
EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHYSIOLOGICAL, AND SOCIO-ACADEMIC REVIEW OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

***Shravya N.**

Milagres College, Hampankatta, Mangalore – 575001.

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***Corresponding Author: Shravya N.**

Milagres College, Hampankatta, Mangalore – 575001.

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ABSTRACT

Examination malpractice in higher education remains a persistent and global concern that undermines academic integrity, educational quality, and student competence. This review synthesizes existing research on the psychological, physiological, and socio-academic factors influencing student behavior during examinations. Psychological stressors such as test anxiety, fear of failure, and moral disengagement have been linked to increased likelihood of malpractice, with evidence showing that students under significant stress may adopt unethical coping strategies. Physiological responses including stress-related fatigue and cognitive overload reduce self-regulation and ethical decision-making. Socio-academic pressures—peer norms, competitive grading, and institutional culture—further shape student perceptions of cheating as a viable strategy. Interdisciplinary analysis reveals that malpractice is a behavioral outcome of interacting internal and external stressors rather than simple ethical failure. The review concludes by underscoring the need for holistic interventions targeting student well-being, ethical education, and supportive academic environments to uphold integrity in higher education.

KEYWORDS: Examination Malpractice; Academic Dishonesty; Higher Education; Student Behavior; Test Anxiety; Socio-Academic Factors; Moral Disengagement.

INTRODUCTION

Examination malpractice, commonly treated as a subset of academic dishonesty, refers to unauthorized methods used by students to gain an unfair advantage during assessments.

These behaviors include answer copying, use of prohibited materials, collaboration without permission, and other forms of cheating. They have been documented across diverse higher education contexts and raise serious concerns about the validity and fairness of academic evaluations.

The significance of this issue lies in its multifaceted impact: it erodes trust in academic credentials, distorts learning outcomes, and jeopardizes students' future professional competence. Moreover, malpractice harms the reputation of institutions and undermines their ability to assess genuine learning. Prior studies indicate that academic dishonesty is driven by a combination of psychological pressures, socio-academic influences, and environmental factors rather than moral inadequacy alone.

Psychological contributors include test anxiety and fear of failure, which disrupt self-confidence and problem-solving during examinations. Research also highlights the role of moral disengagement, by which students justify unethical behaviors to reduce cognitive dissonance. Physiological reactions to stress, such as fatigue and diminished attention, further impair ethical decision-making. Socio-academic pressures like peer influence, institutional competition, and performance expectations reinforce malpractice behaviors. These combined influences justify an interdisciplinary review to inform effective interventions.

Methodology

This review adopts a systematic narrative approach to synthesize existing research on examination malpractice. No primary data were collected. Instead, peer-reviewed articles, empirical findings, and theoretical contributions were sourced from academic databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, SpringerLink, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. Keywords used in the literature search included examination malpractice, academic dishonesty, test anxiety, academic stress, cheating behavior, and higher education assessment. Only English-language, peer-reviewed studies were included to ensure academic credibility. Relevant literature was screened for relevance to psychological, physiological, and socio-academic factors and organized thematically to address the core objectives of the review.

Conceptual Framework

This review is informed by three interconnected theoretical perspectives:

1. Psychological Theories:

Test Anxiety Theory explains how high examination stress undermines cognitive performance and encourages maladaptive coping such as cheating.

Moral Disengagement Theory describes how students rationalize unethical actions to reduce guilt and protect self-image.

2. Physiological Stress Theory:

Stress reactions to high-stakes evaluations (e.g., elevated cortisol and cognitive strain) compromise attention and self-control, lowering resistance to unethical behaviors.

3. Socio-Academic Models:

Social Learning suggests students imitate peer behaviors they observe as successful or unpunished.

Institutional Culture Models argue that assessment systems prioritizing grades over mastery create pressures that incentivize cheating.

These theories collectively illustrate that examination malpractice results from the interplay of internal psychological states, physiological stress responses, and external socio-academic pressures.

Review of Literature

1. Psychological Factors

Scholars consistently identify psychological stressors as key predictors of examination malpractice. Test anxiety, defined as worry and negative emotional reactions during assessment, correlates with increased cheating behaviors. Examinations perceived as threats to self-esteem or future opportunities trigger fear of failure, which, in turn, motivates students to seek unethical coping strategies. Difficult tests, competitive grading, and high expectations intensify anxiety and perceptions of unfairness, which researchers have linked to higher instances of cheating and self-reported intentions to cheat.

Moral disengagement also plays a significant role. Students rationalize dishonest behavior by minimizing its seriousness, diffusing responsibility, or adopting beliefs that “everybody does it,” enabling them to cheat without significant self-blame. Research on academic moral disengagement finds that these cognitive mechanisms increase the likelihood of engaging in unethical academic conduct.

2. Physiological Factors

Physiological stress responses to examination pressure — including stress hormones, fatigue, and mental exhaustion — are less directly studied but still relevant. High levels of stress impair working memory and cognitive control, weakening students' ability to regulate impulses and make ethical decisions. Studies from related research areas demonstrate that stress and fatigue reduce self-control and exacerbate the temptation to adopt shortcuts, though direct causal studies linking physiological stress markers to cheating remain limited.

3. Socio-Academic Factors

Socio-academic influences broadly shape how students interpret and respond to assessment environments. Peer norms significantly affect students' ethical choices — when cheating is perceived as common or socially acceptable within a cohort, individuals are more likely to conform. In competitive institutions where grades influence opportunities like scholarships or placements, pressure to outperform peers intensifies the incentive to cheat. Institutional cultures that emphasize outcomes over learning paired with inconsistent enforcement of integrity policies further normalize malpractice behaviors.

DISCUSSION

The literature reveals that examination malpractice cannot be attributed to a single cause but emerges from the interaction of psychological distress, stress-related physiological responses, and socio-academic pressures. Psychological variables such as test anxiety and fear of failure heighten vulnerability to unethical decisions when students perceive examinations as threats. Moral disengagement rationalizes such behaviors, further lowering inhibitions against cheating.

Physiological stressors, although less studied, contribute by impairing cognitive functions necessary for self-regulation and ethical decision-making. Socio-academic pressures like peer influence and competitive academic culture reinforce the perception that malpractice may be an effective strategy for success, especially in environments with weak enforcement mechanisms.

Implications of the Study

The interdisciplinary understanding gained from this review suggests that addressing examination malpractice requires more than punitive measures. Institutions must consider interventions that:

Reduce psychological stress through counseling, academic support, and stress management programs.

Promote physiological well-being by encouraging balanced study routines and reducing assessment overload.

Strengthen socio-academic environments by fostering academic integrity cultures through honor codes, consistent enforcement, and ethical education.

Limitations of the Review

1. Relies entirely on secondary data without direct empirical evidence.
2. Focuses solely on English-language studies, which may limit cultural diversity.
3. Physiological links to malpractice are inferred due to limited direct research.
4. Does not extensively differentiate between specific disciplines or cultural education systems.
5. Narrative synthesis may be subject to selection bias without meta-analytic statistical validation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should:

Employ mixed-methods research to empirically validate physiological stress links to malpractice.

Explore disciplinary and cultural variations in cheating behaviors.

Test intervention models that integrate psychological and socio-academic support mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Examination malpractice in higher education arises from a dynamic interplay between psychological anxiety, physiological stress responses, and socio-academic pressures. Recognizing it as a behavioral response rather than a moral defect opens pathways for holistic preventive strategies that prioritize student well-being and ethical education.

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