

# ACADEMIC DISHONESTY, PERSONALITY TRAITS AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

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**Abstract:** *Many recent studies has been indicating that academic dishonesty is more frequent in higher education, under the form plagiarism, cheating on exams, and copying assignments from other students. The present research aims to explore the relationship of personality traits, academic dishonesty and academic adjustment. The results showed that conscientiousness, honesty and openness were significantly negatively related to reports of academic dishonesty. Academic neuroticism was the most powerful predictor of cheating behaviours, while an overall high level of maladjustment predicted the positive attitudes towards academic cheating. The significant associations between academic adjustment and academic dishonesty confirmed previous research in the field.*

**Key words:** *academic dishonesty, personality traits, academic adjustment, use of Internet.*

## 1. Introduction

Many recent studies indicating that academic dishonesty is more frequent in higher education, under the form plagiarism, cheating on exams, and copying assignments from other students. Some reports claim that 74% of high school students and 95% of college students are admitting to at least one incidence of cheating. Academic dishonesty could also be considered a form of academic maladjustment. Research on academic dishonesty has focused on the individual (age, gender, personality, motivation and academic engagement) and contextual factors (academic honour codes, penalties, in case of detection) related to dishonest behaviours.

The associations between the personality traits and the cheating behaviours are extensively discussed in the literature, the Big Five model being the most extensively used (Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015; Nguyen & Biderman, 2013; Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore, 2010). We focused in our study on the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2009). The six HEXACO personality traits are defined as follows: persons with very high scores on the Honesty-Humility scale avoid manipulating others for personal gain, feel little temptation to break rules, are uninterested in lavish wealth and luxuries, and feel no special entitlement to elevated social status. Persons with very high scores on the Emotionality scale experience fear of physical dangers, experience anxiety in response to life's stresses, feel a need for emotional support from others, and feel empathy and sentimental

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attachments towards others. Persons with very high scores on the Extraversion scale feel positively about themselves, feel confident when leading or addressing groups of people, enjoy social gatherings and interactions, and experience positive feelings of enthusiasm and energy. Persons with very high scores on the Agreeableness scale forgive the wrongs that they suffered, are lenient in judging others, are willing to compromise and cooperate with others, and can easily control their temper. Persons with very high scores on the Conscientiousness scale organize their time and their physical surroundings, work in a disciplined way towards their goals, strive for accuracy and perfection in their tasks, and deliberate carefully when making decisions. Persons with very high scores on the Openness to Experience scale become absorbed in the beauty of art and nature, are inquisitive about various domains of knowledge, use their imagination freely in everyday life, and take an interest in unusual ideas or people (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

Studies showed that personality and academic dishonesty are associated. In most of the studies, conscientiousness was negatively related to academic dishonesty (Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015) showing that highly conscientious students were not likely to involve in unethical behaviours, because their actions are guided by self-discipline and control. Agreeableness had also negative relationship with academic dishonesty (Clariana, 2013; Salgado, 2002; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Openness seems to be a negative predictor of academic dishonesty, because creativity and receptivity towards new learning as characteristics students with higher levels of Openness are related to academic success and to learning orientation (Masood & Mazahir, 2015). There is consensus in the literature that Neuroticism is associated with academic dishonesty, but recent studies showed that when the effects of the personality traits were combined with other contextual variables, Neuroticism and Openness had a more high and significant impact on cheating behaviours (Day, Hudson, Dobies, & Waris 2011). The association between neuroticism and dishonesty was explained based on the higher levels of stress and lower levels of confidence of neurotics, their motivation for unethical behaviour being sustained by their desire to avoid failure (Barrick, Mount, & Li 2013). Concerning Extraversion, previous research showed contradictory results: Cizek (1999) and Bratton and Strittmatter (2013) found that high Extraversion have effects on ethic behaviours, while others showed that Extroversion was not a predictor of academic dishonesty (Williams et al., 2010, Karim, Zamzuri, & Nor, 2010). Honesty-Humility was not discussed in the literature because the HEXACO model has not been reported in the academic dishonesty studies. However, general studies on this personality trait showed that self-reports of Honesty-Humility were the strongest personality predictor of actual cheating behaviours (Ashton, Lee, & Vries, 2014). Therefore, our study focuses on the associations between the personality traits as measured by the HEXACO model and the academic dishonesty and attitudes towards academic cheating, both viewed as indicators of academic maladjustment.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Aims**

The present research aims to explore the relationship between personality traits, academic dishonesty and academic adjustment. We also aimed to investigate the students' perceptions about unethical behaviours and academic dishonesty.

## 2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 200 university students, male (63) and female (137), with a mean age of 23 years.

