

Analysis of the Predictive Power of Moral and Social Identities on Examination Cheating Behaviors among Students

Christoper Adah Ocheni¹; Adashona Obiamaka Ekwulugo²

¹ Dept. of edu. studies in psych., research meth. & counseling, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA

² Department of social work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Publication Date: 2025/02/13

Abstract

This study investigates moral and social identities as predictors of examination cheating behavior among students. The study analyzed data from 172 participants, available on the Havard Dataverse repository. The data were collected using the moral identity scale (MIS), social identity scale (SIS), and examination cheating behavior scale (ECBS), with reliability indices of .78, .81, and .86, respectively. Analyses were performed using regression statistics in R software. The results showed that moral and social identities are significant predictors of examination cheating behavior. This study concludes that low levels of moral and social identities significantly lead to higher examination cheating behavior among students, whereas, higher levels of moral and social identities are associated with lower examination cheating behaviors. These findings emphasize the role of character education and social frameworks in mitigating academic dishonesty, providing insights for policymakers, social workers, and moral educators aiming to foster ethical behavior in academic environments.

Keywords: Moral Identity, Social Identity, Examination Cheating Behavior, Moral and Ethics Education, Social Work.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cheating behaviors during examinations have continued to threaten academic integrity and undermine the credibility, reliability, and fairness of educational assessments, thereby compromising the value of education. Examination cheating behavior refers to any deliberate attempt by students or examination stakeholders such as teachers, and supervisors, among others, to gain or help some group of students gain an unfair advantage in an examination or academic assessment. This attempt usually violates established rules and ethical standards on best assessment and fair testing practices. Examination cheating behaviors encompass a wide range of dishonest actions, such as copying answers, using unauthorized materials, impersonation, collusion, or engaging in deceitful practices during examinations (Oguguo & Ocheni, 2024). Ocheni et al. (2025) defines examination cheating as any unlawful act or attempt by a student or group of students to dishonestly supply answers to questions during an examination with the aim of improving their scores through such means as grade falsification, score upgrading, plagiarism, data breaches, among others.

The cases of examination cheating have become a worldwide issue. The International Center for Academic Integrity (2024) published a report showing that 95% of students admitted to engaging in one form of cheating behavior or the other. Perez-Pena (2012) reported that in the United States, examination cheating has assumed a worrisome dimension. This is particularly the same for students in Pakistan (Malik et al., 2023), and in Africa (Bison, 2009), as well as in the United Kingdom (Mark, 2014, cited in Owenga, 2020). These statistics highlight the alarming rate of examination cheating and the danger it poses to educational assessment globally.

The continuous cases of examination cheating not only undermine fairness, integrity, and meritocracy of educational assessments, it also distorts the assessment processes, making it difficult to account for accurate and more precise measurement of students' knowledge and skills. This creates an environment where academic achievements do not truly reflect the efforts, competence, skills, and true ability of students, thus compromising the credibility of educational qualifications as well as decisions and policies made based on the outcome of examinations. More so, examination cheating fosters inequality by giving dishonest students an unfair advantage over their colleagues. Consequently, cheating

behavior inhibits students' personal growth as well as essential values like honesty, discipline, and accountability. The forgoing highlights the setbacks arising from continuously engaging in examination cheating behavior. This calls for the need to investigate measures that would help minimize or eliminate cheating behaviors. In a bid to combat examination cheating behavior, there is the need to understand how individual psychological factors like moral identity, and social influences like social identity could independently or jointly contribute to examination cheating behavior among students.

Moral identity is a moral psychological construct that emphasizes the extent to which a person's moral self is experienced in the central part of the person's overall self-concept (Aquino et al., 2011). It reflects the significance and salience of moral values in one's identity and plays a key role in how people interpret and respond to situations that require moral decisions. Moral identity is the degree to which an individual considers morality such as moral concerns like justice, caring, and generosity, among others as important to their identity. It is seen as a major source of moral motivation. Generally, people with high moral identity tend to do what they feel is right, and they have an enduring moral commitment. In education, moral identity has been regarded as an important factor that deter students from cheating in examinations. Hariwijaya and Septiana (2019) found that the moral identity of students has the likelihood of influencing their cheating behavior. Wowra (2007, cited in Hariwajiya & Septiana, 2019) found a positive relationship between moral identity and cheating behavior. However, Nauli (2016) reported that moral identity would discourage students from engaging in academic cheating. These reports highlight disagreement in the findings of scholars. For an important factor as moral identity, it is necessary to embark on further investigations to fully understand whether or not, moral identity could strongly discourage examination cheating behavior. Besides moral identity, such social factors as social identity could also influence students' cheating behavior.

