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To Cheat or Not to Cheat: Evidence on Ethical Decision-Making From a Study of Arab Youth

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Abstract

How do young people make judgments about what is right and ethical? The challenge of cultivating ethical citizens is one that every community faces, yet it has received only limited research attention, with almost no work on this subject having been done in the Arab world. This paper summarizes much of what we know about how youth engage in ethical decision-making, with an emphasis on educational settings in which students are confronted with the question of whether to cheat or not. Its broader aim is to begin a more systematic and evidence-based discussion of the factors that influence ethical decision-making in the Middle East, which may have important implications not only for education but also for political and economic development.

The paper first provides an overview of research on dishonesty, particularly cheating in schools and the question of whether cheating is ever justified. Second, it provides a conceptual outline of strategies that may be used to combat cheating and other forms of unethical behavior. The classification of strategies presented is based on differing (but not mutually exclusive) perspectives on the reasons for dishonesty in any given situation, including perspectives that emphasize external costs and benefits, social norms, self-awareness, and self-deception. Third, the paper summarizes findings from an original study of the attitudes and ethical choices of a sample of Arab students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).





Introduction

Although precise data are often lacking, academic dishonesty is believed to be a significant and growing problem in education systems worldwide. In surveys, substantial numbers of students from elementary school through higher education admit to having cheated at least once, and these numbers have increased over time (Anderman & Murdock, 2011). For example, in the first large-scale study of cheating in American higher education (Bowers, 1964), 75% of 5,000 students surveyed across 99 institutions of higher learning said they had engaged in one or more forms of academic dishonesty. When the study was replicated 30 years later in nine of the original institutions (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), that percentage had risen to 82%, and dramatic increases were found in certain types of cheating, including cheating on tests or exams, cheating by women, and collaborative cheating.

There has been less sustained research on ethical behavior in the Middle East, but studies suggest similar trends in education sectors. In the UAE, for example, in a 2012 survey of 250 college students with diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds (Khan & Balasubramanian, 2012), over 78% admitted to having cheated, particularly through the use of information and communications technologies. In Morocco, recent scandals have involved students using their phones to snap photographs of questions and post them on Facebook (Ennemli, 2015). In Jordan, an undercover reporter found similar but even more elaborate forms of cheating on the *Tawjihi*, the general secondary examination, involving the use of mobile phones and hidden earbuds (Al Shawabkeh, 2012). In one common gambit, questions would be photographed during the exam and sent to a headquarters location or “cell,” where “expert” teachers would find the answers and text them back *en masse* to lists of students who had paid brokers in advance.

It is important to recognize that cheating is a complex phenomenon, which may have multiple meanings and justifications, and as such may not be “all bad.” Buckner and Hodges (2015, p. 4) view cheating on high-school exit exams in Jordan and Morocco as a sociopolitical “form of micro-level contestation of the larger opportunity structure,” which is known to be authoritarian and to favor those with wealth and political connections. The fact that students are not alone in cheating—that family members, teachers, exam proctors, and government officials are often complicit and even encouraging—further complicates the picture.¹ In Jordan and Morocco, the high-school exit exams also reward memorization over critical thinking, public schools may not prepare students effectively for the exams, and the exams are remarkably high-stakes.² Far more

¹ Buckner and Hodges (2015, p. 9) interviewed a young Jordanian woman who said that, although she had not intended to cheat, an exam proctor “leaned in and told her, ‘Make sure you fill in the A clearly,’ even though she had marked a B. Confused at first, she quickly understood that her teacher was telling her the correct answer.”

² For example, the Moroccan baccalaureate exams have been described as the “SAT on steroids,” though unlike the SAT they focus on “achievement” rather than “ability.” In that sense, the baccalaureate exams are akin to the SAT II or AP subject exams in the United States, testing achievement in a range of subjects from physics and chemistry to Islamic Studies and Arabic literature. In Jordan, seven SAT II tests are often considered appropriate for *Tawjihi* equivalency and thus the opportunity to apply to public universities (and public sector jobs). By contrast, Harvard University requires only two SAT II tests (along with the SAT or ACT), but only if the cost of the two SAT II tests is not a financial hardship for the student (<https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/application-requirements>). In addition, many U.S. colleges and universities (such as Smith College, Wake Forest University, and Bates College) do not require SAT II tests at all, or even the SAT or ACT.

than the American SAT, these exams are used to sort high school youth by test scores into rigid life trajectories, not only in terms of what universities and areas of study are open to students, but also with regard to future employment, salary, and status.

Nevertheless, cheating is deeply problematic for society, even where there may be reasonable justifications for it. As with lying, cheating is rarely harmless (Bok, 1999).³ Indeed, even in the case of cheating that feels justified, there are victims. First, there are the students who are unwilling to cheat; those who do not have access to cheating rings, Facebook leaks, mobile phones, and other opportunities to cheat; and those who lack the funds to pay to participate (as when students pay to have exam answers texted to them).

