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FEATURE

Academic Dishonesty, Religious Fundamentalism, among Students at a Religious University

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Abstract. *Academic dishonesty has been a major concern for educators among tertiary students, while there has also been a growing controversy in terms of religion in the world. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism. A cross-sectional descriptive correlational study using Likert scales was used with a sample of 142 participants. Descriptive results indicated that participants disagreed with statements that referred to academic dishonesty while also being neutral towards statements concerning religious fundamentalism. The multiple regression analysis found a negative relationship between academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) while controlling for gender, class level, major, and credits. The final model explained 24% of the variance of academic dishonesty.*

Keywords: academic dishonesty, religious fundamentalism, Thailand, university students, Southeast Asia, regression

Introduction

Academic dishonesty has been a major challenge in higher education. Cheating was common among the majority of medical students (Henning et al., 2015; Taradi et al., 2012). In a survey conducted among university presidents in the United States, half stated that cheating increased with as many as almost 60% of students admitting to cheating within the last six months (Hensley, Kirkpatrick, & Burgoon, 2013; Parker & Lenhart, 2011). One researcher stated that over the 20 years they have looked at academic integrity, there was a decline in ethical strength among students (Lindsey, 2015).

Within Southeast Asia, a study in Malaysia found that respondents believed that cheating was rampant, and 80% said they would not report it (Singh &

Thambumswamy, 2015). In Thailand, cheating scandals have taken place on several campuses involving both low and high technology approaches (Mala, 2016; Neuman, 2013). Furthermore, almost 60% of Thai medical students have admitted to academic dishonesty despite knowing it was not appropriate (Tanawattanacharoen & Nimnuan, 2009). Further, recent studies confirm that academic dishonesty is a problem internationally as well, with research coming from Russia and China, to name just a few places (Chirikov et al., 2019; Xueqin, 2010).

It is an oversimplification to place all the blame on students regarding academic dishonesty. If students have the perception that the institution is unfair or not consistently implementing policies, academic dishonesty is one response to attempt to level the playing field (Lemons & Seaton, 2011). In addition, most studies do not examine the religious position of those in the sample. Currently, there are concerns over individuals who hold strong religious positions in a primarily secular world (Verkuyten, 2018). It may be possible that an individual's religious position in terms of the flexibility of their beliefs will have an association with academic dishonesty and ethical behavior. People with firm beliefs may also hold strictly to these beliefs when faced with moral dilemmas, which has already been confirmed in terms of avoidance of alcohol consumption, academic performance, and personal stress (Soto, Tajalli, Pino, & Smith 2018).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the association of academic dishonesty with religious fundamentalism. Understanding the association of these two variables can be useful for institutions to have insight into dealing with such undesirable behavior as academic dishonesty. In addition, insight into religious fundamentalism may provide understanding into the necessary spiritual adjustments that may be necessary as well.

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty can be defined as any action taken by a student to give them an illegitimate advantage during an assessment or formal academic exercise (Bleeker, 2008). Examples of academic dishonesty include cheating and plagiarism, as well as bribery, deception, and providing false information (Bleeker, 2008; Mala, 2016). Academic dishonesty can also be planned on an individual level, actively in groups, or through the passive support of dishonest behavior of a group (Garavalia, Olson, Russell, & Christensen, 2007). In the context of this study, academic dishonesty is ethically questionable actions students pursue to have an unfair advantage in an assessment that is a part of a class that is a part of their studies.

The context of learning can play a part in the likelihood of academically dishonesty behavior. For example, research that has investigated academic dishonesty in the context of E-learning has found that these students find academic dishonesty to be normal but that it actually occurs less often online than in a

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traditional face-to-face course (Costley, 2019; Peled, Eshet, Barczyk, & Grinautski, 2019). In addition, the subject matter plays a critical role as it has been found that cheating is much more accepted in math and science courses (Anderman & Won, 2019). In general, students in the hard sciences such as engineering are more likely to cheat when compared to social science majors (Sendag, Duran, & Fraser, 2012).

Differences have also been found by gender concerning academic dishonesty. Men cheated during exams much more frequently than women (Hensley et al., 2013). However, female students were more likely to deny that they have committed academic dishonesty (Witmer & Johansson, 2015). Another study found that female students were often punished much more severely for dishonest academic actions implying some sort of difference in expected behavior by gender (Etgar, Blau, & Eshet-Alkalai, 2019). Generally, men were more accepting of academic dishonesty and more likely to justify this kind of behavior (Hensley et al., 2013).