Social identity may be regarded as an individual's sense of belonging to a particular social group and the significance attached to that group membership. Social identity plays a crucial role in shaping behavior, as individuals tend to align their actions with the norms and values of the groups they identify with. Within the framework of social identity theory, when students associate strongly with groups that engage in cheating or tolerate examination cheating behaviors, their likelihood of engaging in similar behaviors increases. This is because, group norms can have a strong influence on an individual's actions, often precluding personal moral standards. Recent studies have shown that threats to social identity or pressures to conform to group expectations can lead to deviant behaviors, such as cheating (Belmi et al., 15). In order to maintain their social standing, students may cheat with their peer groups. Students could also cheat because they perceive cheating as normal within their social group. For instance, where group loyalty or academic competitiveness is emphasized, students may become

compelled to cheat to prioritize solidarity or perceived success over integrity, which could lead to increased cases of examination cheating (Standard Graduate School of Business, 2023). As a matter of fact, group dynamics and peer influences are significant predictors of cheating behavior, especially in academic settings where students may be under pressure to succeed or maintain a reputation. Thus, when examination cheating behavior becomes part of the group culture, it signals that such behavior is acceptable or even expected. Therefore, social identity could directly or indirectly influence students' decision to cheat by creating environments that facilitate and encourage such dishonest behaviors and other kinds of intergroup behaviors (Bluic, et al, 2011).

While examining the individual impact of social and moral identities on the examination cheating behavior of students, it is important to also consider their combined effects or interactions on cheating behavior. Rehman (2021) explored the complex interplay between moral identity, social identity and social comparison, and reported that having a strong moral identity can enhance the relationship between social identity and moral comparison. However, it can sometimes become a barrier, as individuals tend to project group membership and norms and morals over their moral standards. Pillutla (2011) explored the psychological factor that could influence seemingly ethical individuals to engage in unethical behavior, especially when their social identity or group dynamics are involved. It was found that social identity, such as group membership can influence the ethical decision-making and moral identity of an individual, leading them to uphold group interests even it means acting unethically. These studies highlight the potential effect that moral and social identities could have on unethical behaviors of students like examination cheating behavior. Hence, the need to investigate their combined effects or interactions on the cheating behavior of students.

The foregoing reports reveal how moral and social identities could independently predict examination cheating behaviors. However, no study was found in the literature to have investigated the joint prediction of moral and social identities on examination cheating behavior among students. Hence, the present study seeks to evaluate the combined contribution of moral and social identities on examination cheating behavior among students.

➤ *Research Questions*

The following research questions will be answered in this study:

- What is the extent to which moral identity predicts examination cheating behavior among students?
- What is the prediction of social identity on examination cheating behavior among students?
- What is the extent to which moral and social identities contribute to examination cheating behavior among students?

➤ Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested at 0.05 level of significance.

- **H0₁:** Moral identity is not a significant predictor of examination cheating behavior among students
- **H0₂:** Social identity does not significantly predict examination cheating behavior among students
- **H0₃:** the joint contribution of moral and social identities on examination cheating behavior among students is not significant.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

➤ Research Design

The study adopted a correlational research design to assess the relationship between moral identity, social identity, and examination cheating behavior among students. This design was chosen because it best suited for studies that try to establish the relationship between two or more variables.

➤ Participants

The sample for this study comprised 172 participants. The data for this study were retrieved from Harvard Dataverse (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/F3EHOL>; <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NHQLMQ>). The first study from which the data were retrieved was on moral identity, internalization, symbolization, social bias, social comparison, and social identity. The second study was on answer changing behavior, and cognitive load as predictors of examination cheating tendency. The data on examination cheating behavior was for 307 students while the datasets on moral and social identities had 172 participants. Since two of the variables have a total of 172 respondents, the sample size was set to 172 participants for the study.

