Effects of Modeling and Expectancy of Reward on Cheating Behavior

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The present experiment compared the effects of modeling honest and dishonest responses with the effects of expectancy of reward. Sixty preschool children viewed one of three modeling films prior to their playing a pegboard game: (a) dishonest model receiving positive reinforcement, (b) dishonest model receiving no reinforcement, and (c) honest model receiving positive reinforcement. Ss were also told that a reward was dependent on a high level of performance or that a reward was noncontingent on performance with a bonus reward contingent on performance. An overwhelming majority of children in all groups imitated the model they observed with no significant effect due to expectancy of reward.

Cheating is an interesting and extremely common form of deviant behavior. Hartshorne and May (1928) found that cheating, or more generally deception, is not a unitary trait; i.e., particular individuals could not be globally labeled as cheaters or noncheaters. While many people regard cheating as improper and immoral, they nonetheless cheat under certain stimulus conditions: e.g., the promise of rewarding outcome, the absence of negative sanction, and the apparent success of other cheaters. Some of these presumed determinants were investigated in the present study.

One explanation of cheating, as well as other behaviors, emphasizes social models as determinants of the emitted behavior (Aronfreed, 1971; Bandura, 1969; Bogartz, 1969; O'Connor, 1971). Responses can be acquired, facilitated,
or even disinhibited through procedures whereby an observer imitates a model’s responses, and this is especially illustrated in studies of children’s behavior. For example, Walters, Leat, and Mezei (1963) found that observers of a model who was rewarded for playing with forbidden toys imitated more responses than did observers of a model who was punished for the same behavior. In a study by Stein (1967), children were exposed to the temptation of leaving a boring task to watch a forbidden movie. Children observing a live model who yielded to temptation likewise left the task significantly more often than children either observing a model resist the temptation or observing no model at all. Despite standards of appropriate or honest behavior, children do learn to discriminate situations in which deception goes unpunished and is, therefore, seemingly permissible.

An important additional factor to consider in the study of cheating is the subject’s expectancy of reward in the test situation. That is, does the individual believe that there is a high probability of reward if he is honest, or would the probability of reward be greatly increased if he is dishonest? In most previous research on cheating (e.g., Mischel & Gilligan, 1964), subjects found it impossible to obtain a reward unless they cheated. However, in most naturally occurring situations, rewards are also available for honest behavior that meets certain evaluative standards. Therefore, one might expect differences to occur between two groups if one group was reasonably assured of obtaining the desired reward through honest behavior while the other group had no such assurance. It is quite possible that the guarantee of a reward noncontingent on performance will diminish the temptation to cheat.

It was predicted that observers of dishonest models receiving either positive reinforcement or no reinforcement would cheat significantly more than would observers of an honest model receiving positive reinforcement. Similarly, subjects assured of obtaining a reward regardless of their performance were predicted to cheat significantly less than were subjects unassured of such a reward. Due to the limited availability of subjects, the design was necessarily abbreviated, thus eliminating certain interesting comparisons. Research (Bandura, 1969; Flanders, 1968) has generally found no significant difference between groups receiving positive or neutral vicarious reinforcement, but that both groups differ significantly from a group receiving negative vicarious reinforcement. In the present study, it was assumed that negative vicarious reinforcement would result in little, if any, cheating, and this condition was not included.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The 30 boys and 30 girls who participated in this study were 4-year-olds and were from predominantly white, middle-class families. The children attended a nursery school run by the University of Illinois.