

## The Role of Moral Attitude, Goal Commitment, and Cheating Tendency in Academic Achievement

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the effects of cheating tendency, academic goal commitment, and moral attitude toward cheating on academic achievements of teacher candidates. 486 teacher candidates were recruited. The moral attitude toward cheating was measured with the Moral Attitude subscale of the Scale for Attitude Towards Cheating. The cheating tendency was measured with the Cheating subscale of the Academic Dishonesty Scale. The academic goal commitment was measured with the KUT scale. Academic achievement was measured with the GPA. The data were analyzed with the independent t-test, Pearson Correlation test, and path analysis. While moral attitude positively and directly affected academic goal commitment, it negatively and directly influenced cheating tendency negatively. Academic goal commitment predicted cheating tendency negatively and GPA positively. The cheating tendency had a negative impact on GPA. Academic goal commitment positively affected GPA via cheating tendency; however, the direct effect of academic goal commitment on GPA was higher than the indirect effect. Moral attitude negatively predicted cheating tendency via academic goal commitment while it affected GPA positively. Moral attitude positively predicted GPA via cheating tendency. Consequently, cheating tendency affected academic achievement negatively. Moral attitude toward cheating and the high level of academic goal commitment reduced cheating tendency and increased academic achievement.

**Keywords:** Moral, cheating, academic dishonesty

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## Introduction

Students can apply to various strategies such as studying daily, creating study groups, reading the course content, and keeping note cards (Dapremont, 2014) to achieve academic success. Some researches stated that students believe that they can be successful and that this belief is a source of motivation for success (Coleman, 2008; Love, 2010). A person's self-belief is one of the factors that make him / her successful, which also coincides with the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1986). However, individuals can adopt a variety of study approaches that have been conceptualized as deep (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Juklová et al., 2015) or strategic (Ramsden, 1988; Entwistle & Waterson, 1958) study approach to succeed in academic tasks such as assignments, exams, and lectures. An individual's approach to learning, and therefore studying, can also affect the processes and perceptions of academic achievement (Yıldız, Şenel ve Can, 2018). Among these approaches, unlike academic students, the approach that is conceptualized as a surface approach and that is related to students' memorization, and fear of loss (Biggs, 1999; Juklová et al., 2015) may encourage students to choose non-moral paths for success.

The students who have a surface approach may be more likely to exhibit a cheating tendency to achieve academic tasks, pass exams, and get good grades. However, this approach of students may lead to failure rather than success. There is a possibility to fail for the students who turn to non-moral paths to achieve academic success. Although some researchers found no significant relationship between academic achievement and academic dishonesty tendencies (Robinson et al., 2004; Chase, 2010; Bourassa, 2011; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2005) and some revealed negative relationships (Zhang, Yin & Zheng, 2017; Cochran, 2017; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Ömür, Aydın & Argon, 2014), the role of moral attitudes and being committed to academic goals should be examined in detail. Because their personal beliefs can be effective in achieving academic achievement, their commitment to this goal, and their resistance to obstacles can play a key role in academic achievement. Therefore, commitment to academic goals can increase the academic success of the individual, lead to a moral approach by moving away from the tendency to cheat.

Goals are intentions that are specified in detail (Orlich et al., 2010). The goals of the students are described as multivariate profiles that can be defined as the different criteria profile that the learner determines for a learning task (Pieschl, Stahl & Bromme, 2013). Learning goals are determined to focus on development. Individuals make efforts to learn and develop their abilities without considering if they are compared with others or according to some particular standards. On the other hand, performance goals focus on assessing individuals by comparing them with predetermined standards or the capabilities of others (Arends & Kilcher, 2010).

Locke et al. (1981) emphasized that goal commitment referred to a commitment to achieve a goal, while Naylor and Ilgen (1984) stressed that goal commitment is focused on the willingness of a

problem solver to continue the effort and achieve a difficult goal over time. Klein et al. (1999) stated that the main outcome of the goal commitment was to provide the relationship between task difficulty and performance. Klein and Wright (1994) point out the importance of goal commitment by emphasizing that individuals who are committed to their goals are more likely to have higher performance than others when their task is equally challenging.