➤ Measures

This study used moral identity scale (MIS), social identity scale (SIS) and examination cheating behavior scale (ECBS) as instruments for data collection. While the moral identity scale has 10 items on a 7-point scale, the social identity scale has 11 items on a 5-point scale, whereas, the examination cheating behavior scale has 10 items on a 7-point scale. The reliability indices for the scales were 0.78, 0.81 and 0.86, respectively.

➤ Data analysis Procedure

Since the scales for the various instruments are not equal, a score transformation technique (T-score) was used to ensure that all the scores are on the same scale to ensure comparison. The analysis of this study was conducted using the multiple regression analysis technique through the R programming software version 4.3.2. the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to interpret the strength of the prediction, while correlation coefficients (R) was used to determine the relationship between the moral and social identities and examination cheating behavior. Correlation coefficients between 0.0 – 0.3 was treated as low, 0.31-0.70, as moderate, and 0.71 – 1.00 as strong relationship. The hypotheses was tested at a .05 level of significance using an analysis of variance. *P-values* below .05 level of significance will be interpreted as significant, while *p-values* above .05 was interpreted as not significant.

III. RESULTS

To conduct the analysis, the assumptions of multiple regression were evaluated. The Henze-Zirkler (HZ) test for multivariate normality and Anderson-Darling (AD) test for univariate normality. The results showed significant deviations from normality for all variables. To ensure normality assumption, the data was transformed to the log-odd scale. Despite the log transformation, the assumption of normality was still violated, particularly for the moral identity and examination cheating behavior. This suggests potential non-linearities or outliers influencing the distribution. However, since the log-transformed data has reduced skewness and improved scale alignment, the analysis was conducted.

The regression residuals were examined to ensure that the assumptions of homoscedasticity and independence were met; the residual standard error was 0.167, and residual distribution suggested homoscedasticity as the visual inspection of residual vs fitted plots showed no obvious patterns. For the normality of residuals, the Q-Q plot showed acceptable deviations for parametric analysis, although the HZ test showed the violation of this assumption. The analysis was conducted given the reduced skewness which implies that there are only minimal deviations in the data distribution (*Figure 1*).

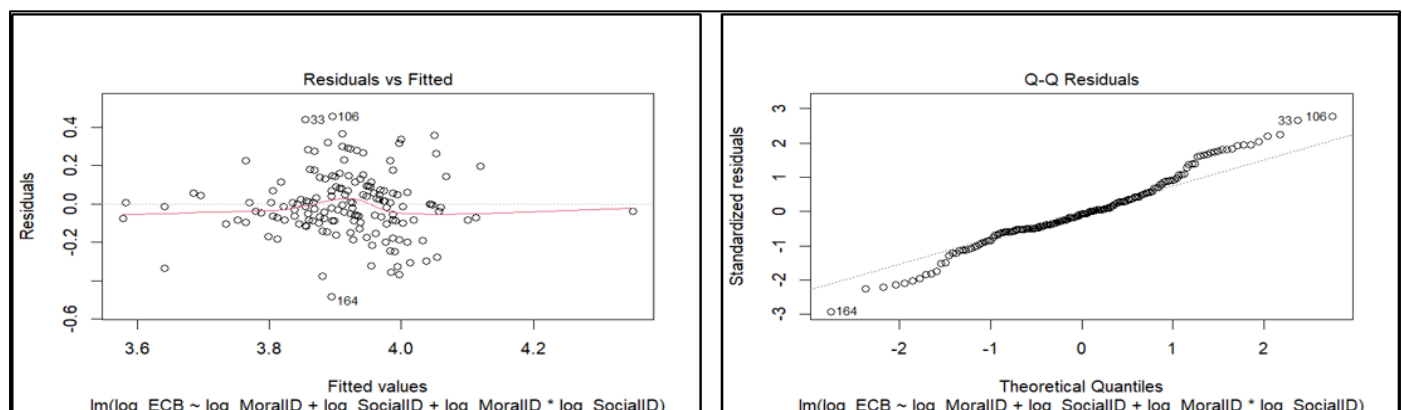


Fig 1 Graph of Residual Plots

Table 1 Regression Analysis of Moral and Social Identities as Predictors of Examination Cheating Behavior.

