

Academic Rigor and Pressures' Impact on Willingness to Lie About Academic Performance in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

High schoolers often experience significant stress from various sources, such as lying. This paper's goal is to address the prevalence and impact of lying among high school adolescents regarding their academic performance. Previous research has explored lying and cheating in school environments, focusing on elementary and college students, but high schoolers remain understudied. Additionally, most studies concentrate on exams rather than academics as a whole. With a survey, this study explores the impact of academic rigor and academic pressures, on lying about overall academic performance by high school students (n=152). Pearson Correlation tests were conducted to find connections between the variables. An ANOVA was conducted to see the impact of different amounts of APs, as they are different groups, not a singular variable with a scale. Findings suggest that pressures from parents, peers, and oneself strongly correlate with a higher likelihood of lying about academic achievement. Additionally, less rigorous students facing higher pressures exhibit greater dishonesty. This may result from perceived social and academic expectations. Holistically, this highlights the need to help alleviate student stress to create a culture of academic honesty. Future research can apply a variety of other methods and relationships to enhance knowledge of academic dishonesty among high school students.

Literature Review

A phrase high schoolers, especially myself, know too well is "What did you get on..." This phrase is usually followed by the name of a test or assignment for which the grades have just been posted. This fosters a student to say that they did well or that they did not do as well as they would have liked. The latter is almost always followed by embarrassment. Getting low grades tends to feel embarrassing (Tips for Talking, 2020). So, to avoid that uncomfortable feeling, people lie (Williams et al., 2013). In an article, done by Dr Priscilla J S Selvaraj, it's stated that kids feel scared to talk to others about their grades because of pressure from high expectations, parental assumptions, low self-esteem, and a sense of self through achievement (Selvaraj, n.d.). Now that these factors have been addressed, it is important to examine their influence on academic rigor and pressures to see how this may lead students to lie about their academic performance to peers, parents, and themselves.

Before & After High School

Prior to High School

Before delving into high school adolescents, it's dire to know what happens in younger schooling years as those habits are what directly affect their high school life (Narvaes, 2017). When examining Brocas and Carrillo's (2021) study, it was found that lying in playground games in elementary school was very prevalent when the students were in point-based competitions with one another. This highlights the fact that from a young age, we are motivated to seem impressive to our peers (Brocas & Carrillo, 2021). This, among a variety of other reasons, can cause internalization of

pressures that cause unhealthy habits for later in life (Coping Under, n.d.). These internalizations can stem from beliefs that we naturally have, as mentioned before, or from ones that grow from one environment to another.

This builds on the idea that looking into the importance of lying at such a young age is crucial. Frausel et al., (2020) found that high-order thinking skills develop from spontaneous conversations in younger children. This once again shows how important it is to avoid lying at younger ages as it also impacts the structure of higher-order thinking skills (Frausel et al., 2020). This can be avoided by raising children in an unpressured environment, so they don't mirror those pressures on other students. The reflection of pressures is a completely possible outcome as students tend to surround themselves with peers who are similar to them (Chui et al., 2021).

Redirecting back to the impact of parents on younger students, neglectful parents lead to processing emotional deficits in their children. Li and a team of researchers (2023) found that children who were addicted to the short-form video application, which is similar to CapCut today, ended up being neglected more by parents, and that it led to a weaker ability to process emotions. This is another reason that stresses how parents should stop putting so much mental harm on their children, as it causes social problems that impact them later in life (Li et al., 2023). One pressure placed by parents that affects high school students is their course rigor. Parents are known for pushing their children to take increasingly difficult courses (Negative Effects, 2022). While it may be to better prepare them for the future, they forget to consider the mental harm it has on their children.