There is also evidence to support that the age or academic level of the student is a factor. It was found that older students cheat less to a point (Olafson et al., 2013). University students were more accepting of academic dishonesty than high school students (Munoz-Garcia & Aviles-Herrera, 2014). However, there was a shift in students' perceptions of academic dishonesty at the graduate level where such behavior is viewed more negatively than undergraduate students (Yang, 2012).

Culture is yet another area in which differences in academic dishonesty have been found. For example, in terms of disclosure, copying and collisions differences were found between European and Asian students (Henning et al., 2015). Several studies have concluded that academic dishonesty has not been considered a serious problem in Asia (Costley, 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). However, for ESL students, the challenges of academic work in the L2 made it difficult for them to identify plagiarism and to reference sources properly (Hu & Lei, 2012). This does not excuse such behavior but provides nuance to the problem of academic dishonesty.

In Thailand, several studies have provided evidence that academic dishonesty is a common occurrence among students (Mala, 2016; Neuman, 2013; Tanawattanacharoen & Nimnuan, 2009). Academic dishonesty has been found to be associated negatively with a growth mindset, a positive classroom learning environment, motivations, and emotions (Thomas, 2017a, 2017b). The possibility that environmental factors play a role was confirmed in another study that investigated plagiarism in Thailand (Puengpipattrakul, 2016). Inferential thinking has been proposed as a way to mitigate plagiarism in the Thai context (Thienthong, 2018). Young (2013) suggests that Thai proclivity towards fun, indifference to long-term thinking/consequences, and learned helplessness contributed to flexible views towards academic dishonesty.

Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism has been viewed in several ways. The word fundamentalism by itself can be defined as having a strong regard towards a set of principles or a discipline such as those found in a religion. This implies that religious fundamentalism is shown through strong respect for a specific religion or faith tradition. However, there are alternative views on religious fundamentalism. For example, others see religious fundamentalism as a form of religious aggressiveness encouraged by a sense of lost religious identity as well as a strong urge to provide alternatives to prevailing secular practices (Herriot, 2014). Within the Christian religion, a fundamentalist is often portrayed as an individual who supports biblical inerrancy along with a strong literal interpretation of the Bible (Mirola & Monahan, 2016).

Factors that comprise religious fundamentalism include extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Allport & Ross, 1967). Other factors commonly associated with religious fundamentalism include external vs. internal authority, fixed vs. malleable religious position, and rejection vs. affirmation of the world (White et al., 2011). This means that religious fundamentalism is often characterized as individuals who have a more fixed religious position, reject at least some aspects of the world, and have an internal sense of authority.

Within education, religious fundamentalism has been found to decrease the likelihood of completing college (Stroope, Franzen, & Uecker, 2015). This is due in part to the literal position that is often taken of Biblical interpretation, which may clash with a secular worldview. In addition, children raised in a fundamentalist environment often show less artistic behavior when comparisons were made (Warlick et al., 2017). These results hold regardless of social status, as students practice their beliefs, it is positively associated with them showing fundamentalist traits (Ellis, 2017).

In terms of gender, women who were identified as agreeing with religious fundamentalism were also found to score lower in terms of formal thinking skills (Bridges & Harnish, 2015). Religious fundamentalism has also been associated with benevolent sexism, which is a positive view of traditional feminine roles (Haggard et al., 2018). Furthermore, religious fundamentalism has been strongly associated with homophobia, with men showing significantly higher levels of homophobia (Fisher et al., 2017; Kanamori et al., 2019). Perhaps in part due to their resistance to change, individuals with strong religious beliefs disagree frequently with changing sexual orientation norms (Adams et al., 2016).

The ethical component of the Christian religion often calls on moral behavior that is defined in terms of biblical principles, such as no lying, stealing, or killing. With this in mind, people with strong religious fundamentalist principles may avoid such behaviors as those related to academic dishonesty. There is already evidence that suggests religious fundamentalism is negatively associated with alcohol consumption and positively associated with academic performance, and

honesty (Scharer, 2017; Soto et al., 2018). Therefore, it may be reasonable to suppose that one's religious position is associated with one's view on ethical behaviors such as academic dishonesty.

In order to understand the phenomenon of academic dishonesty, the following research questions were explored in the current study.