Second, the cheaters themselves may be victims. Even “justified” cheating may come with psychological costs such as guilt and feelings of low self-worth.⁴ Moreover, cheaters may be “cheating themselves” out of learning and reaching their full potential. Interestingly, Buckner and Lodges (2015, p. 16) suggest that high school cheaters in Morocco and Jordan are, ironically, gaining “knowledge economy” skills such as collaboration, networking know-how, problem-solving, and creativity, which their governments want to instill in citizens. That may be true. At the same time, however, surveys of employers in the Arab world, including Morocco and Jordan, routinely say that young people lack labor market skills such as these, so this cannot be the full picture (World Bank, 2013). Consider the UAE: despite significant efforts at public education reform over the past decade, only a third of high school seniors taking the nationwide public university entrance exam in 2012 were able to answer the following question correctly: What is $7/9$ minus $1/9$?⁵ One reason given for that striking result is the prevalence of cheating. Cheating allows students to advance from one year to the next without learning featured skills—even if they are, paradoxically, learning other skills such as collaboration and networking by circumventing the official curriculum.

Third, cheating is corrosive to society, and “society” may thus be seen as a third kind of victim, albeit one that is often overlooked by the cheaters themselves. As philosopher of deception, Sissela Bok (1999, p. 26) puts it:

For even if they make the effort to estimate the consequences to *individuals*—themselves and others—of their lies, they often fail to consider the many ways in which deception can spread and give rise to practices very damaging to human communities. These practices clearly do not affect only isolated individuals. The veneer of social trust is often thin. As lies spread—by imitation, or in retaliation, or to forestall suspected deception—trust is damaged. Yet trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse.

³ For a more sympathetic perspective on lying and its potentially positive social role (e.g. “white lies” told to avoid conflict and hurt feelings), see DePaulo et al. (1996). Cheating, however, is arguably far more problematic than lying; for instance, there is no obvious analog to a “white lie.”

⁴ Even cheating that provides significant gains that are seen as justified may come at the cost of a loss of a positive or healthy self-concept (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008).

⁵ Author’s interview with Ryan Gjovig, Head of CEPA, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Abu Dhabi, July 2012.





Even when cheaters believe that cheating is trivial, justified, or unlikely to be detected, cheating is damaging to society, eroding norms of honesty, fair play, and reciprocity. And even where those norms are not always upheld—as in societies in which corruption is rampant and cheating is most likely to seem justified—cheating nevertheless contributes to their further erosion, and may render it difficult to re-instate such norms in the future. Indeed, students who begin cheating early in life, though they may not intend to make a habit of it, are likely to continue cheating later on (Bowers, 1964; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995). They may also unintentionally encourage others to cheat. McCabe and Trevino (1993, 1997) have repeatedly found in large surveys of U.S. college students that the most significant correlate of cheating behavior is the degree to which students perceive that others are cheating. So cheating, even when “justified,” is rarely an isolated or harmless act.

Given these complexities, the problem of cheating may be akin to the problem of corruption, particularly in authoritarian and developing world settings. Some economists, for instance, have argued that corruption can “grease the wheels” of growth, facilitating trade and business in places with cumbersome regulations and inefficient bureaucracies.⁶ Likewise, political scientists have argued that corruption can assist citizens in overcoming intransigent, inefficient bureaucracies, themselves potentially corrupt (Huntington, 1968). For example, corruption may “redistribute public resources by parallel means accessible to groups that would otherwise have been excluded” (Becquart-Leclercq, 1989, p. 193).⁷ Yet, as with lying and cheating, the longer-term damage to society is difficult to deny. Seligson (2002), for example, shows that corruption, even though it may have its uses, tends to erode the fabric of social trust, necessary for good civic behavior and other positive outcomes for society in the longer term.

Strategies for Encouraging Ethical Decision-Making

To what extent can cheating be prevented, and ethical decision-making, more broadly, be encouraged and promoted among youth? Below I discuss four theoretical perspectives on dishonesty, emphasizing theorized reasons for unethical behavior and potential strategies to reduce it.⁸ My discussion draws from a large literature on the question of dishonesty that spans economics, political science, psychology, education, and moral philosophy.

External Costs and Benefits

First, and perhaps most intuitively, there is a standard economic perspective that treats the decision to cheat (and lie, embezzle, and otherwise engage in unethical behavior) as a result of a rational calculation of expected costs and benefits. Thus, people cheat when they expect to benefit, and also when they estimate that the probability of getting caught is low and the punishment, if caught, is light. The experimental literature generally supports this hypothesis, but it also shows that external costs and benefits are not the only factors that influences cheating behavior.⁹

⁶ For overviews, see Campos and Dimova (2010) and Svensson (2005).

⁷ For a fascinating and similarly sympathetic investigation into corruption in Egypt, see Singerman (1995).