## 2.3. Measures

The following measures were used:

- 1) HEXACO Personality Assessment Inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2009), the Romanian version with 60 items (Ion et al., 2017), assesses personality across six core traits, with fair Cronbach's Alfa coefficients but smaller than the coefficients reported in the literature using the Romanian version of the instrument (Ion et al. 2016): Honesty-Humility ( $\alpha = .70$ ), Emotionality ( $\alpha = .71$ ), Extraversion  $\alpha = .74$ ), Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .70$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .71$ ), and Openness ( $\alpha = .67$ ).
- 2) The Academic Adjustment Questionnaire (AAQ - Clinciu & Cazan, 2014) is a self-report instrument scored with 0 and 1 and it assesses the students' adjustment to the academic learning process: Neuroticism (14 items,  $\alpha = .79$ ), Procrastination (10 items,  $\alpha = .74$ ) and Academic dishonesty (19 items,  $\alpha = .80$ ) The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale is .81.
- 3) The Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS) consists of nine behavioural items (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Bolin, 2004), participants being asked to indicate how often they engaged in academically dishonest behaviours since beginning their studies at the university, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = very often). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale is .86.
- 4) The Perceived Opportunity Scale (POS - McCabe & Trevino, 1997) consists of eight items measuring the participants' perceptions of the frequency and acceptability of academically dishonest behaviours at university and the likelihood of academic dishonesty being detected. The items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale is .72.
- 5) The Unethical Academic Behaviours Scale (UABS - Peled, Eshet, & Grinautski, 2013) consists of a list of 16 academic unethical behaviours that the participant assessed on a five point Likert scale according their views about the seriousness of these behaviours (1 = not serious, 5 = very serious).

## 3. Results

The results showed that conscientiousness, honesty-humility and openness were significantly negatively related to reports of academic dishonesty, measured both as a component of academic maladjustment, and as dishonest behaviour. Surprisingly, Neuroticism was negatively correlated with the perceived opportunity to cheat, students with higher levels of neuroticism having less negative attitudes towards the possibility to cheat; they also showed higher levels of academic dishonesty (Table 1). The highest negative correlation was found for openness, showing that students more open to experience were less likely to involve in academic cheating behaviours.

*Correlations between the personality traits and the academic dishonesty* Table 1

HEXACO traits	Perceived opportunity to cheat	Academic dishonesty
Honesty - Humility	-.001	<b>-.370**</b>
Neuroticism	<b>-.164*</b>	<b>.241**</b>
Extraversion	.026	.046
Agreeableness	-.154*	<b>-.241**</b>
Conscientiousness	<b>-.166*</b>	<b>-.180*</b>
Openness	-.086	<b>-.478**</b>

Note:  $N = 200$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

The associations between the personality traits and the attitudes towards unethical academic behaviours revealed significant associations, especially for Openness, Conscientiousness and Honesty-Humility.

Table 2

*Correlations between the personality traits and the attitudes towards unethical academic behaviours*

Unethical academic behaviours	H	N	E	A	C	O
Copying from someone else during a test	<b>-.247**</b>	.113	<b>.159*</b>	-.081	-.136	<b>-.291**</b>
Taking an exam for another person	-.118	.029	-.040	-.137	-.037	<b>-.340**</b>
Submitting an assignment that was written by someone else	<b>-.365**</b>	.010	<b>-.180*</b>	-.109	<b>-.223**</b>	<b>-.445**</b>
Using technology to answer exam questions during the exam	<b>-.429**</b>	.125	.047	<b>-.244**</b>	<b>-.259**</b>	<b>-.524**</b>
Using un-authorized material	<b>-.160*</b>	.099	.042	<b>-.165*</b>	<b>-.177*</b>	<b>-.429**</b>
Reproducing an exam questions for the purpose of selling them	<b>-.185**</b>	.060	.138	-.086	-.038	<b>-.212**</b>
Copying material from the net and submitted it as my own work	<b>-.242**</b>	.101	-.027	<b>-.269**</b>	.021	<b>-.419**</b>
Invented or falsified information for the bibliography of a paper	-.130	.035	.020	<b>-.242**</b>	<b>-.279**</b>	<b>-.324**</b>
Allowing another person to copy from me during an exam	-.108	<b>.153*</b>	<b>.193**</b>	<b>-.161*</b>	.016	-.095
Copying material from a published source without giving credit	<b>-.308**</b>	<b>.269**</b>	-.091	-.135	<b>-.208**</b>	<b>-.252**</b>
Writing an assignment for a friend who submitted it as his work	-.080	-.014	-.118	-.054	.067	<b>-.185**</b>
Collaborating on an assignment when asked for individual work	-.099	<b>-.233**</b>	<b>.162*</b>	-.083	-.005	-.118
Reproducing an exam questions and sharing them with friends	-.130	.024	.099	-.102	.020	-.107
Obtaining questions from a previous exam	-.116	<b>-.140*</b>	.037	-.002	<b>-.180*</b>	<b>-.218**</b>
Inventing a family crisis in order to get an extension on an exam	-.125	-.011	-.043	-.106	-.137	<b>-.193**</b>
Not contributing to the group work in group assignment	<b>-.254**</b>	<b>.173*</b>	<b>-.147*</b>	<b>-.304**</b>	-.130	<b>-.297**</b>

Note:  $N = 200$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , H = Honesty – Humility, N = Neuroticism, E = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, C = Conscientiousness, O = Openness.