1. What are the respondents' perceptions of academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism?
2. What is the relationship of religious fundamentalism with academic dishonesty when controlling for gender, class level, major, and credits enrolled?

Methodology

The sample of this study was taken from a Christian university located in Thailand. The sample size was 142 respondents. Stratified sampling by gender was used. The demographics of the sample were 43% male and 56% female. By class level, 36% of respondents were freshmen, 26% were sophomore, and 25% were junior, 13% senior. For their major, 4% were Business majors, 33% were Education, 42% were English, 7% were Information Technology, 6% were Religion, and 7% were Science majors.

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. The survey was composed of two parts. The first part solicited demographic information from the participants, such as class level, gender, and major. The second part of the survey included survey items for academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism. The variables in part two were measured with a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = "Strongly Disagree," 2 = "Disagree," 3 = "Neutral," 4 = "Agree," and 5 = "Strongly Agree." Data collection was conducted by the researcher at the site. Surveys were distributed to students and collected.

The religious fundamentalism scale was adopted from White, Savage, O'Neill, Conway, and Liht (2011). This scale measures an individual's flexibility in religious convictions. Sample items included "Women should be able to occupy any leadership position in my religious organization" and "Human reason, not religious beliefs, is the best guiding light for human action." The Cronbach alpha for the 15-item scale was .77.

The academic dishonesty scale was adapted from Bolin (2004). This scale assesses a respondent's perception and behaviors toward academic dishonesty. Sample items from this scale include "It's fine to use a textbook or notes on a test without the instructor's permission" and "Students should go ahead and cheat if they know they can get away with it." The Cronbach alpha for the modified 12-

item scale was 0.90. The number of credits the participants were enrolled in was also collected as a measure of how much time students were spending on academics.

Data Analysis

The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics. A correlational matrix was developed to assess the bivariate relationships among the continuous variables of academic dishonesty, religious fundamentalism, and number of credits. Multiple regression was employed to explain the variance of academic dishonesty through its relationship with religious fundamentalism and the control variables of gender, class level, major, and the number of credits.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics for each of the continuous variable that is a part of this study. For academic dishonesty, the respondents indicated a disagreement with the acceptance of dishonest academic actions ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.71$, 95%CI[1.75, 1.98]). For example, respondents indicated that they disagree that “It’s fine to copy from another student during a test” ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 0.86$, 95%CI[1.43, 1.71]). In addition, respondents indicated that they disagree that “It’s okay to copy material and turned it in as your own work” ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.99$, 95%CI[1.50, 1.82]) and “Students should go ahead and cheat if they know they can get away with it” ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.11$, 95%CI[1.70, 2.06]).

For religious fundamentalism, the respondents were neutral toward the statements ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.51$, 95%CI[3.27, 3.45]). For example, the respondents were neutral that “It is important to distance oneself from movies, radio, and TV” ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.00$, 95%CI [2.74, 3.09]). In addition, respondents also disagreed that “Most people would come to accept my religion if they would not be blinded with strange ideas” ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.00$, 95%CI [3.01, 3.36]). In contrast, respondents agreed that “Obeying God is the most important ingredient in order to grow as a person” ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.00$, 95%CI [3.71, 4.13]).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Confidence Intervals

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Academic Dishonesty	1.88	0.71		
2. Religious Fundamentalism	3.37	0.51	-.30** [-.44, -.14]	
3. Credits	15.00	1.86	.06 [-.11, .22]	.20* [.04, .36]

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014). * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

The bivariate relationship among the three continuous variables were weak as shown in table 1. However, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that religious fundamentalism, major, gender, credits, and class explained 24% of the variance of academic anxiety ($r^2 = 0.24$. $F(11, 120) = 3.32$, $p < 0.01$, 95%CI [0.06, 0.30]). Religious fundamentalism ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) was found to have a significant negative relationship with academic dishonesty when controlling for gender, major, credits, and class. The categorical variables of major (education $\beta = -0.33$, $p < 0.05$) and class (Senior $\beta = -0.37$, $p < 0.10$) were also found to have a significant negative relationship with academic dishonesty. Lastly, gender (Male $\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.11$), and credits ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.21$) were not significantly associated with academic dishonesty. Table 2 provides the results of the regression analysis.

