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Investigating the Causal Relationship between Family Affective Atmospheres and Academic Self-Handicapping with Academic Dishonesty: The Mediating Role of Academic Self-Concept in Secondary School Students in Khorramabad

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Extended Abstract

Aim

The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered dishonesty in virtual education and student Q&A sessions, primarily due to the lack of external oversight and direct teacher supervision. Additionally, students often lack training in personal accountability and self-regulation. With educators diminished external authority, students are increasingly inclined toward dishonesty and cheating within the context of virtual education. Consequently, educators and parents must adapt to managing student behavior. In the absence of external control, internal motivation becomes the primary factor encouraging students to uphold honesty and responsibility in education, necessitating deliberate training by both parents and the educational system (Bilen & Matros, 2021).

The aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of academic self-concept in the relationship between family affective atmosphere, academic self-handicapping, and academic dishonesty among secondary school students in Khorramabad.

Methodology

This was a correlational, descriptive study utilizing path analysis. The statistical population comprised all male senior high school students in Khorramabad, Iran, during the 2021-2022 academic year (N = 4,394). A multi-stage cluster sampling method was employed to randomly select 5 high schools from the all-boys junior high schools in Khorramabad, followed by the random selection of 2 classes from each school. The link to the research questionnaires was then distributed to student groups on social networks with the collaboration of the teachers of these classes.

Data were collected using the Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire (ADQ) (Khamesan & Amiri, 2011), the Family Emotional Atmosphere Questionnaire (FEAQ) (Hillburn, 1964 cited by Haghghi et al., 2002), the Academic Self-Handicapping Scale (Berglas & Jones, 1978), and the Academic Self-Concept Questionnaire (Chen & Thompson, 2003). The path analysis method and SPSS-27 and AMOS-25 software were employed to evaluate the proposed model.

Findings

The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.374) indicated the need for primary corrections. Since the initial model was saturated, meaning all possible paths were drawn, it was not possible to calculate the chi-square and other fit indices. After removing one path (family emotional

atmosphere → academic dishonesty), the model became de-saturated, allowing the statistical software to estimate the chi-square and other indicators. With an RMSEA value of 0.374 in the final model, it was concluded that the model fit the data well.

The results revealed that the path from “family emotional atmosphere” to “academic dishonesty” ($\beta = -0.053$) was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) and was therefore removed. Conversely, the paths from “family emotional atmosphere” to “academic self-concept” ($\beta = 0.255$), “academic self-handicapping” to “academic dishonesty” ($\beta = 0.280$), “academic self-handicapping” to “academic self-concept” ($\beta = -0.467$), and “academic self-handicapping” to “academic self-concept” ($\beta = -0.428$) were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

The significance levels indicated that “academic self-concept” significantly mediated the indirect path from “family emotional atmosphere” to “academic dishonesty” ($\beta = -0.074$) and the indirect path from “academic self-handicapping” to “academic dishonesty” ($\beta = 0.106$) ($p = 0.05$).

Conclusion

The findings demonstrated that all direct paths, except for the path from “family emotional atmosphere” to “academic dishonesty,” were statistically significant. Furthermore, “academic self-concept” significantly mediated all paths to academic dishonesty.

The results also highlighted a significant positive relationship between “academic self-handicapping” and “academic dishonesty.” This suggests that academic self-handicapping increases academic dishonesty among students. Academic self-handicapping often results in poor academic performance, leading students to compensate for their shortcomings through dishonest behaviors, such as cheating. Students may intentionally procrastinate, avoid exerting effort, or remain inactive before exams, employing self-handicapping strategies to mitigate the consequences of potential failure (Afzali et al., 2020). In general, students who adopt self-handicapping strategies exhibit lower academic performance, which in turn prompts them to resort to cheating as a compensatory measure.

Additionally, the study revealed a significant negative relationship between “academic self-concept” and “academic dishonesty.” Therefore, as students' academic self-concept increases, it can be expected that their academic dishonesty will decrease. This finding is consistent with the results of studies by Barani et al. (2019), Onu et al. (2021), Baran and Johnson (2020), and Syahrina (2017). If a student feels that failures have damaged his self-concept” to a certain extent, he may believe that he does not have the necessary ability to succeed in that field and engage in illegitimate behaviors. Accordingly, the weaker and more undesirable self-concept” a person has in an academic field, the more likely he is to engage in academic dishonesty behaviors. As a result, the negative relationship between these two constructs is acceptable.

The study also showed that “academic self-concept” mediated the relationship between “family emotional atmosphere” and “academic self-handicapping” with “academic dishonesty.” No comparable studies were identified in the research literature to evaluate this specific finding. Regarding the direct path, the results showed no significant relationship between “family emotional atmosphere” and “academic dishonesty.” However, the indirect path indicated that a significant relationship between these variables emerges only when the family emotional atmosphere enhances students' self-concept, thereby reducing their academic dishonesty. It can thus be concluded that a healthy family emotional environment—characterized by honesty, intimacy, unity, consistency, gentleness, kindness, and love—reduces the likelihood of academic dishonesty among students (Barani et al., 2019).

Finally, the results confirmed a significant relationship between “academic self-handicapping” and “academic dishonesty.” The indirect path showed that academic self-handicapping negatively impacts students' academic self-concept, which in turn increases academic dishonesty. These findings validate the selection of the mediator variable in this study. A positive attitude toward cheating and cheating behaviors are often seen as outcomes of self-handicapping. Individuals who self-handicap may possess

diminished academic self-esteem and resort to dishonest methods, perceiving cheating as an acceptable strategy to achieve their goals.

This study's revised conceptual model shows good fit, offering a new scientific contribution to enhancing academic honesty among students at various educational levels. However, limitations such as self-reported measures and a sample restricted to secondary school students in Khorramabad may impact the generalizability of the results. The findings suggest that while family emotional atmosphere can reduce unethical behaviors, it is not sufficient on its own; educational counselors must also focus on improving academic self-concept to effectively address academic dishonesty.

Keywords: Academic Dishonesty, Academic Self-Concept, Academic Self-Handicapping, Family Affective Atmospheres.

Ethical Considerations

The participants' information was treated with confidentiality, and the research findings were published in a generalized and anonymous manner.

The ethics code for this research is: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1401.048.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this article.

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