




Comparison of the Effectiveness of Cognitive Moral Education and Moral Action Education on the Academic Identity of Female Students with a Positive Attitude Toward Academic Cheating

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Fallahpour, M., Hassanzadeh, R., & Emadian, S. O. (2024). Comparison of the Effectiveness of Cognitive Moral Education and Moral Action Education on the Academic Identity of Female Students with a Positive Attitude Toward Academic Cheating. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 6(4), 163-170.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.6.4.19>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Considering the importance of fostering honesty as one of the key objectives of the educational system and identifying factors that influence students' engagement in academic cheating, as well as to enhance students' academic identity, it is essential to provide education in this regard.

Methods and Materials: This research utilized a quasi-experimental method with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design including a control group. The statistical population of this study included all second-year high school female students in Sari city during the academic year 2021-2022. A sample size of 45 students was calculated using multi-stage cluster sampling. Through random assignment, 15 students were allocated to experimental group A (related to cognitive moral education), 15 students to experimental group B (related to moral action education), and 15 students to the control group. The Vaz and Isaacson (2008) Academic Identity Questionnaire was used. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc test) with SPSS software version 24.

Findings: Changes from pre-test to post-test in successful, late, and follower identity showed an increase, whereas in confused academic identity there was a decrease. Additionally, a significant difference was observed in the follow-up stage compared to the pre-test. There is no difference between the effectiveness of cognitive moral education and moral action education on the academic identity of female students with a positive attitude toward academic cheating.

Conclusion: Cognitive and moral action education impacted the academic identity of female students with a positive attitude toward academic cheating, leading to a high level of competence, capability, and self-worth among students.

Keywords: Cognitive Moral Education, Moral Action Education, Academic Identity, Academic Cheating.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of new technologies over the past forty years, academic cheating has increased to such an extent that it has now become a widespread issue. Today, cheating is considered a pervasive phenomenon that contradicts moral values and societal norms (Sharifinia et al., 2020). Cheating is recognized as an unethical activity in the academic environment for learning and leads to a form of deviant behavior that violates social norms. A wide range of factors influence academic cheating among students (Moeck, 2002).

One of the factors that seems to have the most significance and relevance in understanding students' performance and motivation in the educational environment is academic identity. Academic identity reflects various types of competence, autonomy, purposefulness, self-efficacy beliefs, and the experience of common emotions among adolescents with their classmates and teachers in classrooms, characterized by how they perform in academic fields (Blasi, 1993; YahyazadehJeloudar et al., 2018). Graham and Anderson (2008) consider academic identity the most important factor in academic performance and achievement motivation. Academic identity is the process of each individual's conscious response to their academic situation, such as whether they should study or not, what path to take, and thereby seeking their academic identity (Sadigh, 2020). According to Vaz and Isaacson (2008), academic identity is a specific part of "self-identity" and a distinct aspect of identity development (YahyazadehJeloudar et al., 2018). Considering the academic domain as one of the important areas of life, they have introduced the four statuses of academic identity as successful academic identity, late academic identity, confused academic identity, and early academic identity. Confused academic identity refers to a lack of exploration and commitment often accompanied by procrastination in decisions related to academic values. Early academic identity indicates the student's commitment to the values and ideals taken from significant individuals such as parents, teachers, and classmates. Late academic identity refers to the student's doubts in reaching conclusions about academic values and goals. Successful academic identity occurs when a student becomes committed to academic values after a period of exploration (Sadigh, 2020; YahyazadehJeloudar et al., 2018).

Pramonagama's (2017) research results showed a negative and inverse relationship between academic identity

and moral anomalies. Moreover, therapists consider irresponsible behavior the main cause of students' academic problems and regard identity as a significant factor in achieving appropriate responsibility (Sadigh, 2020). Logically, it seems that increasing responsibility reduces academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty is a common unethical behavior in educational settings. Cheating, as a symbol of academic dishonesty among students at various educational levels from elementary to university, regardless of geographical and economic context, and in both public and private educational centers, is common. This behavior occurs individually, in groups, with the help of parents, and sometimes even with the cooperation of teachers and school officials (Moeck, 2002).

