

# Personality predicts cheating more than academic struggles, study shows

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Students who cheat in high school and college are highly likely to fit the profile for subclinical psychopathy - a personality disorder defined by erratic lifestyle, manipulation, callousness and antisocial tendencies, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. These problematic students cheat because they feel entitled and disregard morality, the study found.

Cheating, a perennial concern for educators, "has been facilitated by new technologies," said Delroy Paulhus, PhD, who led the research. "At the same time, cheating may seem more apparent because we can more effectively detect it." Because it's hard or even dangerous to try to reform a psychopathic person, he recommends blocking cheating using other means.

College [students](#) who admitted to cheating in high school or turned in plagiarized papers ranked high on personality tests of the so-called Dark Triad: psychopathy, Machiavellianism (cynicism, amorality, manipulateness), and narcissism (arrogance and self-centeredness, with a strong sense of entitlement). Of the three dark personality types, psychopathy was most strongly linked to cheating. These findings appear in the September [Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied](#).

Students were spurred to cheat by two motivations, the research found: First, they sought to get the grades to which they felt entitled; second, they either didn't think cheating was wrong or didn't care.

The first of three studies at the University of British Columbia surveyed 249 second-year college students who, without having to share their identities, filled out take-home personality tests that looked at the Dark Triad and psychology's "Big Five" core traits of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, stability and openness.

Also anonymously, students were asked whether they had cheated on high-school tests or handed in essays copied from someone else. (Questions specifically referred to high school to allay concerns about admitting to cheating at the university.)

Each of the Dark Triad variables went hand in hand with cheating at a high level of statistical significance. The more likely students were to have cheated, the higher they ranked on the psychopathy scale, followed by Machiavellianism and [narcissism](#).

Students who were more conscientious and agreeable were significantly less likely to have cheated. Those low in conscientiousness were probably more likely to cheat because they were less prepared and more desperate, the authors wrote, adding that disagreeable students would by definition be less cooperative. However, the predictive power of those two core traits paled next to those of the Dark Triad.

A second study measured actual, not self-reported, cheating by analyzing two of each student's term papers -- one summarizing a research topic and one summarizing a personal experience. The students, who took the same personality tests, were warned that their papers would be scrutinized by an online service that calibrates how much of a paper directly matches sources in a database. Plagiarism was flagged when any string of seven words or more directly matched a published source or another finished paper.

Of the 114 students studied, 16 plagiarized on at least one essay. Again,

the Dark Triad and plagiarism were closely and significantly linked, with psychopathy leading the pack. Although for the essay, poor verbal skills were also tied to cheating, the association with psychopathy was tighter still.

With both the self-report and the plagiarism screen detecting cheating, the authors concluded that personality profiling can help predict cheating.

Finally, a third study examined why students cheat. A total of 223 college students went online to take personality tests and rate themselves on a Self-Report Cheating Scale that included items tapping motivation, such as "I needed to get (or keep) a scholarship," or "I'm not concerned about punishment if caught."

Analysis unearthed subgroups of students who felt that cheating was an appropriate strategy for reaching their ambitious goals, who were not afraid of punishment, or who were not morally inhibited. Psychopathy was significantly linked with all three motivations.

"Incentives such as high grades and scholarships seem to activate dishonesty in these individuals," the authors wrote. "The achievement goals shared by most college students trigger [cheating](#) in psychopaths alone." Making it worse, moral deterrents don't matter to psychopaths, who scoff at social norms.

The authors caution that subclinical psychopaths are unlikely to exhibit the extreme behaviors of criminal psychopaths. Even with subclinical levels, however, it's nearly impossible and potentially dangerous to intervene with psychopaths. To foil the natural cheaters, the authors recommend that teachers use different forms of the same test, ban cell phones and other electronics, use random or assigned seats, ask for essays about personal experiences (which are not easily duplicated), and

use plagiarism screening software.

To a lesser extent, educators can expect that students who aren't well prepared are also more likely to cheat. The authors suggest that making a classroom less competitive could avoid tempting the weaker students.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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