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of these four perspectives, see Mazar and Ariely (2006).

⁹ See, for example, Gneezy (2005) and Mazar et al. (2008).



Strategies of reducing cheating, then, might aim to reduce expected benefits, increase the probability of getting caught, and/or render punishment more severe. In combating corruption, for example, states have often focused on the latter two approaches through greater institutional monitoring as well as stiffer penalties for corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). The “benefits” side has also been considered, particularly the hypothesis that increasing civil service wages may reduce the benefits associated with corruption and thus discourage it (Van Rijckeghem & Weder, 2001). Likewise, in education, strategies have sought to reduce the benefits and heighten the costs associated with cheating. In the UAE, for example, education reforms in the lower grades have sought to reduce the high-stakes nature of exams by promoting “continuous” assessment, with final exams only one among several inputs into the final grade (Jones, 2015).

Social Norms

Another theoretical perspective on cheating emphasizes the role of social norms—the rules, often informal or implicit, governing acceptable behavior within a community. People may be more likely to cheat when social norms against cheating are less rigid or well-defined and when they are less consistently ingrained or upheld. It is notable that, in their survey of more than 6,000 students at 31 U.S. academic institutions, McCabe and Trevino (1997) found *peer behavior* to be the most significant variable linked to cheating—and that this was more significant than beliefs about the likelihood of getting caught and the severity of punishment for cheating. Of course, both social norms and external cost-benefit calculations can affect cheating, and sometimes these affects function in complementary ways. For instance, McCabe and Trevino suggest that students who perceive others are cheating feel themselves at a disadvantage, so peer behavior may not only provide normative support for cheating but also increase the perceived benefits associated with it.

This perspective suggests clarifying and strengthening social norms against cheating. A significant body of research, both observational and experimental, attests to the power of honor codes and similar codes of ethics, including religious dictates, in reducing dishonesty.¹⁰ Interestingly, just as research suggests a “slippery slope” in which initial steps toward unethical behavior can render additional steps progressively easier to take (e.g., Milgram, 1963), there is evidence that early experience with strong social norms prohibiting unethical behavior can have an enduring effect. McCabe et al. (1996) found that dishonest behavior in the workplace was lowest for those who had experienced an honor code environment in college and who currently worked in an organization with a strongly implemented code of ethics.

Social norms surrounding cheating can also vary across communities in ways that may affect the development of strategies to foster more ethical behavior. For example, in a cross-national study, Magnus et al. (2002) examine attitudes toward three actors in a hypothetical cheating incident: “Student C reports to the departmental office that student A, while taking an exam, copied answers from student B’s paper with the consent of student B.” They find evidence that Russian students are far more negative toward informers (i.e., Student C) compared to American students. One possible explanation, they note, is social norms related to political systems. In

¹⁰ See, for example, Shu et al. (2012), Mazar et al. (2008), Shariff and Norenzayan (2011), and the series of studies by McCabe and Trevino, reviewed in McCabe et al. (2001).



democratic America, reporting cheaters may be seen as a positive civic duty, because cheating may be viewed as an unfair instrument of competition in an essentially fair society. By contrast, in authoritarian Russia, officials (including school principals) may be seen as “the enemy,” so that citizens informing on other citizens are viewed as betraying society rather than fulfilling a civic duty. Indeed, in such circumstances, people may see cheating as justified, and strategies to counter it will need to take a form that is relevant to their political culture, likely in the context of broader institutional change.

Self-Awareness

Cheating may also result from a lack of “self-awareness.” Self-awareness is a concept in psychology referring to a state in which one’s attention is focused on the self; one is more “aware” of the self as navigating through the world (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). The key idea is that, with greater self-awareness, one is more likely to compare one’s current attitudes and behavior in a given situation with the salient standards for behavior in that situation. Standards, or points of reference, may include social norms, codes of ethics, instructions, or deeply felt values. If there is a discrepancy between one’s own behavior and the salient standard, people are then motivated to resolve it by seeking to conform more closely to the standard (or shifting attention away from the self so as to avoid thinking about the discrepancy). Thus, people may cheat, not because of a lack of standards that prohibit cheating (such as social norms or an honor code), but because they are not actively comparing themselves and their behavior to those standards in the moment.

Strategies to counter cheating, then, might stress efforts to promote self-awareness (and the salience of relevant standards, thus facilitating the comparison process) at the point of temptation. The experimental literature has found significant support for the hypothesis that increasing self-awareness—by having subjects sit in front of a mirror, for instance, or asking them to write a short story about themselves—can encourage people to conform to standards more effectively, including working harder on a task (Wicklund, Duval, 1971), follow instructions more closely (Beaman et al., 1979), and cheat less on a test (Diener & Wallbom, 1976). Interestingly, the idea of self-awareness is not well-known outside of social psychology; for example, neither the corruption literature in political science nor the research on academic dishonesty makes much mention of it.

