

Research Article

Examining the Relationship between Academic Pressure and Ethical Behavior among Secondary School Students in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

This research explores how academic pressure affects the ethical conduct of high school students in Andhra Pradesh, India. Employing a descriptive-correlational approach, it delves into the link between academic stress and students' involvement in dishonest school practices. Researchers drew a sample of 200 students via stratified random sampling from both city and village schools. They used validated scales to assess academic pressure and ethical behavior, and then applied stats like means, standard deviations, t-tests, correlations, regression, and mediation analysis.

Key results showed a strong inverse link between academic pressure and ethical behavior ($r = -0.62$). Regression confirmed academic pressure as a major driver of unethical actions ($\beta = -0.61$), accounting for 48% of the variation. Self-control partially mediated this connection. Overall, the study calls for school reforms that prioritize ethical growth alongside academic success.

Keywords: Academic Pressure, Ethical Behavior, Academic Integrity, Secondary Students, Andhra Pradesh.

1. Introduction:

Education doesn't just build smarts—it shapes character and moral compass too. Today's schools, though, ramp up the heat with high-stakes tests, rankings, and performance metrics, piling pressure on students. Sure, a bit of stress can spark drive and focus, but when it tips into overload, it breeds anxiety, exhaustion, and shortcuts like cheating, copying, or faking results.

High schoolers in this mix are especially at risk. They're right in the thick of brain development, figuring out who they are, and wrestling with right and wrong. In Andhra Pradesh, the scene is cutthroat: board exams loom large, coaching centers thrive, and parents push hard. Success often boils down to scores, sidelining ethics along the way.

This study zeros in on academic pressure as a make-or-break factor in students' ethical choices. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Regulation Theory, we argue that outside stresses mess with inner guards like self-control and moral judgment, ultimately steering real-world behavior. Pinpointing this dynamic is key to crafting fixes that honor both grades and integrity.

1.1 Need of the Study:

Academic cheating is on the rise in schools, demanding a hard look at what's fueling it. Pressure from exams, family hopes, rivalries, and school demands stands out as a prime culprit. Yet solid data from India—especially Andhra Pradesh—remains scarce.

This work fills the gap by:

- Gauging how deeply academic stress sways teens' ethics.
- Probing differences by gender and setting (urban vs. rural).
- Arming schools and policymakers with insights for smarter assessments, lighter loads, counseling, and broader reforms.

1.2 Significance of the Study:

On the theory side, we advance the field by weaving academic pressure into ethical behavior models, spotlighting mediators like self-control and moderators such as gender and locale. This pushes Social Cognitive and Self-Regulation theories into fresh Indian territory.

Practically, it equips:

- Teachers to craft fairer evaluations that ease the strain.
- Schools to roll out counseling and emotional skills training for better self-mastery and ethics.
- Parents to rethink sky-high demands and their fallout on kids' choices.
- Leaders to champion well-rounded policies prizing honesty as much as high marks.

2. Review of Literature:

This section synthesizes key research on academic pressure and its ripple effects on students' ethical choices, spotlighting patterns, gaps, and theoretical anchors relevant to our Andhra Pradesh context.

1. **Murdock and Anderman (2006)** dove into the motivations behind student cheating through surveys of U.S. middle and high schoolers. They uncovered that intense classroom pressure—think relentless grading and competition—pushes kids toward dishonesty as a survival tactic. Crucially, they showed how a supportive environment (e.g., collaborative learning) buffers this, cutting cheating rates by fostering intrinsic motivation. This underscores the need to tweak school climates, a thread we'll pull in our study of Indian secondary students.
2. **Singh (2019)** surveyed Indian college students and linked heavy academic stress to spikes in anxiety, which in turn fueled plagiarism and copying. Using regression models, they quantified how parental and exam pressures amplified these risks, especially among high-achievers fearing failure. Their call for stress-relief workshops aligns with our focus, though it overlooks secondary schoolers and rural-urban divides—gaps we address here.
3. **Nweke et al. (2024)** zeroed in on African university students, employing structural equation modeling to reveal how stress erodes self-regulation. High workloads slashed self-control scores, indirectly boosting unethical decisions like exam fraud. With a mediation effect size of 0.35, their work spotlights self-control as a linchpin—mirroring our hypothesis that it partially mediates pressure's toll on ethics in Andhra Pradesh teens.
4. **Eshet (2024)** dissected Israeli high school data, showing institutional stressors like overload and rankings explained 42% of misconduct variance through logistic regression. Interventions like flexible deadlines curbed it effectively. Their emphasis on systemic fixes inspires our push for balanced reforms in competitive Indian settings.
5. **Yin, X., Lai, Q., & Guo, Y. (2025)**. Drivers of academic dishonesty: situational pressures versus student motivation crunched data from 1,200 Chinese students, confirming high-pressure milieus (e.g., gaokao prep) hiked cheating by 28% via propensity score matching. Cultural collectivism moderated this, suggesting context matters—fueling our localized lens on Andhra Pradesh's exam frenzy.
6. **Bandura's (1999)** Social Cognitive Theory ties it together: behavior emerges from triadic interplay of environment (pressure), personal factors (self-control), and actions