Following High School

After addressing the foundations that root before high school, it is equally as important to investigate college years as that's when the impacts of high school issues stand out. Ottaway along with other researchers, (2017) found that high-achieving students in college had a higher tendency to cheat on their exams. Now while this study is focused on lying, the root of this cheat is what is so influential to discuss. Students that are high-achievers, have set themselves in a sort of competition. They have created an expectation that they must meet, pressuring them to perform for their parents and peers. If they feel like they can not compete then they turn to cheating, which is detrimental to mental health (Ottaway et al., 2017). This again circles back to the idea that pressures on students cause unneeded and detrimental mental health problems. When students feel the need to do something wrong like lying or cheating instead of owning up to the failure, it is clear that their environmental pressures are no longer a motivating factor but a destructive factor.

While students who are high-achievers do cheat more in college, that is not the only kind of environment that blooms new cheaters. Chui, Kouchaki, & Gino found that groups of students, that are full of cheaters, cause increased cheating in other students. The students in the group who don't typically cheat, felt like they needed to cheat, or they would not be able to keep up with their peers (Chui et al., 2021). This shows how pressure can result indirectly from peers. While the non-cheaters were never told to cheat, they felt pressured to do so because in their mind, they would not be able to perform to the level of their cheating peers. This expresses the idea that pressures can be faced in virtually any way, for an endless amount of reasons, wrecking a student's mental health.

It's established that pressure is a major source of harm to students, but it is also important to analyze the impacts of pressure-free environments on students. Bao et al. found that college students who actively collaborated and supported one another faced an increase in the quality of college life. Now, it's without a doubt that alleviating pressures from students not only frees them from stress but also engages them in a better quality of life.

Importance of Research

It is clear that there has been an abundance of studies done prior to and following high school, which is great, but high schoolers need to be studied too. A majority of mental illnesses develop in a person's adolescence showing how crucial it is to focus on high school adolescents. In addition to this, it was found that stress is most impactful on a person when developed in their adolescents (Ossola, 2015). Unfortunately, high school students have not been covered as much. This can stem from a variety of reasons, but the most prevalent one is ethics. Younger students usually have their parents opt-in for them, and older students do not need parental permission as they are adults. High schoolers on

the other hand, usually need to consult parents and want to partake in a study, meaning there are more steps to the approval (Teens and Children, 2020). This lack of studies leads to a lot of assumptions and beliefs about trends that are not properly backed up by research. Even those that are researched tend to not cover their academic variable as holistically.

Even with all of those thorough research papers, no one has seemed to consider how academic rigor could impact a student's need to lie about their academic performance, especially while incorporating pressures from their parents, peers, and even from themselves. This study aims to determine if academic rigor and pressures cause a high school student to lie in given academic situations. It is important to note that these situations do not revolve solely around exams like previous studies, but take in all forms of communication in an academic environment about performance. Some examples of this are assignments and workload. So, in order to address this gap in the body of knowledge, the following variables were created.

Variables

Academic Rigor

Academic Rigor is defined as a student's curriculum acceleration. The high school that this survey was distributed in had options of varying acceleration in their math and science courses, meaning that they could take classes that were ahead of their grade level if they were qualified to do so. The participant's rigor was assessed by averaging the level of acceleration in each subject. It is important to note that the number of APs taken by the participant was also recorded in this study. Both academic rigor and the total number of APs, aim to address how rigorous a student's course load is, but because of the formatting of the questions, they had to be assessed separately.

Academic Pressures

Academic pressures in this study are defined as factors from the students' environment, caused by parents, peers, and themselves, that have an effect on their academic life, whether it be performance or mental health, which could impact one another (Kristensen et al., 2023).

Lying About Academic Performance

Lying about academic performance in this study is defined as situations where the participant could feel the need to lie about their academic performance to others around them. The relationship between academic performance and honesty has been a subject of growing interest in psychological research. Central to this investigation is the definition of a "bad grade." For an "A" student accustomed to excellence, does a dip below the expected standard suffice as a "bad grade"? Alternatively, does the "B-C" student, whose academic trajectory follows a different curve, perceive the same grade as adversely impactful? These ideas as well as the gap in the body of knowledge led me to question, how does academic rigor and pressures of an adolescent in high school influence their willingness to lie about their academic performance?