Considering the importance of fostering honesty as one of the main objectives of the educational system and identifying factors that influence students' engagement in academic cheating, as well as to enhance students' academic identity, it is essential to provide education in this regard. One of the educational approaches that can be effective in this context is cognitive moral education. Cognitive moral education is a term used to expand students' thinking about a number of moral concepts and challenge their moral assumptions and beliefs (Jafari et al., 2016; Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020). Another approach used for this purpose is moral action education based on Blasi's theory. Since the root and nature of many social anomalies in adolescents and young adults stem from the underdevelopment of their moral levels, this issue can, in turn, spread many social, familial, and cultural problems in society (Jafari et al., 2016).

This issue seems to be clearly related to the lack or reduction of adherence to moral standards in our society, causing concern among educational experts and social psychologists. On the other hand, the limited research conducted in this area does not suffice and clearly indicates a research gap in this field. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: Is there a difference between cognitive moral education and moral action education in the academic identity of female students with a positive attitude towards academic cheating?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present research method was experimental. The research design was quasi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with a control group. The

statistical population of this study included all second-year high school female students in Sari city during the academic year 2021-2022, totaling 6456 students. The sample size was calculated using G*Power software, resulting in 45 students (noting an 8% attrition probability, 48 students were initially selected). For sampling, 200 students were voluntarily selected from the total student population. From this number, using purposive sampling, students with the highest scores on the Frost Attitude to Cheating Questionnaire (2013) were identified, and based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 45 students were chosen as the sample. These students were then randomly assigned to experimental group A (cognitive moral education), experimental group B (moral action education), and the control group, with 15 students in each group.

The sampling method was multi-stage cluster and voluntary, with random assignment to the groups. Inclusion criteria included voluntary consent to participate, obtaining the required score on the Frost Attitude to Cheating Questionnaire (2013), no substance abuse or use of psychoactive drugs, no severe psychological disorders or physical illnesses that would hinder participation, and no concurrent participation in psychotherapy sessions or use of psychotropic medications. Exclusion criteria included more than two absences, lack of active participation, failure to complete assignments, and unwillingness to continue participation. Necessary permissions were obtained from the university and the research department, and informed written consent was obtained from the participants. Participation in this study was voluntary.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Academic Identity

In this study, the Vaz and Isaacson (2008) Academic Identity Questionnaire, translated and validated by Hejazi et al. (2011), was used. The original tool includes 40 items on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Persian version includes 32 items, with certain items removed for content validity and factor analysis. The first component, successful academic identity, includes 10 items (4, 5, 17, 18, 25, 28, 30, 32, 38, 40); the second component, late academic identity, includes 6 items (7, 12, 21, 24, 31, 37); the third component, confused academic identity, includes 11 items (2, 3, 8, 13, 14, 15, 23, 26, 34, 35, 39); and the fourth component, follower academic identity, includes 5 items (1, 6, 9, 16, 29). Hejazi et al. (2011) reported acceptable validity and reliability for

the academic identity scales among Iranian students, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients for successful, late, confused, and follower academic identity dimensions of 0.76, 0.73, 0.75, and 0.71, respectively, indicating the tool's suitable reliability (Soleymani et al., 2023).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Cognitive Moral Education

The moral transformation educational program by Green (2011) consists of eight sessions, each lasting 70 minutes (Jafari et al., 2016; Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020).

Session 1: This session introduces the key determinants of morality within individuals. Participants explore the fundamental aspects that shape a person's ethical framework, including their values, beliefs, and the influences that contribute to their moral development.

Session 2: The focus is on Piaget's theory of moral development. The stages of moral reasoning as proposed by Piaget are discussed, highlighting how moral understanding evolves from childhood through adolescence.

Session 3: Kohlberg's stages of moral development are examined in detail. Participants learn about the different levels and stages that characterize moral growth according to Kohlberg, including pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality.

Session 4: This session encourages participation in hypothetical dilemmas reflecting real-life scenarios. Through verbal debates and addressing ambiguities associated with these dilemmas, participants are prompted to critically think about moral issues.

Session 5: Continuation of engaging with hypothetical dilemmas. The session further encourages verbal debate and resolution of ambiguities, fostering deeper moral reasoning and ethical discussion.