Since goal commitment is directly associated with academic achievement (Johnson, 2007; Girrardi, 2011; Lord, Bjerregaard & Hartman, 2013), determining the goals of the individuals correctly, and showing their commitment to these goals can remove them from the tendency to cheat. This study aims to examine the effect of moral attitude, goal commitment, and the cheating tendency on academic achievement, to test whether the cheating tendency will bring success, and the role of goal commitment and moral attitude in this path.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study was designed to provide evidence of the role of moral attitude, goal commitment, and cheating tendency on academic achievement. A theoretical model was hypothesized to reveal the relationships.

### Participants

The study group included the final year students in teaching programs of elementary school (n=48), German language teaching (n=19), preschool (n=39), social sciences, (n=27), psychological counseling and guidance (n=47), elementary mathematics (n=27), Turkish language (n=38), Science (n=47), English language (n=66), physical education and sports (n=128). Of the participants, 61.5% were females (n=299), 38.5% were males (n=187).

### Measurements

#### Attitudes Towards Cheating

The Moral Attitude subscale of Attitudes Towards Cheating, developed by Ay & Çakmak (2015), was used to determine the moral attitudes of the students. The scale has 16 items, while the moral attitude subscale includes seven items that are rated between 1 (strongly disagree) – 5 (strongly agree). They found the internal consistency coefficient as 0.85. For this study, the results of the CFA and alpha coefficient were displayed in table 1.

**Table 1.** CFA results and Alpha Coefficient for Moral Attitudes Towards Cheating

Subscale		Cronbach's Alpha							
Moral Attitude		.94							
CFA Fit Indexes	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
	20.46	11	1.86	.98	.97	.99	.99	.009	.04

### Cheating Tendency

The cheating subscale of the Academic Dishonesty Tendency Scale, which was developed by Eminoğlu & Nartgün (2009) to measure the academic dishonesty tendencies of individuals, was used in this study to measure university students' cheating tendencies. The scale includes 22 items, while cheating tendency has five items that are rated between 1 (strongly disagree) – 5 (strongly agree). The alpha coefficient for the cheating tendency was 0.71 in the original study. For this study, the results of the CFA and alpha coefficient were displayed in table 2.

**Table 2.** CFA results and Alpha Coefficient for Cheating Tendency

Subscale		Cronbach's Alpha							
Cheating Tendency		.82							
CFA Fit Indexes	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
	49.45	16	3.09	.97	.94	.96	.98	.05	.06

### Goal Commitment

For the measurement of the commitment to academic goals, KUT target-free, one-dimensional, commitment scale, developed by Klein et al. (2014) was used. Şenel, Yıldız, & Klein (2019) adapted the scale in Turkish. The scale has 4 items that are rated between 1 (not at all) and 5 (extremely). The most important feature of the scale is being a one-dimensional and target-free. After specifying the target, the scale can measure the commitment (how committed are you to [your/the/this] [target]?). The scale designed as “how committed are you to academic goals?” The results of CFA and alpha coefficient were displayed in table 2.

**Table 3.** CFA results and Alpha Coefficient for Goal Commitment

Subscale		Cronbach's Alpha							
Goal Commitment		.94							
CFA Fit Indexes	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
	0.8	1	0.87	.99	.99	1.0	1.0	.00	.00

### Academic Achievement

The academic achievement levels were determined with GPA. GPA was grouped between 0-2.00, 2.01-2.50, 2.51-3.00, 3.01-3.50 ve 3.51-4.00.

### Data Collection

The authors collected the data during the 2017 - 2018 academic year with the participation of teacher candidates. The students were asked whether they wanted to participate in the research voluntarily, and the purpose of the research was explained to the volunteers, and the form was introduced.

### Analysis

The demographic variables of the participants were analyzed by percentage and frequency. While the differences between the genders were determined by using the independent t-test, the relationship between the variables was calculated with the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Primary level confirmatory factor analysis was performed in the AMOS program to determine whether the scales were suitable for path analysis. To calculate the fit indices of the hypothesized model, path analysis was performed in the AMOS program, the maximum likelihood method was used, and the direct and indirect effects of the variables were calculated.