Individuals with high levels of Honesty-Humility and Openness had negative attitudes towards behaviours such as: copying from someone else during a test, submitting an assignment that was written by someone else, using technology to answer exam questions during the exam, copying material from the net and submitted it as own work, copying material from a published source without giving credit. In addition, Openness was negatively associated with the tendency to take an exam for another student or the tendency to give unauthorized and unethical help to a friend. However, more extravert students had positive attitudes towards dishonest behaviours such as copying from someone else during a test, allowing another person to copy from me during an exam or collaborating on an assignment when asked for individual work, mainly behaviours reflecting a high degree of social desirability exhibited towards obtaining social rewards from peers. A similar perspective was observed for high neurotic individuals (Table 2). Students with higher levels of Neuroticism also showed a preference for not contributing to the group work in group assignment, confirming their preferences for individual tasks.

As expected, academic maladjustment correlated significantly with academic dishonesty procrastination being the only dimension which was not associated with unethical behaviours (Table 3). Perceived opportunity to cheat was not associated with academic dishonesty (Table 3). Concerning the dimensions of academic adjustment, the analysis revealed that academic neuroticism could be a positive predictor of cheating behaviours, while an overall high level of maladjustment predicted the positive attitudes towards academic cheating. The significant associations between academic adjustment and academic dishonesty confirmed previous research showing that students who are high in academic self-efficacy are less likely to engage in academic dishonesty and that the more confident students are in their abilities to reach their academic goals and perform the course work required, the less likely they are to cheat.

*Correlations between the academic maladjustment and the dishonesty* Table 3

AAQ dimensions	Perceived opportunity to cheat	Academic dishonesty
Academic neuroticism	-.082	<b>.159*</b>
Procrastination	.066	.026
Academic dishonesty	-.132	<b>.353**</b>
Academic maladjustment	-.090	<b>.284**</b>

Note:  $N = 200$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The significant associations between academic maladjustment, personality traits and the cheating behaviours led us through the hypothesis that personality traits and dishonest behaviours could predict academic maladjustment. The linear multiple regression analysis showed that Neuroticism had a significant positive weight, while Honesty-Humility and Openness had negative weights. Extraversion and Agreeableness were excluded from the analysis given their low correlations with the maladjustment. Conscientiousness was included but the analyses revealed that its effect is not significant. Academic dishonesty and negative attitude towards cheating predicted significantly academic maladjustment (Table 4).

*Prediction of academic maladjustment*

Table 4

Model	Coefficients		<i>t</i>
	Unstandardized ( <i>B</i> )	Standardized ( $\beta$ )	
R <sup>2</sup> = .29, F(6,199) = 13.50***			
(Constant)	.603		<b>4.278**</b>
Honesty-Humility	-.032	-.141	<b>-2.069*</b>
Conscientiousness	-.033	-.099	-1.553
Neuroticism	.068	.249	<b>3.695***</b>
Openness	-.040	-.165	<b>-2.114*</b>
Academic dishonesty	.034	.178	<b>2.325*</b>
Perceived opportunity to cheat	-.032	-.148	<b>-2.172*</b>

Note: *N* = 200, \* *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, Dependent Variable: AAQ Academic maladjustment

#### 4. Conclusions and Discussion

The results were consistent with previous research in the field, despite the significant variability in the research results. Research showed that extraversion could be both positively (Gallagher, 2002) and negatively (Salgado et al., 2014) related to academic dishonesty. Most studies have found negative relationships between conscientiousness and cheating (Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015). Bratton and Strittmatter (2013) found that conscientious students made more ethical judgments in academic honesty scenarios. Concerning Neuroticism, studies found positive relationship between neuroticism and academic dishonesty (Clariana, 2013). Regarding openness and academic dishonesty, the previous results are conflicting. Some studies found positive relationships (Gallagher, 2002; Williams et al., 2010), but most of the studies (Aslam & Nazir, 2011) have reported negative relationships between openness and cheating. Our results are also confirming previous research showing negative relationship between agreeableness and academic dishonesty (Clariana, 2013; Salgado, 2002; Williams et al., 2010).

Our study has important practical implications because the understanding of the individual differences which predict academic dishonesty could represent a way to control for these effects when examining contextual influences, as Giluk and Postlethwaite (2015) also stated. Taking into consideration these differences, academics could design intervention strategies for reducing the frequency of dishonest behaviours. The high homogeneity of the sample included in this research could be a limitation, as well as the high scale desirability which the correlational design could not control for. Demographic and contextual variables such as classroom setting, teacher characteristics and practices and preventive measures were not taken into account.

Future research will try to investigate if personality traits and attitudes towards cheating could predict academic dishonesty, the attitudes being a mediator between personality and dishonest behaviours. Further investigations will also include demographic and contextual variables and we will focus also on the effect of preventive measures on academic dishonesty and maladjustment. The expansion of technology and online resources could favour dishonest behaviours, therefore academic institutions should invest in technical, human, and financial resources to prevent students from engaging in academic cheating (Hendy, 2017).

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