



Narrow facets of honesty-humility predict collegiate cheating

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ABSTRACT

As collegiate cheating is a growing concern across the world, researchers have started to explore personality traits for a better understanding of why students engage in such behavior. Whilst prior studies investigated the relationship between personality and general academic dishonesty criteria (viz., counter-academic behavior), this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how narrow facets of honesty-humility (i.e., HEXACO Personality Inventory) predict both general and specific academic dishonest behavior. Results from our study of 308 university students replicated prior findings in that the narrow facet, fairness, was the best predictor of broad counter-academic behavior. However, our data revealed that greed avoidance predicted a more specific form of academic dishonest behavior, namely collegiate cheating. Furthermore, narrow facets of honesty-humility show incremental predictive validity above and beyond the global trait when explaining variance in both general and specific self-reported measures.

1. Introduction

Internationally, collegiate cheating has become a central concern for educational stakeholders (Bretag, 2016; Gallant, Binkin, & Donohue, 2015). A review of 64 studies of general cheating prevalence (amongst United States and Canadian college students) revealed an average of 43.1% students confessing to having cheated on examinations in some way (Whitley, 1998). More recent research – a longitudinal study including data from 134,709 students over the period 2002 to 2013 – reports an average of 37.3% students cheated by receiving unauthorized help whilst conducting written tasks (McCabe, 2016). As collegiate cheating appears to be a prevailing problem, a more comprehensive understanding of its psychological underpinnings is needed.

Prior studies (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; McAbee, Oswald, & Connelly, 2014) show that students' personality traits might play an important role in academic dishonest behavior. For example, honesty-humility (one of the six broad traits derived from HEXACO-Personality Inventory; Lee & Ashton, 2004) has consistently shown negative relationships with counter-academic behavior (De Vries, De Vries, & Born, 2011). Counter-academic behavior is defined as a broad criterion, encapsulating multiple ethical transgressions within an academic context (i.e., cheating, plagiarism, substance abuse, misrepresentation, low personal standards, petty personal gain; Hakstian, Farrell, & Tweed, 2002). Remarkably, we do not yet understand how honesty-humility might relate to more context-specific measures of counter-academic

behavior, such as cheating on a test. Counter academic behavior encompasses various types of wrongdoing, whereas the latter accounts for a specific type of dishonest behavior. Given that collegiate cheating represents a serious violation in the academic context (Bretag, 2016; Gallant et al., 2015), it is important to determine whether honesty-humility predicts this specific form of counter-academic behavior.

The present study investigated how narrow facets of honesty-humility relate to *different* types of academic dishonesty criteria (i.e., differentiated by generality insofar that counter-academic behavior includes several, varied outcomes whereas collegiate cheating is more specific). Although it has been investigated how personality factors relate to counter-academic behavior as general criterion, how personality predicts cheating as a more specific form of dishonest academic behavior has not yet been explored. Therefore, we sought to replicate the findings of earlier studies (De Vries et al., 2011) and establish how narrow facets of honesty-humility relate to collegiate cheating.

Another issue to consider was how well collegiate cheating could be predicted from narrow facets (vs. the global trait) of honesty-humility, in the light of predictor specificity. In the personality literature (Soto & John, 2017), it is suggested that narrow facets may predict context-specific behavior (e.g., collegiate cheating) with higher accuracy compared to global traits. Therefore, a secondary aim was to establish whether narrow facets of honesty-humility are better predictors of collegiate cheating compared to the global trait measure.

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2. Honesty-humility and counter-academic behavior

Honesty-humility is the “quintessential basic trait to account for individual differences in ethical behavior” (Hilbig & Zettler, 2015, p. 85). This personality trait is defined as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156). Honesty-humility as a global trait comprises two theoretical aspects: honesty and humility (Leone, Desimoni, & Chirumbolo, 2012). Honesty is defined as “the refusal to pretend that facts of reality are other than what they are” (Becker, 1998, p. 158). Put differently, honesty refers to being fair and trustworthy, unwilling to cheat, exploit, steal or lie to others for personal gain (Ashton, Lee, & Son, 2000). Humility, on the other hand, is about being modest and avoiding greed. Individuals high on humility are uninterested in acquiring luxury goods or having high social status (Ashton & Lee, 2001, 2002).

Further, the global trait of honesty-humility is operationalized as comprising four narrow facets (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Together, the two narrow facets of *sincerity* (being genuine in interpersonal relations) and *fairness* (avoiding fraud and corruption) theoretically represent the element of honesty. It is specifically suggested that people high on honesty have the internal control to avoid fraud, stealing or cheating, irrespective of their motivation in wanting to do so (Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). As individuals high on honesty are associated with fostering relationships based on trust and reciprocity, one would expect less counterproductive behavior from such individuals. In contrast, the two narrow facets of *greed avoidance* (being uninterested in possessing lavish wealth, acquiring luxury goods and having high social status) and *modesty* (viewing oneself as an ordinary person, unentitled to special treatment), represent the aspect of humility. A person high on humility would have less motivation to compete for acquiring social status or material advantages (Leone et al., 2012) as humility represents an accurate view of one's actual traits, abilities or resources. To summarize, *greed avoidance* and *modesty* could be the underlying motive for engaging in unethical behavior; and *fairness* and *sincerity* may – despite the motive – act as a control element, buffering whether one would actually engage in counterproductive behavior.