### Results

**Table 4.** Gender differences regarding GPA, Moral Attitude, Cheating Tendency, Goal Commitment

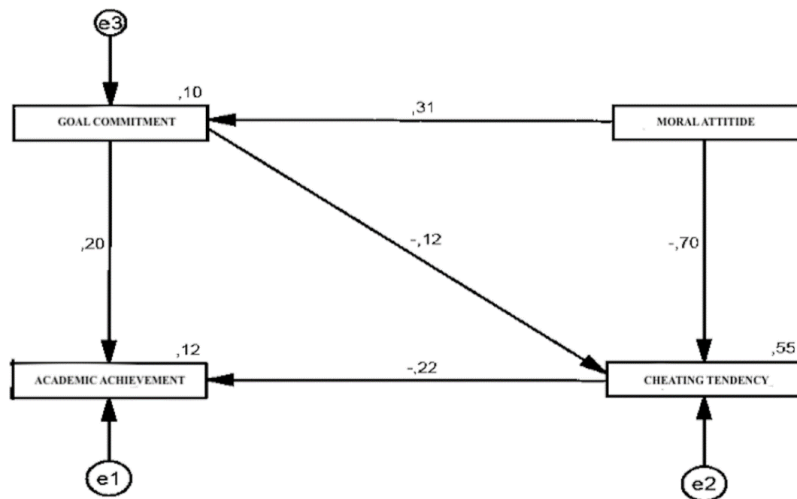
Variables	Female		Male		T	p
	n	X±σ	n	X±σ		
Moral Attitude	299	3.69±1.15	187	3.57±1.30	1.087	.278
Cheating Tendency	299	2.19±.90	187	2.49±.96	-3.513	.000**
Goal Commitment	299	3.93±.87	187	3.66±1.06	2.952	.003**
GPA	299	3.34±.88	187	2.77±.81	7.139	.000**

There were gender differences regarding cheating tendency ( $t=-3.513$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), goal commitment ( $t=-2.952$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and GPA ( $t=7.139$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). No significant difference was found between genders in cheating tendency ( $p>0.05$ ). Females reported lower cheating tendencies and higher commitment to academic goals and GPA than males.

**Table 5.** Mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis values, and correlation coefficients

	n	X±σ	Skewness	Kurtosis
GPA	486	3.12±0.90	.06	-.45
Moral Attitude	486	3.64±1.21	-.63	-.67
Cheating Tendency	486	2.30±0.93	.46	-.34
Goal Commitment	486	3.83±0.96	-.77	.31
	1	2	3	4
GPA	1			
Moral Attitude	.178**	1		
Cheating Tendency	-.284**	-.735**	1	
Goal Commitment	.271**	.314**	-.337**	1

Commitment to academic goals positively correlated with GPA ( $r=0.271$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and moral attitude ( $r=0.314$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) while negatively correlated with cheating tendency ( $r=-0.337$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Moral attitude positively correlated with GPA ( $r=0.178$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) while negatively correlated with cheating tendency ( $r=-0.735$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).



**Figure 1.** The theoretical model displaying the path between goal commitment, cheating tendency, moral attitude, and GPA

Figure 1 shows the path between goal commitment, cheating tendency, moral attitude, and GPA. There are nine paths, including five direct and four indirect effects hypothesized in the model. Path 1 is the direct prediction of moral attitudes to goal commitment. The path 2 is between goal commitment and GPA, while path 3 is between moral attitude and cheating tendency. Path 4 represents the prediction of goal commitment to cheating tendency. Path 5, which is the last direct effect, is between cheating tendency and GPA. The path 6 is the indirect effect of moral attitude on GPA via goal commitment. In path 7, it is hypothesized that moral attitude indirectly predicts cheating tendency via goal commitment. Path 8 shows the indirect effect of moral attitude on GPA through goal commitment and cheating tendency. Path 9 displays the indirect effect of goal commitment on GPA via cheating tendency. Path 10 is the indirect effect of a moral attitude on GPA via cheating tendency.

