervention Description
• Name of the program/study condition: “induced hypocrisy”
• Main purpose or general description:
  o “This study involved the use of an induced hypocrisy condition to address high school students’ cheating attitudes and behavior” (p. 219)
  o “We sought to induce hypocrisy in students by making students mindful of their attitudes toward cheating as well as their own history of academic dishonesty using a cheating questionnaire and then having them take an active role against academic dishonesty by participation in an academic dishonesty policy development group” (p. 219)
• Theoretical background:
  o Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957)
  o Induced hypocrisy paradigm (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Fried & Aronson, 1995)
• Components: N/A
• Previous studies / evaluations: N/A

Implementation Elements
Content elements:
• Academic dishonesty
Pedagogical strategies:
N/A

Research Question(s) / Hypotheses
• Hypothesis: when compared to the control group, students in the induced hypocrisy condition report a higher reduction in cheating behavior and attitudes after the intervention.

Research Methods
Sample Description:
• Total N final sample: n = 109
  o Control group: 65
  o Intervention group: 44
• Composition:
  o Gender: 52.3% female.
  o Location: Riverhead, New York.
  o Ages: from 12 to 18 years old.
  o Ethnicity: 85% Caucasian.
SES: average score on the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status fell in the Medium Business/Minor Professional Range (48.19/67).

- Special education: N/A
- Family composition: N/A
- Other: private Catholic junior/senior high school.

**Measures:**
- **Cheating rate:**
  - Assessed self-reported frequency of cheating behavior (number of tests cheated on divided by number of tests taken since the beginning of the semester)
- **Academic Honesty Scale (AHS; Vinski):**
  - Assesses students’ self-reported:
    - Attitudes subscale: attitudes toward cheating
    - Past Behavior subscale: past history of cheating
    - Future Behavior subscale: projected future dishonest behavior
    - Total AHS Scores: total scores of the three subscales

**Procedures:**
- **Design:**
  - Quasi-experimental
  - “Repeated measures design”
- **Times of assessment:**
  - Pre-test: one day before the intervention
  - Post-test: ten weeks after the intervention
- **Assignment method:**
  - Level of assignment: classrooms (religion classes).
  - All students in the school (approximately 500) were invited to participate. Only students who volunteered to participate and had parental consents participated in the study. Experimental or control conditions were deliberately assigned by the researcher at the class level.

**Research results**

Overall pretest-posttest change (repeated measures ANOVAS):
- Attitudes subscale: trend for increased overall change.
- Past Behavior subscale: no significant overall change.
- Future Behavior subscale: significant increase.
- Total AHS Scores: significant increase.

Program effects (ANOVA condition x time interactions):
- Attitudes subscale: no significant interaction.
- Past Behavior subscale: trend for the experimental group to admit more past cheating behavior and control group to admit less past cheating behavior.
• Future Behavior subscale: no significant interaction.
• Total AHS Scores: no significant interaction.
• Cheating rates: no significant interaction.

Additional (descriptive) analyses:
• Percentage of students reporting that had cheated on tests: 88%
• Percentage of students reporting that had turned in work another person did: 50%
• Percentage of students reporting that had let other students copy their work: 91%
• Percentage of students reporting that they do not fear being caught cheating: 59.3%
• Percentage of students reporting that had cheated on tests: 88%
• Students’ scores in the AHS Attitude subscale indicate that, on average, students disagreed with pro-cheating statements.

Summary of results
“results indicate that the cheating behavior intervention generally produced no positive effects relative to the no-intervention control” (p. 223).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOME VARIABLE</th>
<th>DIRECTION (positive, neutral, iatrogenic)</th>
<th>SIGNIFICANCE</th>
<th>P VALUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheating rate</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Non-significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Non-significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Behavior</td>
<td>Iatrogenic</td>
<td>Non-significant (trend) 0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Behavior</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Non-significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total AHS Score</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Non-significant</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Study limitations
• “the pretest, intervention, and retest occurred within two days” (p. 224)
• Responses may not reflect students’ typical behavior.
• Possible contact between intervention and control group (their belonged to the same religion class).
• Little active participation on the group’s discussion about cheating during the intervention.

Outcome Variables Taxonomy
• Attitudes toward cheating
• Past cheating behavior
• Projected future cheating behavior
• Frequency of cheating behavior

Program Association
N/A