Methodology

This study aims to address the correlation between academic rigor and academic pressures on willingness to lie about academic performance through a variety of hypotheses. The first hypothesis states that students who face pressure will equally experience pressure from parents, peers, and oneself. The second hypothesis states that as academic pressures increase, a student's willingness to lie about their academic performance will also increase. The third hypothesis states that as the severity of course rigor increases, lying about academic performance also increases. The fourth hypothesis states that as academic pressures increase, the severity of course rigor will also increase. The fifth and final hypothesis

states that as the number as the total number of APs taken increases, the willingness to lie about academic performance also increases.

Participants

The 152 participants researched in this study were high school students from ninth grade to twelfth grade. They were categorized by race, gender identity, and academic rigor. The academic rigor was determined from the various survey questions about the difficulty level of classes from their respective grade (see Appendix A). The categories were made in order to show correlations between different psychographics and overall demographics and their behavior toward different situations. This population was selected as it was the population that was accessible through social media platforms and word of mouth. In addition, choosing high school students helped with differentiating my research from previous literature as well as getting to the root of mental health issues that arise in an adolescent's youth (Kessler et al., 2005).

Methodological Rationale

Previous literature in the field of study that discussed lying and cheating in adolescents has consistently used surveys or observational studies. Since a minor is not able to prepare experiments and watch other students in said environment, because such environments can't be controlled, those methods of study were not available. Second, those observational studies were done on young college students or elementary school children. Most questions asked were about current habits and or emotions for the observational studies.

Surveys are the most effective for gathering data, as they collect statistics from an extremely vast group of people. Having a survey will help get as diverse as possible answers from as many people as possible. In addition, they can properly gauge attitudes and opinions in a controlled manner.

Ethical Considerations

Since minors are the target participants, there are ethical concerns to address before collecting data. At the beginning of the survey, a Passive Consent Form was attached to mention the survey's purpose and conditions regarding privacy. It stated that the questions were all "nonrequired", that they were allowed to not submit the survey if they felt uncomfortable, and lastly that they would remain anonymous if they chose to submit the survey. The results of the survey will not be released until May 1, 2024, as stated in the Passive Consent Form. While the results of the survey are visible to myself, no identifying information other than the demographics is known about the participants (see Appendix A).

Prior to distributing this survey, the in-school Institutional Review Board known as the IRB approved it for distribution. This helps to ensure the rights, privacy, and welfare of the participants. There were no required changes or adjustments to the survey's questions after getting approved by the IRB.

Description/Design of Instrument

The survey consisted of 34 individually created items measuring the following variables: demographics, academic rigor, academic pressures, and academic performance. Questions 1-9 were demographics, followed by academic rigor, followed by the number of APs taken which were used to categorize the participant. Those questions had no scale. Questions 10-18 assessed academic pressures, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The first three questions concerned pressures from parents, followed by three questions

concerning pressures from peers, and lastly followed by three questions concerning pressures from oneself. Questions 19-34 were situations about academic performance. This was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from Never to Very Frequently depending on how likely the participant was to lie about the given scenario (see Appendix A).

Procedure

An initial pilot survey was distributed throughout the grounds of a high school to the AP Research classes. The results of this pilot survey were used to gauge the consistency of each question within its respective variable. After the pilot survey was conducted, a test to determine the Cronbach's Alpha of my variables through SPSS was done. The Cronbach's Alpha results for academic pressures were 0.869 and .865 for academic performance.

Following those results, the survey was sent for the IRB process as mentioned before. Afterward, the digital survey was distributed through social media platforms, word of mouth, in school open classroom trials, and in social studies classes.