Session 6: Participants are again involved in hypothetical dilemmas and debates. This repeated exposure aims to solidify their understanding and application of moral principles in various contexts.

Session 7: The session maintains the focus on hypothetical dilemmas, promoting consistent engagement and reflection on moral ambiguities and ethical decision-making through debate.

Session 8: The final session involves summarizing the key points covered throughout the program and answering students' questions. This consolidation helps ensure that

participants have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the moral concepts discussed.

2.3.2. Moral Action Education

The moral action educational package, was designed by Blasi (1993) and includes eight sessions, each lasting 105 minutes (Blasi, 1993, 2004). The content validity of this program was confirmed by five expert faculty members from Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran (Sharifinia et al., 2020).

Session 1: The session begins with introductions and explaining the conditions and objectives of the workshop. Emphasis is placed on the importance of participating in activities and assignments both within and outside the workshop, punctuality, and obtaining a written commitment to attend all sessions. A pre-test is also administered.

Session 2: The importance of ethics and moral action is introduced, covering individual, social, and religious dimensions. Participants are made aware of how moral actions impact various aspects of life.

Session 3: This session continues with self-awareness dimensions, including understanding beliefs and values as the building blocks of the mental structure. Strategies for recognizing values and understanding moral goals are provided.

Session 4: Emotional intelligence is taught, focusing on how recognizing and managing emotions can enhance moral behavior.

Session 5: Practical principles for strengthening emotional intelligence are introduced. Participants learn

techniques to improve their emotional responses and interactions.

Session 6: Practical strategies for enhancing emotional intelligence are continued, including pausing and reflecting, maintaining a positive demeanor, and fostering win-win relationships.

Session 7: Further practical strategies are discussed, such as adopting a third-person perspective, active listening, expressing feelings, flexibility, detachment, responsibility, awareness of moral strengths and weaknesses, and continuous learning.

Session 8: Self-regulation is taught, focusing on techniques to manage one's own behavior and impulses to align with moral standards.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean charts) and inferential statistics (Shapiro-Wilk test, repeated measures ANOVA, and Bonferroni post hoc test) were used for data analysis. Data analysis was performed using SPSS software version 24.

3. Findings and Results

In the cognitive moral group, the mean age of the students was 16.2 years, in the moral action group, it was 15.86 years, and in the control group, it was 16.13 years. There were no significant differences between the three groups in a one-way ANOVA analysis ($P = 0.758$). The academic identity status of the different research groups during the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Academic Identity in Research Groups During the Study

Variable	Group	Cognitive Moral (M, SD)	Moral Action (M, SD)	Control (M, SD)
Successful Academic Identity	Pre-test	27.25 (5.52)	24.47 (6.20)	24.53 (4.10)
	Post-test	33.07 (4.79)	31.00 (5.29)	25.00 (4.28)
	Follow-up	32.87 (4.17)	31.07 (5.20)	24.93 (3.56)
Late Academic Identity	Pre-test	26.80 (5.36)	26.87 (4.78)	24.47 (5.11)
	Post-test	32.53 (5.72)	31.13 (5.25)	24.73 (4.77)
	Follow-up	32.47 (5.38)	29.33 (5.35)	24.60 (5.19)
Follower Academic Identity	Pre-test	25.40 (5.21)	26.53 (5.55)	27.53 (4.78)
	Post-test	35.67 (5.46)	32.67 (5.50)	27.53 (5.11)
	Follow-up	35.60 (5.54)	32.60 (5.07)	27.73 (5.54)
Confused Academic Identity	Pre-test	39.67 (3.79)	41.93 (3.01)	40.00 (2.93)
	Post-test	28.33 (4.32)	27.13 (4.05)	40.07 (3.26)
	Follow-up	27.33 (4.94)	27.47 (5.63)	39.67 (3.35)

Given that no overall score for academic identity is defined, the four primary dimensions of identity were

evaluated using multivariate analysis within and between groups under Wilks' Lambda. Subsequently, a mixed

repeated measures design was used among the three groups: control, cognitive moral education, and moral action education. To determine the differences between the groups

in each dimension of academic identity during the study, a mixed repeated measures analysis was used, as shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA Results During the Intervention Process on Academic Identity Dimensions