Self-Deception

A final theoretical perspective emphasizes how people may reframe dishonest acts such as cheating in ways that are positive or self-serving. Thus, they do not perceive such acts as dishonest—or, perhaps more commonly, they *do* perceive them as wrong or problematic in a sense, just not *as* wrong or problematic as they truly are. For example, people may cheat, not because of a lack of social norms against cheating or a lack of self-awareness at the moment of temptation, but because they don’t perceive themselves as cheating, or they do, but they rationalize the act, making it seem less problematic to themselves in ways that others would not accept. The key here is what Bok (1999) calls the “publicity test.” If the act were exposed, would it survive the scrutiny of reasonable people in the community? Would they, too, find it justified? If not, then self-deception is likely at work.



If cheating results from self-deception, then it may be especially difficult to reduce. Research shows that the self-serving bias—an unconscious tendency to interpret reality in a self-serving way—is a stubborn one, even when efforts are made to make people see themselves in a more truthful and realistic light (Babcock & Loewenstein, 1997). In addition, it may be difficult in practice to distinguish between problems of social norms and problems of self-deception. For example, the research by Buckner and Hodges (2015) shows that some students see cheating on high-stakes exams in Jordan and Morocco as a form of “helping” others that is essentially justified, suggesting a social norms explanation.¹¹ On the other hand, if such cheating would not survive the “publicity test”—and sharp criticism of mass cheating in those country’s media suggests it would not—then the problem is one of self-deception. It seems likely that both are often at play, particularly when there are multiple communities of reference.

In designing strategies to counter cheating that results from self-deception, another relevant factor may be the extent to which certain acts are more or less easily reframed in a self-serving manner. On this question of “categorization malleability,” Mazar et al. (2008) suggest that it is easier for someone to steal a \$0.10 pencil from a friend than the money itself, since the former act, although an equivalent act of stealing, is easier to categorize in terms that are compatible with friendship (e.g., “He took a pencil from me once” or “Friends share”). In this respect, it is interesting that one Jordanian student interviewed by Buckner and Hodges (2015, p. 10) drew a distinction between types of cheating; if cheating is used to secure a higher score and get a seat at a prestigious university, he said it was unfair, but if used because there is no other recourse for a better life, it is fair. (The question of how one knows if there really is “no other recourse for a better life” was not addressed, however, and self-deception may play a role here, too.)

Findings from a Survey of Youth Attitudes in the UAE

To build knowledge about how Arab youth negotiate ethical decision-making, a survey-based study of youth attitudes was conducted in the UAE in 2014. The study had two specific goals. First, it aimed to build basic descriptive knowledge about ethical decision-making among Arab youth, especially the correlates of cheating behavior; as noted, a plethora of research examines ethical decision-making in Western contexts, but the topic is much neglected in work on the Middle East. Second, the study contained an experimental component to assess the implications of group composition for attitudes and behaviors, including ethical ones.

Students at two public high schools in the UAE, one boys’ school and one girls’ school, were surveyed ($n = 172$). The sample included Emirati students as well as Arab expatriate students, including those from Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Syria. The survey questions were designed to assess attitudes about ethical issues and dilemmas, such as taking time to help someone in a car accident, cheating on exams, copying homework, taking credit for another’s work, accepting bribes, showing favoritism in hiring based on family or other ties, or using government funds for personal purchases. For example, in one scenario, a government worker uses funds from the ministry’s budget to help pay the cost of a vacation for his family. Students are asked to judge how

¹¹ In one illuminating example, a Moroccan student is quoted as saying that when she was caught cheating, she was not punished because the exam proctor “knew I didn’t cheat, I was just helping” (Buckner & Hodges, 2015, p. 12).



severely the worker should be punished, and also whether they think the worker is sorry for his actions. Other questions on the survey assess attitudes about future government employment, the importance of job security, rights to government employment, and related attitudes.

As part of the survey, students were also given an opportunity to cheat on a short quiz with questions such as “How deep is the ocean, on average?” The students were told not to turn the paper over because the answers were listed and they would be using those answers to grade their own quizzes. Two of the “answers” were incorrect, and used as a means to determine if the student had turned the paper over and thus cheated.

Finally, the survey contained an experimental component allowing an assessment of the implications of group composition for attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, students were assigned to homogenous (all Emirati Arab) or heterogeneous groups (consisting of one Emirati Arab student and one or two expatriate Arab students). Given research on the positive effects of intergroup contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Phillips, 2014), the goal was to test the hypothesis that students in mixed groups, relative to those in homogenous ones, would evince the positive effects predicted by theory, including greater creativity and potentially more ethical decision-making. Thus, in groups, students carried out a series of positive group identity-building exercises. For example, they wrote their names on name-tags and introduced themselves to other members of their group. They also chatted with their team members to decide on a team name (such as the “Lions”), which they then added to their name tags. After these exercises, they tackled a group creativity challenge and then filled out the survey.