The survey, which was a Google Form, collected the data. Then, the data is documented in Google Sheets. Lastly, the data was exported through Microsoft Excel and analyzed on the IBM SPSS software. It is important to note that the following charts were created with Google Sheets. Multiple Pearson's Correlation tests were conducted to find a connection between the variables: academic rigor, academic pressures, and lying about academic performance. An ANOVA test was conducted to find the difference between the amount of APs taken, considering the sum amount of AP taken as one group respectively, on lying about academic performance.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Students who face pressure will equally experience pressure from parents, peers, and oneself.

Table 1. Correlation between specific pressures (parents, peers, and oneself)

		Avg Pressures Parents	Avg Pressures Peers	Avg Pressures Oneself
Avg Pressures Parents	Pearson's Correlation	1	.508**	.339**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	152	152	152
Avg Pressures Peers	Pearson's Correlation	.508**	1	.431**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	152	152	152
Avg Pressures Oneself	Pearson's Correlation	.339**	.431**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	152	152	152

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between pressures from parents, from peers, and from oneself separately. There was a strong positive correlation between pressures from parents and peers, $r = .508$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.01$ There was also a strong positive correlation between pressures from parents and oneself, $r = .339$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.01$ There was also a strong positive correlation between peer pressure and

oneself, $r = .431$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.01$ Overall, there was a strong, positive correlation between all the variables. Increases in pressures from parents, peers, or oneself were correlated with increases in pressure from both ladder environments.

Hypothesis 2: As academic pressures increase, a student's willingness to lie about their academic performance will also increase.

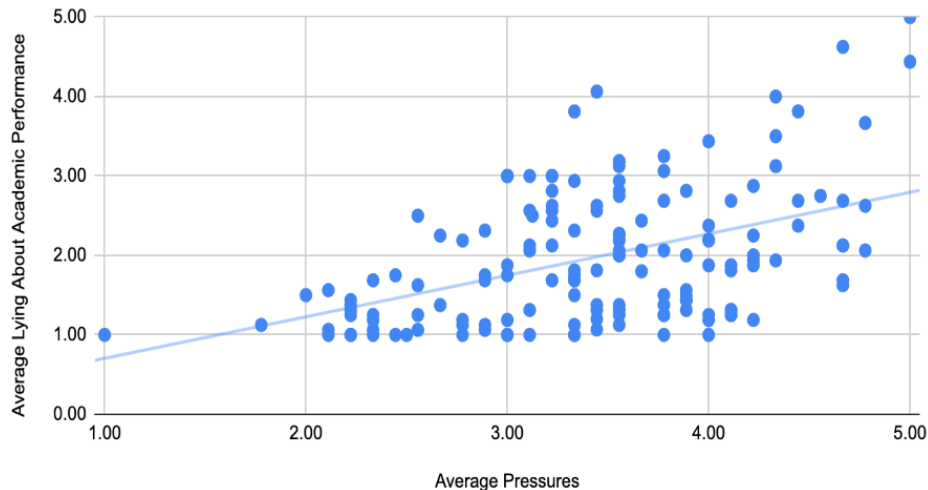


Figure 1. Correlation of academic pressures on lying about academic performance

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between academic performance and academic pressures. There was a strong positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .456$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.01$. Overall, as academic pressures on a high school adolescent increased, their willingness to lie about academic performance also increased.

Hypothesis 3: As the severity of course rigor increases, lying about academic performance also increases.

Table 2. Correlation between academic rigor on lying about academic performance

		Avg Lying About Performance	Avg Rigor
Avg Lying About Performance	Pearson's Correlation	-.163*	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.045	
	N	152	152
Avg Rigor	Pearson's Correlation	1	-.163*
	Sig (2-tailed)		.045
	N	152	152

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between academic performance and academic rigor. There was a moderate negative correlation between the two variables, $r = -.163$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.05$. Overall, as the course rigor of a high school adolescent decreased, the willingness to lie about their academic performance increased.

Hypothesis 4: As academic pressures increase, the severity of course rigor will also increase.

