TOPICS IN THIS ISSUE:

13.1: Honor pledges and self-image

KEY QUOTATION (from the editor):

“Honor pledges emphasize the ‘honest, honorable’ self-image. They support ‘ego-motivation’ at the precise moment when temptation to cheat is greatest.

13.1 ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Honor pledges and self-image

We wrote in LPR 08.26 and TPR 12.26 about renewed interest in asking students to write or sign academic integrity honor or honesty pledges. New studies support the effectiveness of such pledges and highlight the importance of pledge placement and wording.

[The Enron financial scandal . . . prompted Ariely to explore the value placed on honesty . . .] He and his colleagues devised studies that would tempt people to cheat. Student subjects, for example, would be paid for each correct answer on a multiple-choice test. In some cases, they transferred their answers to a sheet that had the correct answers pre-marked—meaning they could, if provoked into dishonesty, readily cover up their mistakes. In different versions of the experiment, the test-taking students were asked to sign a statement, just at the moment of temptation, testifying that the exercise fell under an honor system. Alternatively, they were asked first to write down [what they could remember of] the Ten Commandments.

Those gestures had a significant impact on his subjects' behavior. Once they began thinking about honesty through firm reminders, they stopped cheating completely. 'In other words, when we are removed from any benchmarks of ethical thought, we tend to stray into dishonesty,' Ariely observes in the book. 'But if we are reminded of morality at the moment we are tempted, then we are much more likely to be honest.'

In his latest book (The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone---Especially Ourselves, 2012) Professor Ariely proposed a theoretical foundation for why timely ethical reminders work:

In a nutshell, [my] central thesis is that our behavior is driven by two opposing motivations. On one hand, we want to view ourselves as honest, honorable people. We want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and feel good about ourselves (psychologists call this ego motivation). On the other hand, we want to benefit from cheating . . . Clearly these two motivations are in conflict (p. 27).

Honor pledges emphasize the “honest, honorable” self-image. They support “ego-motivation” at the precise moment when temptation to cheat is greatest.

A new study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology by Benoît Monin (Stanford University), Christopher Bryan (UC San Diego) and Gabrielle Adams (London Business School) suggests that pledge language highlighting the signer’s ethical self-image enhances effectiveness. The study abstract states:

In 3 experiments using 2 different paradigms, people were less likely to cheat for personal gain when a subtle change in phrasing framed such behavior as diagnostic of an undesirable identity. Participants were given the opportunity to claim money they were not entitled to at the experimenters' expense; instructions referred to cheating with either language that was designed to highlight the implications of cheating for the actor's identity (e.g., "Please don't be a cheater") or language that focused on the action (e.g., "Please don't cheat"). Participants in the "cheating" condition claimed significantly more money than did participants in the "cheater" condition, who showed no evidence of having cheated at all. This difference occurred both in a face-to-face interaction (Experiment 1) and in a private online setting (Experiments 2 and 3). These results demonstrate the power of a subtle
linguistic difference to prevent even private unethical behavior by invoking people's desire to maintain a self-image as good and honest."

What are the practical implications for educators?

[1] Honor pledges can influence behavior in traditional or online classrooms (see language from the abstract in italics), and

[2] Pledges work best when they invoke students’ “desire to maintain a self-image as good and honest.”

Here’s language we’ve begun using at academicintegrityseminar.org:

"I do honest work. The words in this exercise will be mine, unless other sources are clearly identified."

Type your name here ____________________________

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


[b] Professor Dan Ariely's Predictably Irrational website

[c] An article by Dan Ariely and MIT postdoctoral associate Nina Mazar on "Dishonesty in Everyday Life and Its Policy Implications":

"[A] psychological approach for reducing dishonesty could be based on increasing the long-term effectiveness of internal rewards (education), increasing the short-term effectiveness of internal rewards (contextual cues), or eliminating the possibility of dishonest acts when the cause could be attributed to self-deception. When the role of internal rewards is better understood, both preventions and punishments of dishonesty can be made more effective and efficient."

[d] Overview of the University of Maryland Honor Pledge

[e] Former Senator Bill Bradley on the Princeton Honor Code

"He also reminded us . . . that an important part of having integrity is maintaining our idealism."

[f] The Declaration of Geneva (Physician pledge)
"Declaration of Geneva was adopted by the General Assembly of the World Medical Association at Geneva in 1948 and amended in 1968, 1984, 1994, 2005 and 2006. It is a declaration of physicians' dedication to the humanitarian goals of medicine, a declaration that was especially important in view of the medical crimes which had just been committed in Nazi Germany. The Declaration of Geneva was intended as a revision of the Oath of Hippocrates to a formulation of that oath's moral truths that could be comprehended and acknowledged modernly."