Coefficients:				
	Estimate	Std.	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	13.7246	4.1758	3.287	0.00123 **
log_MoralID	-2.7819	1.0636	-2.616	0.00972 **
log_SocialID	-2.1921	1.0422	-2.103	0.03693 *
log_MoralID:log_SocialID	0.6306	0.2657	2.373	0.01875 *
Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1				
Residual standard error: 0.1667 on 168 degrees of freedom				
Multiple R-squared: 0.2547, Adjusted R-squared: 0.2414				
F-statistic: 19.13 on 3 and 168 DF, p-value: 1.01e-10				

➤ *Moral Identity as a Predictor Examination Cheating Behavior among Students*

The regression analysis showed that moral identity significantly predicts examination cheating behavior, [$\beta = -2.78$, $SE = 1.06$, $t = -2.62$, $p = 0.010$]. The negative coefficient indicates that students with high levels of social identity are less likely to cheat during examination, whereas, those with lower levels of moral identity have a higher tendency of cheating in an examination. This result validates the hypothesis that moral identity is a significant predictor of examination cheating behavior among students.

➤ *Social Identity as Predictor of Examination Cheating Behavior among Students*

The result of the analysis in Table 1, indicates that social identity significantly predicts students' examination cheating behavior, ($\beta = -2.19$, $SE = 1.04$, $t = -2.10$, $p = 0.037$). This result suggests that high levels of social identity lead to lower rates of examination cheating behavior. This means that the null hypothesis is rejected

and the hypothesis that social identity is a significant predictor of examination cheating behavior is retained.

➤ *Combined Effects or Interactions of Moral and Social Identities on Examination Cheating Behavior*

Table 1 shows that moral and social identities have a significant interaction or combined effects on examination cheating behavior of students, [$\beta = 0.63$, $SE = 0.27$, $t = 2.37$, $p = 0.019$]. This result suggests that social and moral identities jointly predict examination cheating behavior. The interaction effects of moral and social identities explain a significant portion (24%) of the variance in examination cheating behavior, [$Adjusted R^2 = 0.24$; $F(3, 168) = 19.13$, $p < 0.001$]. Thus, the null hypothesis that the joint contribution of moral and social identities on examination cheating behavior is rejected. This can be visualized in Figure 2, specifically, students with lower social identities experience a stronger negative effect of moral identity on examination cheating behavior, while students with higher social identities show a weaker effect.