Table 3. Correlation between academic pressures and academic rigor

		Avg Pressures (All)	Avg Rigor
Avg Pressures (All)	Pearson's Correlation	-.045	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.583	
	N	152	152
Avg Rigor	Pearson's Correlation	1	-.045
	Sig (2-tailed)		.583
	N	152	152

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between academic pressures and academic rigor. There was no correlation between the two variables, $r = -0.045$, $n = 152$, $p = 0.583$. Overall, the pressures faced by a high school adolescent had no impact on their course rigor in high school.

Hypothesis 5: As the total number of APs taken increases, the willingness to lie about academic performance also increases.

Table 4. Correlation between the number of APs on lying about academic performance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.143	11	1.013	1.449	0.158
Within Groups	97.17	139	0.699		
Total	108.313	150			

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the total number of APs on lying about academic performance in high school adolescents. There was not a significant effect of the total number of APs on lying about academic performance at the $p < .05$ level for the three conditions, $F(11, 139) = 1.449$, $p = 0.158$. These results show that the amount of APs does not impact a student's need to lie about their academic performance.

Discussions

The hypothesis that students who face pressure from parents, peers, or oneself are increasingly likely to face pressure from all environments at once, was upheld. Table 1 displays a strong positive correlation. This correlation shows that pressures from one source will most likely cause a student to feel similar pressures from other people. This is extremely important as it shows the need to ensure student mental health to try and avoid a domino effect of pressure from all sources. This is impactful for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it shows that pressures from parents, peers, and oneself have a chance of causing internalization of the other pressures, connecting back to the literature review (Coping Under, n.d.). For example, a student who faces pressure from their parents might feel pressured by their peers even if it's not true. In addition, this helps us address major problems related to stress diseases in high schoolers. These results also

refer back to the idea in the literature review that students find students who are similar to them (Chui et al., 2021). In turn, this causes more pressure to branch and feed off of itself. These are all reasons showing how dire it is to address these results in order to help the mental well-being of adolescents in high school. It is evident that adolescents in high school face extreme amounts of stress, and these results show that a lot of it could be from a domino effect.

Concerning the hypothesis that as academic pressures increase, a student's willingness to lie about their academic performance will also increase, was upheld. Figure 1 displays a very positive significance. This means that the more pressured high school adolescents felt by their surroundings, the more they lied, and vice versa. This has likely stemmed from the idea that if the pressures and expectations are higher than what is achievable, then the only option left is to lie. There is no way to change the past, so instead what others hear changes. These pressures that enforce a lying environment could cause lying tendencies outside of school, which worsens mental health (Pandey, 2022). This shows that as a society, we are sacrificing mental well-being for academic well-being. Referencing back to the idea established by Kessler et al., that most mental illnesses and trust issues develop in a person's adolescence, the idea of pressures could be one of the major causes of mental illness and trust issues that lead to future complications. So, we should stop pressuring high schoolers to avoid problems in the future. This can be done by not reinforcing high pressured environments as parents of a student, or as a peer of a student.

Concerning the hypothesis that as the severity of course rigor increases, lying about academic performance also increases, was not upheld. Table 2 displayed a moderate significance, but it was negative. This means that less rigorous students tend to lie more. This can be for a variety of reasons. One reason could be that less rigorous students are in "easier" classes meaning it is harder to do poorly. Connecting back to previous literature, because rigorous students are in such difficult classes, it is more accepted that they do poorly from time to time, compared to students who are in less rigorous classes resulting in a greater need to lie (Tanabe & Tanabe, n.d.). It is also known that as a whole, adolescents get embarrassed about receiving low grades (Tips for Talking, 2020). In turn, they get very embarrassed and want to lie if they can't do well in easy classes causing them to be nonconfrontational.