Counterproductive behavior, specifically conducted within an academic or collegiate setting, is referred to as counter-academic behavior (Hakstian et al., 2002). Counter-academic behavior has been operationalized as self-proclaimed ethical violations and is computed as the mean score of various counterproductive behaviors added together (e.g., misrepresentation, cheating during examinations, plagiarizing, etc.). Counter-academic behavior has been found to relate negatively to the global trait of honesty-humility ($r = -0.40, p < 0.01$; showing medium to large effect) (De Vries et al., 2011). However, the narrow facets underlying honesty-humility may predict academic dishonesty differently; the reason being ascribed to the conceptual difference of facets and the way counter-academic behavior is conceptualized.

The narrow facets of honesty-humility may relate to counter-academic behavior in different ways. For instance, De Vries et al. (2011) found that the four narrow facets of honesty-humility correlated negatively with broad counter-academic behavior. In their research, they explored how all six global traits of the HEXACO-PI relate to counter-academic behavior. More relevant to our research, De Vries et al. (2011) found that, although all narrow facets of honesty-humility significantly correlated with counter-academic behavior, only one narrow facet, namely *fairness*, predicted counter-academic behavior ($\beta = -0.47, p < 0.01$). Further, the findings of De Vries et al. (2011) revealed that *fairness* (which is expressed as relative weight in percentages) explained 67.7% of the total variance in predicting counter-academic behavior. Following De Vries et al. (2011), we expected to replicate the findings that:

Hypothesis 1. The narrow facets of *fairness* (H1a), *sincerity* (H1b), *greed avoidance* (H1c) and *modesty* (H1d) will relate negatively to counter-academic behavior, with *fairness* relating more negatively to

counter-academic behavior than *sincerity*, *greed avoidance* and *modesty* (H1e).

3. Honesty-humility and collegiate cheating

Many studies have so far failed to consider how the narrow facets of honesty-humility would relate to a context-specific measure of counter-academic behavior, like cheating. As a consequence, we do not yet understand how honesty-humility, at facet-level, might relate to collegiate cheating (Hilbig & Hessler, 2013).

In prior studies (De Vries et al., 2011; Marcus et al., 2007; McAbee et al., 2014) counter-academic behavior was defined as a broad form of academic dishonesty, encapsulating multiple ethical transgressions like plagiarizing, or cheating. In contrast, it is also possible to conceptualize academic dishonesty in a narrower way, fitting a particular situational context. For example, cheating during a test could be considered a context-specific criterion measure of academic dishonest behavior.

Recently, researchers have found a significant relationship between the global trait, honesty-humility, and the probability of actual cheating under monetary incentivized conditions (Hilbig & Zettler, 2015). For example, one study (Zettler, Hilbig, Moshagen, & De Vries, 2015) reports that low scores on honesty-humility significantly relate to over-reporting on alleged wins during a monetary incentivized coin-toss task. Closer to the notion of using narrow facets as predictors of criteria, Hilbig, Glöckner, and Zettler (2014) predicted that honesty-humility would explain unique variance in predicting prosocial behavior (being the opposite of self-interest behavior such as cheating) due to the inclusion of the *fairness* and *greed avoidance* aspect. Although both these narrow facets were significantly associated with prosocial behavior, only *fairness* explained unique variance in this outcome. However, how honesty-humility, at facet level, might relate to collegiate cheating has not been tested yet.

As far as current literature reports, a person high on *fairness* would want to avoid fraud, corruption, stealing and cheating (Lee & Ashton, 2004; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). Further, *fairness* has been found to be the best predictor of counter-academic behavior when compared to the other three narrow facets of honesty-humility (De Vries et al., 2011). Furthermore, counter-academic behavior was found to include aspects of self-reported cheating during examination (captured by items in the counter-academic behavior measure; Hakstian et al., 2002). Therefore, we expected that students that are low on *fairness* would also be more likely to engage in dishonest behavior like cheating. Hence our premise:

Hypothesis 2. The narrow facets of *fairness* (H2a), *sincerity* (H2b), *greed avoidance* (H2c) and *modesty* (H2d) will relate negatively to collegiate cheating, with *fairness* relating more negatively to collegiate cheating than *sincerity*, *greed avoidance* and *modesty* (H2e).

Researchers have demonstrated that strong relations and increased validity may result when narrow-level facets of personality constructs are related to specific criteria, as opposed to using the global trait alone (Barrick & Mount, 2003). To increase predictive precision, a facet-level research approach could be followed when studies pose context-specific research questions and wish to predict specific outcomes (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012; Soto & John, 2017). This notion suggests that the narrow facets of honesty-humility could show incremental predictive validity over and above that of the global trait, honesty-humility, when predicting specific dishonest behavior (viz., collegiate cheating). Such facet-level insights are important, because they may provide a better theoretical understanding of how personality and criteria are linked (Hastings & O'Neill, 2009).

In fact, prior studies using a broad academic counter-behavior criterion (De Vries et al., 2011) showed that a model containing the two global traits, honesty-humility and conscientiousness ($R^2 = 0.29, p < 0.01$) versus a model containing their narrow facets ($R^2 = 0.41, p < 0.01$) respectively, incrementally predicted counter-academic

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