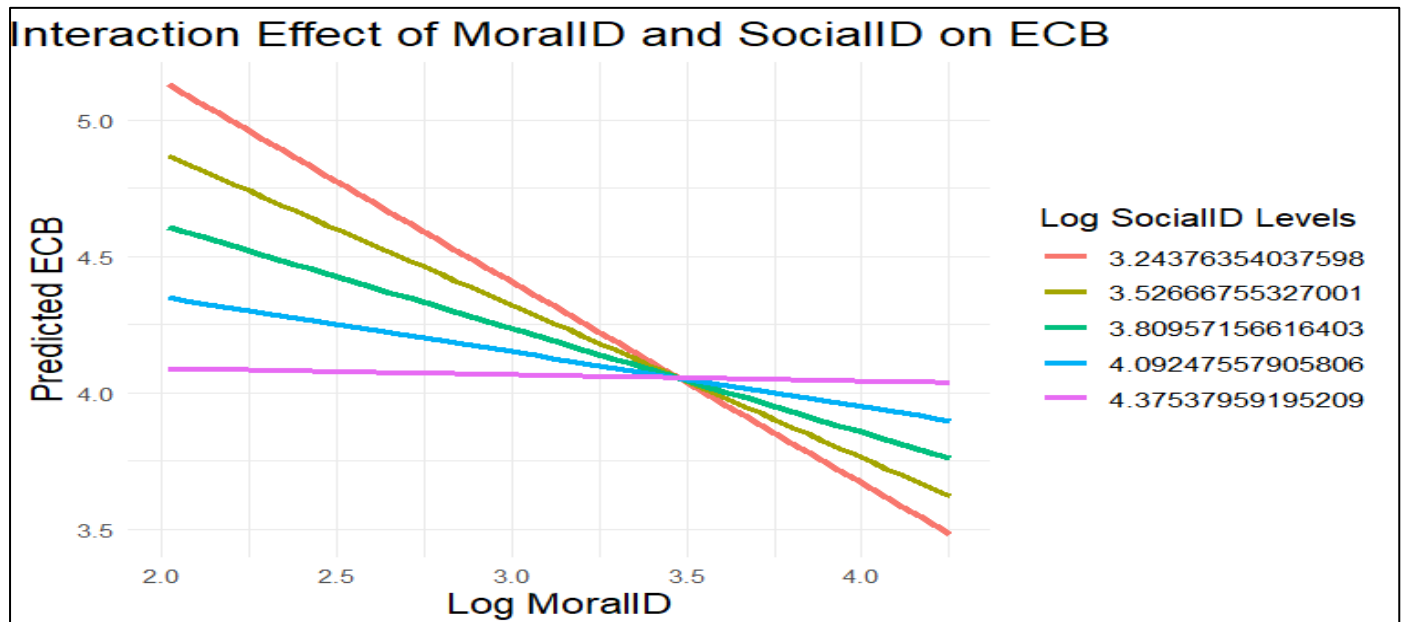


Fig 2 Interaction Effect of MoralID and SocialID on ECB

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that both moral and social identities are significant predictors of examination cheating behavior, with moral identity exhibiting a stronger negative association. The implication of these results is that a higher level of moral or social identities

results to a lower rate of examination cheating, whereas, a low level of moral or social identities leads to high cheating behavior. This result is plausible because, as students uphold moral concerns such as caring, justice, generosity, ethics, and values, they are likely to interpret and respond to situations that require moral decisions like examination cheating in a positive way. This would make

students with high moral identity consider examination cheating as unethical and immoral behavior. Moreover, when students identify with social groups that promote morality and uphold ethical values and moral norms, they tend to discourage examination cheating. These results support the findings of Nauli (2016) that moral and social identities discourage examination cheating behavior among students. However, the findings of (Standard Graduate School of Business, 2023; Wowra, 2007, cited in Hariwajiya & Septiana, 2019;) report contrary findings. The disparity may be attributable to factors such as the characteristics of the sample, and the socializing factors such as environment, societal values, norms, and so on.

The results show that the interaction effects of moral and social identities on the examination cheating behavior of students is significant. Their combined influence provides a more detailed understanding of the relationship between moral, and social identities and examination cheating behavior. These results agree with the findings of Rehman (2021) that moral identity enhances social identity, which could jointly influence unethical behaviors like examination cheating. Pillutla (2011) also reported that social identity could interact with moral identity to influence students' decision-making on ethical issues like examination cheating behavior. The results of these findings highlight the influence of moral and social identities on students' examination cheating behavior.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that low levels of moral and social identities significantly lead to higher cheating behaviors among students, whereas, when moral and social identities are at higher levels, students are less likely to engage in examination cheating.

Despite the violation of the normality assumptions, the use of robust log transformations reduced extreme deviations in the data, supporting the validity of the results. However, further research should investigate alternative methods like non-parametric or Bayesian analysis to mitigate residual distribution issues.

The data for this study were from survey studies, indicating potential biases in the data collection process. These biases could have introduced confounds and would have influenced the results of this study. Other methods of data collection that would help eliminate these biases could be employed to improve the validity of the study.

These findings emphasize the role of character education and social frameworks in mitigating academic dishonesty, providing valuable insights for policymakers, social workers, and educators aiming to foster ethical behavior in academic environments.

DECLARATION STATEMENTS

➤ *Statements of Funding*

The authors did not receive any support or financial assistance from any individual or organization for conducting this study.

➤ *Acknowledgment*

The researchers wish to extend their sincere appreciation to God Almighty. The researchers are also grateful to the authors who provided the data on the Harvard Dataverse repository and to all students who provided their responses to the instrument used for the study.

➤ *Data Availability*

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Havard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/F3EHOL>; <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NHQLMQ>

➤ *Declaration of Statement*

The authors report that there is no competing interest to declare.