Concerning the hypothesis that as academic pressures increase, the severity of course rigor will also increase, was not upheld. Table 3 displayed no significance after conducting the test. This means that there was no correlation between feelings of pressure from one's surroundings and the difficulty of courses. As mentioned previously, parents pressure kids to take harder classes for a variety of reasons (Negative Effects, 2022). The results of this test show the contradicting thoughts in the high school adolescent's mind. Some want to honor the expectation of a challenging course load and satisfy parents, with whatever means possible. Others might be afraid to let their grades drop and let that expectation down so they take less rigorous classes to avoid that. This causes a split and an overall dilemma in the mind of a student which adds more pain and stress (Lee, 2020).

Concerning the hypothesis that as the total number of APs taken increases, the willingness to lie about academic performance also increases, was not upheld. Table 4 displayed no significance between different amounts of APs taken and the need to lie. Keep in mind that this does not measure how many total APs a student has taken during their high school years, but just the ones that they are taking and have taken. The goal of this test was to show the similarity between rigor/lying and the number of APs/lying to say that one connects to another. This result shows no matter how full their course history may have been with APs, it never impacted their need to lie about their academic performance. With this result, we can understand that the amount of APs is a known stressor, but not the most major one in high school adolescents. This means that as a whole, we should redirect our worries from APs to school and outside pressures.

Now that the results are discussed individually it is important to view the results holistically to analyze them further. Due to the fact that stress is the most detrimental to health when it starts in high school and that lying does lead to increased stress levels, we must avoid lying for students' mental health (Ossola, 2015). Another major discussion is that being pressured by parents after being in less rigorous classes causes them to lie more. So, students become less confrontational for help and improvement, as seen in college students (I Feel, 2012). Not reaching out for help causes grades to get worse. This domino effect could ruin the mental health of high school students. This also shows how problems that high school adolescents face end up feeding off of one another. Now approaching from a different

angle, rigor had lying impacts but APs didn't so we should shift from knowing more about APs and worry about a student's course rigor as a whole. Overwhelming course rigor and high amounts of APs a student takes aren't majorly impactful on lying, so we should shift focus on a variety of other pressures as they might impact students more, such as jobs.

Conclusions

Overall, this study was able to fill in a gap about the impact of academic rigor and academic pressures on lying about academic performance. There were a variety of results, such as when less rigorous students lied more about academic performance, which went against assumptions from previous literature, and some that were able to be upheld. These findings have one main goal, which is to understand and identify the main stressors of adolescents so they can be dealt with as soon as possible. This is why it's important to dive into a variety of populations such as different schools, or even younger ages, and help find more applicable and precise solutions to these problems.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a variety of limitations in this experiment. A major gap in student academics and stressors and pressures as a whole is the use of longitudinal studies. This is even more evident when looking at the longitudinal references and noticing that their date of publication is fairly old. The structure of this research did not support a longitudinal study environment. This means that there is no way to determine how these results will change over time and if assumptions made in the discussions will hold. In response to this, future research should focus on the impact of lying over time in adolescent years, and as an individual moves past education as a whole.

Another limitation was the lack of follow-up information on the participants. The research method of this study lacked an interview, which I realized after analyzing results that knowing more about individual situations would be severely impactful to the discussions of my study. So, for future research, trying to incorporate interviews to not only strengthen discussions but also to emphasize the relevance and dire need for results is undoubtedly necessary.

In addition to lying, cheating was also a heavily mentioned topic in my literature review. In order to not cross into covered information and to not overload my research plan, the study remained solely about lying as it is the topic that has the most apparent personal impact. This led to the limitation that there was no comparison between the impacts of academic rigor and pressures on cheating, and how it might impact lying. So, for future research, the relationship between lying and cheating can be tested to fill the body of knowledge.

Lastly, my results while having a variety of demographics, were mostly confined to one public high school. This means that my results are limited in their generalization to private school students and even students across the United States. So, for future research, it would be possible to determine lying's impact on stress levels in high school students within different populations.

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