Table 2

Regression Results Using Academic Dishonesty as the Criterion

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i> 95% CI [LL, UL]	<i>sr</i> ²	<i>sr</i> ² 95% CI [LL, UL]	Fit
(Intercept)	2.56**	[1.28, 3.84]			
Religious Funda.	-0.38**	[-0.65, -0.11]	.05	[-.02, .12]	
Gender: Male	0.21	[-0.05, 0.47]	.02	[-.02, .05]	
Major: Business	0.37	[-0.21, 0.94]	.01	[-.02, .04]	
Major: Education	-0.33*	[-0.63, -0.04]	.03	[-.02, .09]	
Major: IT	-0.32	[-0.81, 0.16]	.01	[-.02, .04]	
Major: Religion	-0.15	[-0.69, 0.38]	.00	[-.01, .02]	
Major: Science	-0.31	[-0.82, 0.19]	.01	[-.02, .04]	
Class: Junior	0.19	[-0.17, 0.55]	.01	[-.02, .03]	
Class: Senior	-0.37	[-0.77, 0.02]	.02	[-.02, .07]	

Class:	0.16	[-0.15, 0.47]	.01	[-.02, .03]	
Sophomore					
Credits	0.04	[-0.03, 0.11]	.01	[-.02, .04]	
					$R^2 = .234^{**}$
					95% CI [.05, .29]

Note. A significant *b*-weight indicates that semi-partial correlation is also significant. *b* represents unstandardized regression weights. sr^2 represents the semi-partial correlation squared. *LL* and *UL* indicate the lower and upper limits of a confidence interval, respectively. * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study have led to the following findings. First, there is a weak yet negative relationship between religious fundamentalism and academic dishonesty. This means that a person with a strong fixed view of religion may also have a strong disagreement with academically dishonest behaviors. This seems reasonable as many religions such as Christianity and Buddhism condemn many academically dishonest actions such as disobeying teacher directions, copying, cheating on exams, and more (Anderman & Won, 2019; Costley, 2019; Etgar et al., 2019). Examining academic dishonesty with the religious component of fundamentalism was one of the unique contributions of this study.

A second major finding was the overall disagreeing view towards academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty is a prevalent behavior (Hensley et al., 2013; Mala, 2016; Tanawattanacharoen & Nimnuan, 2009). However, participants do not appear to be willing to admit that they may view such behaviors as acceptable. In other words, the beliefs that the participants stated may not be consisted of the behavior of the context. This may be explained in part by the strong moral teachings of a religious university. Such teachings may encourage people to say what is right and then do what it takes.

A third major finding was the tepid perception the participants of this study had towards religion. The responses were primarily neutral rather than disagreeing or agreeing. This is in contrast to other studies that have found either a disinterest in religion or a fanaticism towards it (Hardie et al., 2016; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2014). The studies just mentioned were conducted in the West. The current study was conducted in Asia in which perceptions of religion appear to be more indifferent than the polarizing.

In terms of recommendations, schools may need to consider providing an environment in which some sort of strongly enforced moral code is in existence. A standard for acceptable academic behavior that is consistently supported and enforced may contribute to the actual development of the desired behavior (Ramzan, Munir, Siddique, & Asif, 2012). This is particularly true in many parts of Asia, where there is a cultural difference in terms of what is academic dishonesty

and its ethical ramifications (Henning et al., 2015; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). In addition, for schools that have a clear religious context, steps should be taken to emphasize this because the strong moral teachings of a religious school provide the understanding of right and wrong that is missing in the lives of many youths.

For further study, it would be interesting to compare the results of a religious school with secular schools. This can help to strengthen the hypothesis that religion makes a difference in terms of behavior, such as dishonesty. In addition, a study that takes a closer look at the neutral/indifference to religion in Asia, in contrast with the polarization found in the West, would be useful to understand what factors are present or missing here that are found in the West.

Among the limitations, this study is correlational in nature and does not imply causation. In addition, there is an assumption that the respondents completed the survey accurately and attentively. Lastly, the context of the study limits the interpretation of a sample in a similar setting.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of students towards academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism and to assess the relationship between these two variables. The results indicated that students disagree with dishonest academic behavior while also being neutral toward religion. The relationship between academic dishonesty and religious fundamentalism was negative while controlling for gender, class level, major, and credits enrolled. This finding indicates that the stronger position an individual takes in their religious worldview, the less acceptable academic dishonesty becomes.

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