(ethics). This reciprocal model frames our study, positing pressure disrupts self-efficacy and moral disengagement in real-world school scenarios.

3. Objectives of the Study: This research pursues these core aims:

Assess levels and patterns of academic pressure among secondary school students in Andhra Pradesh. Evaluate ethical behavior in the context of academic stress, focusing on common lapses like cheating and plagiarism. Compare ethical conduct across gender (male vs. female) and location (urban vs. rural). Investigate the nature and strength of the association between academic pressure and ethical behavior.

4. Hypotheses of the study: Null hypotheses:

H01: No significant difference in ethical behavior between male and female students.

H02: No significant difference in ethical behavior between urban and rural students.

H03: No significant relationship exists between academic pressure and ethical behavior.

5. Methodology:

5.1 Research Design:

A quantitative descriptive-correlational design, ideal for mapping real-time associations between variables without experimental intervention.

5.2 Sample: The sample comprised 200 secondary school students (grades 9-12) from Andhra Pradesh, balanced as 100 males and 100 females; 100 from urban schools (e.g., Vijayawada) and 100 from rural areas. Stratified random sampling ensured representativeness across demographics.

5.3 Tools: Data collection relied on psychometrically sound, standardized instruments:

Academic Pressure Scale (APS): A 25-item Likert-type scale (1-5) by Rao and Kumar (2018), capturing multidimensional stress from exams, parental demands, peer rivalry, and workload. It boasts strong validity (convergent $r = 0.72$ with stress biomarkers) and reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$ in this study).

Ethical Behavior Inventory (EBI): 30-item scale adapted from Murdock and Anderman (2006), Prior use confirms excellent psychometrics; here, $\alpha = 0.84$, with test-retest $r = 0.81$.

5.4 Statistical Techniques:

Mean, SD, t-test, Pearson correlation and regression.

6. Conceptual Framework:

This study anchors in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1991) and Self-Regulation Theory (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), weaving them into a cohesive model that explains how academic pressure shapes ethical behavior.

Social Cognitive Theory posits behavior as a dynamic interplay of personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy), environmental influences (e.g., exam stress), and behavioral outcomes (e.g., cheating). Pressure acts as an environmental trigger, eroding moral disengagement—where students justify dishonesty to cope.

Self-Regulation Theory complements this by framing self-control as a finite resource depleted by stress, impairing impulse control and ethical judgment. High pressure drains this "muscle," heightening unethical shortcuts.

Integrated Model: Academic pressure exerts a direct negative effect on ethical behavior while indirectly channeling through self-control as a partial mediator. Gender and location moderate these paths—e.g., boys or urban students may face amplified effects due to competition norms.

Moderators:

- Gender (Male/Female): Stronger effects for males?

- Location (Urban/Rural): Intensified in urban high-stakes settings?

7. Data Analysis and Results:

Descriptive Statistics
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Academic Pressure	200	72.45	8.32
Ethical Behavior	200	58.30	7.15
Self-Control	200	65.20	9.10

Students reported moderate-to-high academic pressure (M=72.45, SD=8.32; range 40-100), with ethical behavior leaning low (M=58.30, SD=7.15; higher scores = better ethics). Self-control averaged 65.20 (SD=9.10).

Table 2: Gender-Wise Ethical Behavior Comparison

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	100	56.80	7.40	2.15	0.033
Female	100	59.80	6.70		

Table 3: Location-Wise Ethical Behavior Comparison

Location	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Urban	100	57.10	7.20	1.98	0.049
Rural	100	59.50	6.90		

Group Comparisons: Males showed weaker ethics (M=56.80, SD=7.40) than females (M=59.80, SD=6.70); $t(198)=2.15$, $p=0.033$, $d=0.31$ (reject H01). Urban students edged lower (M=57.10, SD=7.20) vs. rural (M=59.50, SD=6.90); $t(198)=1.98$, $p=0.049$, $d=0.28$ (reject H02).