Variable	Source of Effect	SS	df	MS	F	p	Effect Size
Successful Academic Identity	Between Subjects: Group	745.644	2	372.822	7.386	0.002	0.260
	Error (Group)	2119.956	42	50.475			
	Within Subjects: Educational Stages	720.400	1.280	562.754	35.639	0.000	0.459
	Group*Educational Stages	305.956	2.560	119.501	7.568	0.001	0.265
	Error (Stages)	848.978	53.766	15.790			
Late Academic Identity	Between Subjects: Group	878.504	2	439.252	6.207	0.004	0.228
	Error (Group)	2972.044	42	70.763			
	Within Subjects: Educational Stages	296.237	1.362	217.575	26.879	0.000	0.390
	Group*Educational Stages	166.874	2.723	61.281	7.571	0.000	0.265
	Error (Stages)	462.889	57.185	8.095			
Follower Academic Identity	Between Subjects: Group	494.948	2	247.474	3.897	0.028	0.157
	Error (Group)	2667.378	42	63.509			
	Within Subjects: Educational Stages	900.193	1.327	678.417	50.531	0.000	0.546
	Group*Educational Stages	519.585	2.654	195.789	14.583	0.000	0.410
	Error (Stages)	748.222	55.730	13.426			
Confused Academic Identity	Between Subjects: Group	1891.733	2	945.867	30.005	0.000	0.588
	Error (Group)	1324.000	42	31.524			
	Within Subjects: Educational Stages	2361.378	1.731	1364.267	140.346	0.000	0.770
	Group*Educational Stages	1189.956	3.462	343.744	35.362	0.000	0.627
	Error (Stages)	706.667	72.697	9.721			

[Table 2](#) shows that in the dimensions of academic identity, the group effect was significant at the 0.05 error level. This significance may arise from the difference of at

least one pair of groups. The Bonferroni post hoc test results are shown in [Table 3](#) to reveal these differences.

Table 3

Bonferroni Post Hoc Test Results for Between-Group Comparisons on Academic Identity Dimensions

Variable	Groups	Mean Difference	SE	p
Successful Academic Identity	Cognitive Moral – Moral Action	1.556	1.498	0.915
	Cognitive Moral – Control	5.578	1.498	0.002
	Moral Action – Control	4.022	1.498	0.031
Late Academic Identity	Cognitive Moral – Moral Action	1.489	1.773	1.000
	Cognitive Moral – Control	6.000	1.773	0.005
	Moral Action – Control	4.511	1.773	0.044
Follower Academic Identity	Cognitive Moral – Moral Action	1.622	1.680	1.000
	Cognitive Moral – Control	4.622	1.680	0.026
	Moral Action – Control	3.000	1.680	0.244
Confused Academic Identity	Cognitive Moral – Moral Action	0.400	1.184	1.000
	Cognitive Moral – Control	-8.133	1.184	0.000
	Moral Action – Control	-7.733	1.184	0.000

The Bonferroni post hoc test from [Table 3](#) indicates that there was no significant difference in successful academic identity between the cognitive moral education and moral action education groups ($P = 0.915$). However, there was a significant difference between the control group and cognitive moral education ($P = 0.002$) and between the

control group and moral action education ($P = 0.031$). In late academic identity, no significant difference was found between the cognitive moral education and moral action education groups ($P = 1.000$), but there was a significant difference between the control group and cognitive moral education ($P = 0.005$) and between the control group and

moral action education ($P = 0.044$). For follower academic identity, no significant difference was found between the cognitive moral education and moral action education groups ($P = 1.000$), but there was a significant difference between the control group and cognitive moral education ($P = 0.026$), although not between the control and moral action education groups ($P = 0.244$). In confused academic identity, no significant difference was found between the cognitive moral education and moral action education groups ($P = 1.000$), but there was a significant difference between the control group and cognitive moral education ($P < 0.001$) and between the control group and moral action education ($P < 0.001$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the obtained results, the dimensions of academic identity in the cognitive moral education group were significant in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Changes from pre-test to post-test in successful, late, and follower identities were increasing, while in confused academic identity, there was a decrease. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the follow-up stage compared to the pre-test. Therefore, cognitive moral education had an impact on the academic identity of female students with a positive attitude towards academic cheating. Moreover, there is no difference in the effectiveness of cognitive moral education and moral action education on the academic identity of female students with a positive attitude towards academic cheating. These findings are consistent with the prior studies (Amalia et al., 2016; Blasi, 1993; Galvão et al., 2019; Gholampour et al., 2020; Jafari et al., 2016; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013; Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020; Tizro-Toly et al., 2019).