➤ *Ethical Statement*

The study involved human subjects, hence the researchers ensured that all ethical guidelines were followed during the conduct of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All the authors contributed to this study. The conceptualization, introduction, methods, data analysis, result presentation, and discussions were done by Ocheni, Christopher Adah, while the literature review and editing were done by Ekwulugo, Adashona Obiamaka. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Aquino, K., McFerran, B., & Laven, M. (2011). Moral identity and the experience of moral elevation in response to acts of uncommon goodness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(4), 703–718. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022540>
- [2]. Belmi, P. Barragan, R. C., Neale, M. A., & Cohen, G. L. (2015). Threats to social identity can trigger social deviance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(467-484). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01467215569493>
- [3]. Bliuc, A.-M., Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., & Hendres, D. M. (2011). Understanding student learning in context: Relationships between university students' social identity, approaches to learning, and academic performance. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 26(3), 417–433.
- [4]. Forkuor, J. B., Amarteifio, J., Attah, D. O., & Buari, M. A. (2019). Students' perception of cheating and the best time to cheat during examinations. *Urban Review*, 51, 424-443.
- [5]. Hariwijaya, D. Z., & Septiana, E. (2020). Effect of personality traits on cheating behavior in college students with moral identity as a moderator. *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Intervention and Applied Psychology and the 4th Universitas Indonesia Psychology Symposium for Undergraduate Research*, 494. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201125.044>

- [6]. Hurst, P., Kavussanu, M., Swain, J., & Ring, C. (2023). The role of moral identity and regret on cheating in sport. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 21(2), 230–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2022.2057567>
- [7]. International Center for Academic Integrity (2024). Facts and statistics. <https://academicintegrity.org/resources/facts-and-statistics>
- [8]. Khan, S. (2019) Place identity, social identity & moral identity, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/F3EHOL>, *Harvard Dataverse*, V1, UNF:6:H2hlzIxO09gw7/Sp5U/wJQ==[fileUNF]
- [9]. Malik, A. A., Hassan, M., Rizwan, M., Mushtaque, I., Lak, T. A., & Hussain, M. (2023). Impact of academic cheating and perceived online learning effectiveness on academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic among Pakistani students. *Front Psychol.*, 2(14):1124095. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1124095>.
- [10]. Nauli, T. M. P. (2016). Hubungan identitas moral dengan kecurangan akademik pada mahasiswa di Indonesia. *Universitas Indonesia*. 20(3), 393-398.
- [11]. Ocheni, C. A. (2024). Answer changing, cognitive load and examination cheating tendency. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NHQLMQ>, *Harvard Dataverse*, V1
- [12]. Ocheni, C. A., Nwatu, U. L., Vita, B., Ezugwu, I. J., Agah, J. J., Oguguo, B. C. E., Ekwulugo, A. O., & Nwatu, J. O. (2025). Application of rational emotive behavioral therapy in the treatment of examination cheating behavior among students. *Journal of Academics Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09596-1>
- [13]. Oguguo, B. C. E. & Ocheni, C. A. (2023): Cybersecurity: a tool for curbing examination breaches and improvement of the quality of large-scale educational assessments. *Information Security Journal: A Global Perspective*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19393555.2023.2284761>
- [14]. Owenga, J. T. O., (2020). Relationship between selected home determinants and examination cheating among secondary school students. *IORS Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 25(7), 54-62
- [15]. Perez-Pena, R. (2012, September 7). Studies find more students cheating with high achiever no exception. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/08/education/studies-show-more-students-cheat-even-high-achievers.html>
- [16]. Pillutla, M. M. (2011). *When good people do wrong: Morality, social identity, and ethical behavior. In Social psychology and organizations* (pp. 385-402). Routledge.
- [17]. Rehman K., S. (2021). Different and better than you: The interplay between social identity, moral identity, and social comparison. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 31(5), 615-635.
- [18]. Stanford Graduate School of Business (no date). Change lives, change organizations, change the world. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/>
- [19]. Tarrant, M., Branscombe, N. R., Warner, R. H., & Weston, D. (2012). Social identity and perceptions of torture: It's moral when we do it. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(2), 513–518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.10.017>