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 shows descriptive statistics on the sample of Arab youth, including gender, ethnicity or country of origin, income, and religiosity. Almost 70% of respondents classified themselves as middle class, and a similar percentage of respondents considered themselves “somewhat religious” or “religious.” Unsurprisingly, expatriate Arabs reported significantly lower incomes compared to Emiratis in the sample.

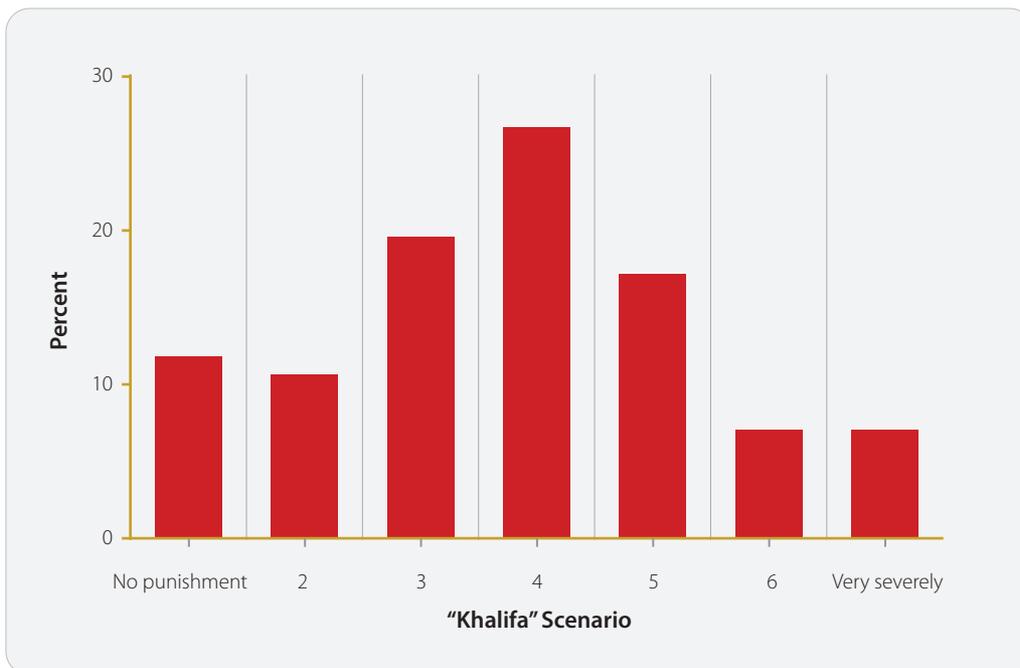
Subjects displayed a broad range of responses to different types of ethical decision-making. In one scenario, for example, students were asked to judge the severity of punishment for “Khalifa,” a student who allows others to copy his homework. Figure 2 shows the results in terms of the percent of students who selected each level of punishment. Almost 12% judged that Khalifa should not be punished at all, while others thought the punishment should be severe.

This level of variation suggests that social norms against allowing others to copy one’s work are not very consistent. In their qualitative and ethnographic study on cheating in Morocco and Jordan, Buckner and Hodges (2015) find that allowing other students to “copy” one’s work may be viewed as a form of “helping” others. It may also be that authority figures in students’ lives, such as teachers and family members, are not successfully communicating clear social norms against plagiarism and related transgressions to youth.

Figure 1: Demographics

Gender	Boys	91
	Girls	81
	Total N	172
Ethnicity	Emirati	62.8%
	Omani	1.7%
	Syrian	2.9%
	Yemeni	4.1%
	Jordanian	3.5%
	Sudanese	0.6%
	Egyptian	14.0%
	Other	10.5%
Income	Very or somewhat poor	5.3%
	Middle Class	69.8%
	Very or somewhat wealthy	23.8%
Religious	Religious	33.1%
	Somewhat religious	39.0%
	Not religious	24.4%

Figure 2: Student Responses: How Severely Should Khalifa be Punished?





Similar variation appeared in many of the other responses to ethical dilemmas, indicating that students hold varied opinions about what constitutes an ethical choice and what sorts of punishments, if any, might be appropriate for ethical lapses. Indeed, variation also appeared in the results concerning actual cheating behavior. In the sample, 48.8% of the students copied at least one incorrect answer from the back of the quiz, despite being told not to do so.