Kohlberg believes that understanding and recognizing moral principles inherently leads to moral action, and with the development of moral reasoning abilities, individuals become more prepared to use moral principles (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). When moral concerns form the core of the self, individuals have higher moral motivation. In other words, individuals can base their identity on various aspects such as values, relationships, and social roles, which are referred to as identity content. Cognitive morality can be one of the elements forming identity, in the sense that to the extent that a person bases their identity on moral concepts such as kindness, honesty, justice, etc., they possess identity (Blasi, 2004). Individuals who receive moral cognition are more likely to compare their behaviors with existing identity

standards and adjust their behavior when they fall short to achieve appropriate identity. Conversely, individuals who do not acquire moral cognition pay less attention to evaluating their current moral status and are less inclined to start the process of comparing and evaluating their behavior against a moral standard, being less sensitive to suspected immoral actions. Therefore, they encounter difficulties in achieving appropriate identity. According to the cognitive-social theory, mechanisms of cognitive moral education comprise strategies that increase individuals' sensitivity to adhere to moral standards by justifying moral behavior (Jafari et al., 2016; Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020).

Following this, with increased moral sensitivity, the likelihood of behaviors aligning with academic and educational rules also increases. Additionally, cognitive moral mechanisms improve individuals' evaluation of their performance, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in behaviors that align with their internal values (Santos et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020). In other words, cognitive moral mechanisms separate individuals' internal standards from their behavior, making them effective. This enables individuals to improve their internal moral standards (Sadi Pour et al., 2020) and, thus, enhance their academic identity. In explaining this finding, it can be said that students with a positive attitude towards academic cheating may have weaknesses in moral cognition. Therefore, cognitive moral education can support them, as moral cognition helps achieve individual and social support in these students, enhances personality integration, provides unique coping strategies, and fosters academic identity (Sharifinia et al., 2020; YahyazadehJeloudar et al., 2018). Cognitive moral education can free students from many academic challenges such as academic alienation and help them improve their academic identity (Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2020). On the other hand, academic identity refers to an individual's belief about how to study and use effective strategies to achieve success in this path (Sadigh, 2020). Thus, being influenced by cognitive moral education can be effective on academic identity, as moral cognition encompasses perceptions derived from personality factors and fundamental moral beliefs that can improve academic identity in students.

Moral action education plays a fundamental role in the formation of individual identity because behaviors and accompanying tendencies are essential factors in human life. Accordingly, moral actions have an important role in individuals' lifestyles and how they deal with life's problems,

and this is especially important in social organizations, particularly educational organizations like schools, due to the presence of multiple human factors working together towards organizational goals (Sadi Pour et al., 2020; Sharifinia et al., 2020). In fact, practical moral education ensures that students have a more robust and regulated moral and social system compared to other students, significantly reducing components of academic alienation and avoiding many academic issues that hinder progress and lead to the decline and destruction of academic identity. Undoubtedly, practical moral education should be considered from the beginning of life in adolescents because at this age, they seek to find personal identity, gradually separate more from their parents, and become less dependent.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of this study was the use of convenience sampling. It is suggested that future research be conducted using random sampling to enhance the external validity of the study. Additionally, it is recommended that this therapeutic approach be compared with other psychological treatment methods for these patients to assess its effectiveness and efficiency compared to other approaches.

Given that cognitive moral education and moral action education have had positive results in both preventing psychological harm and treating many behavioral disorders, it is suggested that cognitive moral education and moral action education be promoted as a public program through mass media and with the help of experienced experts, using various methods including visual and animation for children and more formal education for all levels of society.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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