Table 4: Correlation

Variables	R	p
Academic Pressure & Ethics	-0.62	<0.001

Correlation and Regression:

Academic pressure correlated negatively with ethics ($r=-0.62$, $p<0.001$), rejecting H03. Regression revealed pressure as a powerhouse predictor ($\beta=-0.61$, $p<0.001$), with gender/location adding nuance; model explained 48% variance ($F=62.4$, $p<0.001$).

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Ethical Behavior

Predictor	β	t	p	R ²
Academic Pressure	-0.61	-9.12	<0.001	0.48
Gender	0.18	2.45	0.015	

Location	0.14	2.01	0.046	
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Gender and Location moderating the strength of these paths (e.g., stronger pressure–self-control links among male and urban students).

8. Findings of the Study:

The findings consistently show that elevated academic pressure exerts a powerful negative influence on students' ethical behavior, confirming and extending prior research on stress and academic misconduct in different cultural contexts. The strong negative correlation ($r = -0.62$) and high predictive power ($\beta = -0.61$; 48% variance explained) highlight that pressure is not merely a background factor but a central driver of unethical practices such as cheating, plagiarism, and fabrication.

The partial mediation of self-control suggests that when students feel overwhelmed by examinations, parental expectations, and workload, their capacity to regulate impulses and adhere to ethical standards diminishes. This supports Self-Regulation and Social Cognitive perspectives, which emphasize that external pressures interact with internal resources to shape behavior. The observed gender and location differences further indicate that social and environmental contexts refine these relationships: male students and those in urban schools appear more vulnerable to ethical lapses under pressure, possibly due to higher competition and performance-oriented norms in these settings. These results align with studies showing that academic stress and weakened self-regulatory resources are associated with increased problem behaviors and academic dishonesty among adolescents. However, the present study adds value by focusing explicitly on secondary school students in Andhra Pradesh, a highly competitive Indian context, and by integrating self-control as a mediator within a structured conceptual framework.

9. Recommendations: Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Schools:

1. Redesign assessment systems to include continuous, low-stakes evaluations and project-based work, reducing concentration on high-stakes board exams.
2. Introduce structured counseling and socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs to strengthen self-control, emotional regulation, and ethical decision-making among adolescents.
3. Create peer-led integrity clubs or "honesty forums" to normalize ethical behavior and reduce the stigma around reporting misconduct.

For Teachers and Administrators:

1. Provide regular training on recognizing early signs of academic stress and on promoting ethical classroom cultures.
2. Implement transparent rubrics and clear expectations to minimize ambiguity that can push students toward cheating.
3. Encourage open discussions about academic integrity, using case studies relevant to Andhra Pradesh's context.

For Parents:

1. Reorient expectations from performance-only goals to holistic growth, emphasizing effort, resilience, and honesty.
2. Engage in calm, non-punitive conversations about pressure and its impact on decision-making, rather than using threats or comparisons.

For Policymakers:

1. Develop state-level guidelines that integrate ethical education and mental-health support into the secondary school curriculum.
2. Fund research and pilot programs on stress-reduction and ethical development, especially in rural and underserved areas.

10. Educational Implications:

The study carries several important implications for practice:

Curriculum and Pedagogy: Curriculum developers can embed modules on academic integrity, moral reasoning, and self-control strategies within existing subjects such as social science and life skills. This would help students internalize ethical norms as part of their daily academic experience rather than treating them as abstract rules.

Assessment and Evaluation: Results suggest that assessment reform—moving toward diversified, formative methods—can reduce the pressure that fuels dishonesty. Reducing over-reliance on a single board examination and emphasizing growth over rank can foster healthier academic environments.

Teacher Role: Teachers occupy a pivotal position in modeling and reinforcing ethical behavior. Consciously building trust, discussing the consequences of academic misconduct, and rewarding integrity can strengthen students' internalized moral compass and counteract pressure-induced unethical choices.

Holistic Education Policy: The findings support a broader shift toward holistic education policies that balance academic achievement with ethical, emotional, and social development. Viewing students not merely as exam performers but as future citizens reinforces the need for systems that prioritize integrity alongside excellence.

11. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that academic pressure significantly undermines the ethical behavior of secondary school students in Andhra Pradesh. The relationship is not only direct but also partially mediated by self-control, confirming that internal regulatory mechanisms buffer the impact of external stressors. Gender and location further moderate this dynamic, with male and urban students exhibiting relatively weaker ethical conduct under pressure. Overall, the findings underscore the need to shift from a purely achievement-driven model to a more holistic educational framework that actively nurtures ethical reasoning, self-regulation, and mental well-being.

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