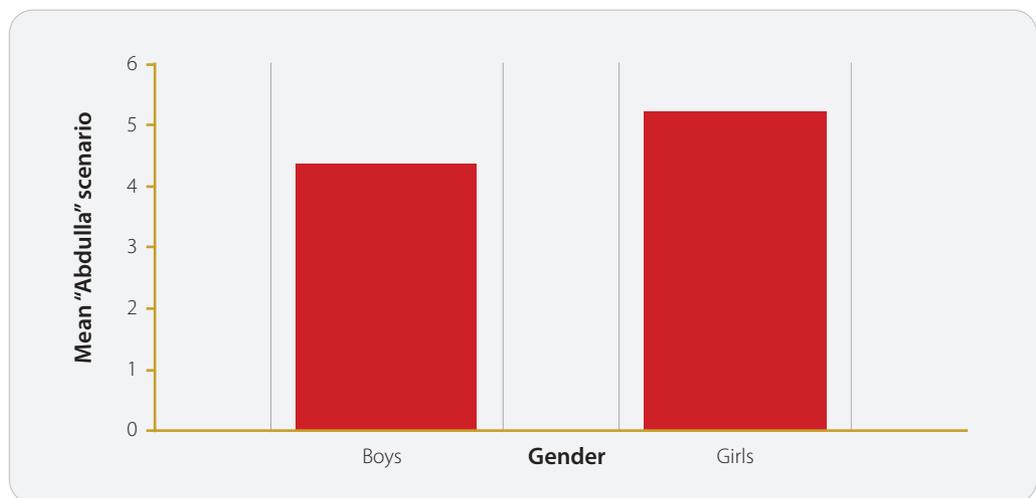
Correlates of Cheating

Variation in cheating behavior on the general knowledge quiz included as part of the survey allows for a fruitful investigation of the correlates of cheating. One of the most striking findings from this study involves gender differences, a result that aligns with other research on ethical decision-making. Young females are often found to be more ethical or moral and to cheat less than young males in academic settings (Anderman & Murdock, 2011).¹² In the sample, girls were significantly less likely to cheat on the general knowledge quiz. For boys, the rate of cheating on at least one question was 82%, compared to just 12% for girls. This gender difference, which was highly significant, was also remarkably robust; it held when controlling for gender, religiosity, income, parents' level of education, and whether the student was an Emirati citizen or an expatriate.

On several measures, the girls also tended toward harsher punishments for unethical acts, and they judged various ethically questionable actions as less justifiable compared to the ways in which boys judged the same actions. For example, one ethical dilemma involved "Abdulla":

Abdulla, a man who works in one of the federal ministries, has a son who really wants to study at a famous university in America—Harvard University. But his grades are too low. Abdulla believes his son deserves the chance to study at Harvard University. So he obtains help for his son with his application, and increases his grades a little bit. He also hires a British co-worker to write his son's cover letter for him.

Figure 3: Gender Differences in Ethical Decision-Making



¹² It is worth noting that the broader research on gender differences in ethical decision-making, beyond academic settings, is considerably more mixed. However, when gender differences are found, it is females who are found to be more sensitive to ethical or moral issues (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005).



When asked how severely Abdulla should be punished on a scale from 1 (no punishment) to 7 (severe punishment), the means for boys and girls differed significantly, with girls choosing, on average, harsher punishments than boys chose, as shown in Figure 3. Girls in the sample generally selected harsher punishments for ethical transgressors, even when controlling for income, country of origin, religiosity, and level of parents' education. For the scenario related to misusing government funds for a private family vacation, for instance, girls were also less sympathetic compared to boys, and the result was quite robust.

This gender difference was also clear in the degree to which students considered various acts "never justified," "always justified," or something in between. Girls in a sample, for example, judged "taking credit for someone else's accomplishments" as less justifiable than boys considered it. Girls also indicated that, in their view, there was less justification for "hiring a family member for a position in a business, when there is another applicant who is more qualified" and for "taking government benefits that you do not need." These correlations remained significant when controlling for income, religiosity, level of parents' education, and country of origin.

Gender differences appeared in other types of attitudes as well. For example, when asked to rate how important various goals are to them, girls rated "job security" significantly higher than did boys in the sample; the result again held up even when controlling for the full set of demographic variables. Girls also considered "The right of U.A.E. nationals to get a good government job" to be more important, on average, than boys considered it. These findings align well with findings from previous surveys of U.A.E. youth (Jones, under review). It is possible that U.A.E. females are more moral, but also more dependent on the state and particular about their employment.

There was also some evidence that those with higher incomes cheated more often, again when controlling for the full set of demographic variables. This is somewhat surprising, because prior work often finds that less well-off people are more likely to cheat and behave unethically, particularly due to a feeling of desperation or being "in a hole." In addition, those who ranked their *mothers* as having a higher level of education were also less likely to cheat, controlling for demographic differences. The same was not true of those who ranked their *fathers* as having a higher level of education. This may testify to the greater role of (especially educated) mothers in the lives and socialization of youth. Fathers are more likely to be absent from the home. They also work more than women in the region, and they are more likely than women to drop out of school and to suffer health problems. They may also have other wives and families due to polygamy being legal in the UAE, and this contributes to a widening "reverse gender divide" (Ridge, 2014). In addition, if women are more ethical than men, as some research suggests (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), then we might expect those with more educated and present mothers to be themselves more ethical.