**Table 6.** The estimated parameters, direct and indirect effects

	Mediator/ moderator		Estimate	Standard Error	C.R.	P	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	
MA (P1)	-	GC	.314	.034	7.28	*	.314	-	
GC (P2)	-	GPA	.198	.042	4,35	*	.198	-	
MA (P3)	-	CT	-.698	.025	- 21,82	*	-.698	-	
GC (P4)	-	CT	-.118	.031	-3,68	*	-.118	-	
CT (P5)	-	GPA	-.217	.044	-4,79	*	-.217	-	
MA (P6)	GC	GPA	-	-	-	*	-	.062	
MA (P7)	GC	CT	-	-	-	*	-	-.037	
MA (P8)	GC - CT	GPA	-	-	-	*	-	.008	
GC (P9)	CT	GPA	-	-	-	*	-	.026	
MA (P10)	CT	GPA	-	-	-	*	-	.151	
<b>Fit Indices</b>									
<b>Model</b>	<b>x<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>df</b>	<b>x<sup>2</sup>/df</b>	<b>GFI</b>	<b>AGFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>	<b>CFI</b>	<b>SRMR</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>
	2.36	1	2.36	.99	.97	.98	.99	.01	.05

The MA directly predicted the GC at the level of 0.31% (path 1). GC affected the GPA directly at approximately 0.19% (path 2). MA had an impact on cheating tendency at the level of -0.69% (path 3). GC directly predicted CT at the level of -0.18% (path 4), while CT affected GPA directly by approximately -0.21% (path 5). MA indirectly affected GPA and CT via GC (path six and path 7), while MA indirectly predicted GPA via both GC and CT (path 8). GC had an indirect impact on GPA via CT (path 9), while MA indirectly predicted GPA via CT (path 10). The fit indices revealed that the hypothesized model had perfect fit ( $\chi^2=2.36$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $\chi^2/df=2.36$ , GFI=.99, AGFI=.97, TLI=.98, CFI=.99, SRMR=.01, RMSEA=.05).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aims to examine the effect of moral attitude, goal commitment, and the cheating tendency on academic achievement, to test whether the cheating tendency will bring success, and the role of goal commitment and moral attitude in this path. The results revealed that moral attitude increased goal commitment, which directly and positively predicted GPA. Additionally, the moral attitude towards cheating indirectly and positively predicted GPA. Contrarily, cheating tendency decreased GPA. There was a positive correlation between moral attitude and GPA (Table 5), and cheating tendency decreased this relationship level in the model (Table 6). When the indirect effect of MA on GPA (via cheating tendency) was examined, the positive effect of moral attitudes proceeded. Thus, it can be inferred that a moral attitude reduces the negative impact of cheating tendency on GPA. In the model, it is seen that goal commitment decreases the cheating tendency. Besides, cheating tendency reduced the relationship between goal commitment and GPA. It was found that moral attitude decreases the level of cheating tendency through goal commitment. Moral attitude directly decreased the cheating tendency; however, it is a surprising finding that goal commitment negatively affected the prediction level of moral attitudes on the cheating tendency. Some researchers state that there are no significant associations between GPA and cheating (or academic dishonesty) (Robinson et al., 2004; Chase, 2010; Bourassa, 2011; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2005; Genereux & McLeod, 1995) while some found significant relations between these variables. For example, Zhang (2017) revealed that the students having lower grades were more prone to cheating, while Cochran (2017) found a negative correlation between GPA and academic dishonesty. McCabe & Trevino (1997) found that GPA had a negative impact on academic dishonesty. Ömür, Aydın & Argon (2014) stated that cheating tendency increased if GPA decreased.

Having a surface learning approach can be the reason for cheating. It is revealed that the surface learning approach can be detrimental for students' moral development (Fleming, 1996; Ponemon, 1990); however, Guo (2011) reported that there was no relationship between plagiarism and surface approach.

Consequently, moral attitude and goal commitment independently increase academic achievement while cheating tendency negatively affected academic success. Increasing the commitment levels of the individuals having a moral attitude toward cheating on academic goals may cause an increment in cheating tendency. The student's goal perception, task difficulty, and being over motivated may lead students to cheat for academic success. It is possible to infer that cheating tendency brings failure. Correspondingly, it can be said that the teacher candidates having a moral attitude, studying for the academic tasks and goals, and being committed to these goals will reach academic success.

Every part of the educational institution has an important role in determining academic goals and adopting a moral attitude. Research shows that if higher education institutions such as faculties, schools, and similar elements include and provide guidance, students are more likely to achieve academic success (Dapremont, 2011; Etowa, Foster, et al., 2005; Gardner, 2005; Higgins, 2005; Wong et al., 2008)

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