Experimental Results

Another final component of this study explored the extent to which group composition might influence ethical decision-making. Because social norms often play a large role in decisions about ethical behavior, the composition of the individual's current reference group might independently affect behavior, at least to the extent that it is salient. A large body of research suggests that group identity and norms play a role in attitudes and behavior, even when the group identity is relatively



fragile or based on random assignment (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tajfel, 1982).

As discussed, subjects were assigned to small groups of two or three students, in which some groups were homogeneous in terms of citizenship or country of origin (all Emirati), and other groups included students from different countries (mixed Emirati/expatriate Arab). After positive group identity-building exercises, such as selecting a team name, the students tackled a creativity challenge as a group and then completed the survey described earlier. All experimental results below control for gender, in light of the findings reported earlier and the fact that there were more girls in mixed groups than boys in mixed groups.

The first and most striking finding was that subjects in mixed groups displayed greater creativity on the creativity challenge than did subjects in homogenous groups. The creativity challenge adapted Guilford's Alternative Uses Task (Guilford, 1967), a widely used measure of creativity in which subjects are asked to come up with different uses for a common object. For this activity, the common object was a paper clip, something that is familiar to all students in the UAE. Students brainstormed within their groups, and then each student wrote down the ideas in their own survey packets.¹³

The greater creativity of subjects in mixed or diverse groups is consistent with a growing literature on diverse working groups, which highlights their often greater creativity, work ethic, and deliberative skill relative to homogenous working groups (Phillips, 2014). For example, Loyd et al. (2013) conducted an innovative experiment in which subjects were asked to read a murder mystery and decide who they thought was the culprit. All were told they would be meeting with another subject who disagreed with their opinion and that they should prepare to convince their partner to come around to their side. Half were then told their partner was a member of their (American) political party (Democrat or Republican), while the other half were told their partner was a member of the other political party. The striking result was that subjects paired with a political out-group member worked harder in preparing for the meeting than did subjects paired with a political in-group member.

¹³ Each student's responses were scored individually by assessing the four characteristics typically used to score responses on the Alternative Uses Task: fluency, elaboration, flexibility, and originality. Fluency was simply the number of ideas submitted. For each idea, elaboration was scored based on the amount of detail the student offered. A simple idea received a score of 1 on elaboration, while responses with additional detail received a score of 2. Flexibility represents the student's ability to think in terms of different categories of uses. For example, if all the ideas submitted by a student involved dealing with papers, the student received a flexibility score of 1. A student who submitted two ideas involving papers, and one idea that presented a different use category, such as tying the hair, would receive a flexibility score of 2. The originality scores were determined by first analyzing all the ideas submitted by this sample, and determining the frequency of each idea. Any idea that was submitted by less than 5% of the sample received an originality score of 1. Ideas that were submitted by fewer than 1% of the students received an originality score of 2. In this sample, ideas such as conducting electricity and unlocking doors fell into the 5% range, while others, such as opening cans, knitting, or enhancing handwriting earned 2 points each because they were mentioned by such a small fraction of the sample. Note that each student received one score each for fluency and flexibility, because those measures assess aspects of the student's overall responses. In contrast, scores for elaboration and originality were awarded for each idea submitted, and then summed for each student. To obtain an overall score for creativity, the scores for fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality were added together.



The fact that Arab students in the sample displayed greater creativity in mixed groups is particularly striking given widespread calls in the Middle East to foster greater creativity and deliberative skill among youth in preparation for twenty-first century labor markets.¹⁴ Based on the data at hand, it is difficult to pinpoint the causal mechanisms at play. For example, members of mixed groups may have been more creative because of greater information exchange, dialogue, and deliberation at the group level. But it is also possible that Emirati students in mixed groups tried harder at the task than did Emiratis in homogenous groups. The literature on diverse working groups provides support for both possibilities. Indeed, Sommers (2006) found that six-person juries consisting of four white and two black jurors exchanged a wider range of information compared to all-white juries. Importantly, he found that such improvements in group performance occurred not only due to greater information exchange, but also because white jurors changed their behavior—in diverse conditions, they made fewer factual errors and raised more case facts during deliberation.

Other differences across homogenous and mixed groups were also found. For example, Emirati students in mixed groups displayed greater support for performance-based meritocracy than did Emirati students in homogenous groups.¹⁵ At the same time, they placed greater importance on “getting a good government job,” and were more likely to rank an Emirati candidate first over two expatriate Arab candidates for a job in a hypothetical scenario. Generally speaking, research on diverse working groups suggests that being in one can cause problems such as discomfort, a lack of trust, more concern about disrespect, and lower communication. Yet, as noted, it also points to greater creativity, innovation, and problem-solving. It is possible that being in a mixed group led to some degree of in-group bias among students in the sample, as predicted by social identity theory, yet also unleashed more positive forces in favor of meritocracy and hard work at the community level.

Indeed, the results also point to greater empathy and concern about community ethics in mixed groups, when we examine grouped data using averaged scores for dependent variables for each of the groups (again controlling for gender). One difference that appeared between average scores for students in homogeneous groups compared to those in mixed groups involved the “Abdulla” scenario. When students were asked to judge how sorry Abdulla was for his ethical lapses, the mixed group averages were higher, indicating that on balance, those groups thought Abdulla would feel more remorse. The mixed group composition may thus have enhanced feelings of empathy.

In addition, students in mixed groups judged that “taking credit for someone else’s achievement” and “littering in public places” were less justifiable actions compared to the ratings that students in the homogeneous groups gave to those actions. One plausible hypothesis to explain this finding is that students participating in a mixed group feel a heightened sense of self-awareness, and thus are more attuned to how others might evaluate their behavior. These experimental results are preliminary, but promising, especially in the sense that a factor such as group composition, which is something that can be controlled by teachers, at least in classroom settings, may have positive effects on creativity as well as ethical attitudes and behaviors.

¹⁴ See, for example, UNDP (2003) and Faour and Muasher (2011).

¹⁵ The question, adapted from the World Values Survey, was: “Imagine two women of the same age, doing the same job. One finds out that the other earns more a month than she does. The better paid employee, however, is quicker, more efficient, and more reliable at her job. Is the difference in pay fair, or unfair?” Emirati students in mixed groups considered the difference in pay to be fairer than did Emirati students in homogenous groups.



Conclusions and Future Research

The likelihood that patterns of ethical behavior that emerge among students in the lower grades may persist into adulthood makes it extremely important to study how youth are making ethical judgments and to better understand the factors that are associated with and can promote ethical behavior. The study presented in this paper offers a window into the thinking of Arab youth in the United Arab Emirates about ethical dilemmas, both in academic settings, in which they are currently embedded, and also in the larger context of the business world and society. The gender differences are striking, and the potential effects of group identity and group composition on ethical decision-making may also offer insights. More research is needed to uncover the underlying reasons that students make certain ethical choices and to identify strategies that will help educators address these important challenges.

Further research may also lead to important policy implications. For example, if the wide variation in attitudes toward ethical dilemmas found in this study is confirmed across additional samples of Arab youth in the UAE and beyond, a social norms-based approach to encouraging more ethical decision-making may be warranted. Such variation may reflect a lack of clear or consistent social norms against cheating, which educators and other authorities could work to change. However, in a context in which many students may feel that cheating is often “justified,” as Buckner and Hodges (2015) suggest is the case in the Middle East, the approach would need to take a more nuanced form than “cheating is wrong, kids,” and would occur, preferably, in concert with broader institutional change.

For instance, a better social norms-based approach may seek to internalize the idea that—while cheating may feel justified due to the perception of difficult and high-stakes exams, as well as to poverty, authoritarianism, and corruption more generally—the decision to cheat is still problematic. Specifically, it harms others, the self, and society—which are the victims of even “justified” cheating and which are all too often forgotten, as discussed earlier. It should perhaps be emphasized to students that, in cheating, they are chipping away at the integrity of their own social fabric; some scholars may see such youth in a positive light as “exercising agency,” but the negative effects over time of unethical or anti-normative behavior are undeniable. Thus, in academic settings, if a truthful alternative to cheating exists—such as studying more effectively or helping others do so or taking a year off from school—then it should be strongly preferred, and educators should make students aware of these alternatives to cheating, while working to remove any stigma associated with them.

Future research should also build on the remarkable gender differences in ethical decision-making found in this study, exploring their nature and the types of situations in which they are most likely to arise. These findings are consistent with broader research on a “reverse gender divide” in the Arab Gulf, with women increasingly outperforming men along a range of dimensions (Ridge, 2014). If Arab Gulf women are more ethical or seen as such, then there may be important policy implications in a variety of areas. For example, gender quotas in parliaments may lead to less corruption, and female teachers, administrators, interrogators, and judges may be more law-

abiding and resistant to bending the rules.

Gender may also be a fruitful basis for further research on group composition and ethical decision-making. For example, Emirati males may be especially motivated to exhibit ethical attitudes and behaviors in the presence of females, despite patriarchal norms in society; this is a hypothesis worth testing directly in a future study. If supported, mixed-gender educational and workplace environments may have beneficial effects on the development of a stronger moral compass among males. On group composition, another line of inquiry in the Gulf context would be to vary the expatriate country or region of origin, examining the effects on ethical decision-making of being in a mixed Emirati/Western group or a mixed Emirati/South Asian group. As shown above, the positive effects of intergroup contact may also include enhanced creativity, an outcome that should interest Arab Gulf governments seeking strategies that could encourage more vibrant, post-petroleum knowledge economies. Overall, research should aim to build a stronger base of knowledge about the nature of ethical decision-making, with emphasis on testing hypotheses about what conditions and interventions may work to strengthen the ethical foundations of Arab society.



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