

Peer Influence and the Normalisation of Examination Malpractice: The Moderating Role of Assertiveness Training in Counselling

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Abstract: The prevalence of examination malpractice in secondary and tertiary education continues to threaten academic standards and the credibility of qualifications in Nigeria and beyond. This paper examines how peer influence contributes examination malpractice and explores the moderating role of assertiveness training within counselling frameworks. The specific objectives were to investigate the mechanisms through which peer influence operates, analyse how collective norms reinforce malpractice, and evaluate the role of assertiveness-based counselling interventions in promoting ethical decision-making. The study is anchored in social learning theory, conformity theory, and the theory of planned behaviour, providing a conceptual lens for understanding both individual intentions and social pressures. A qualitative-analytical methodology was adopted, synthesising evidence from contemporary scholarship on peer influence, ethical behaviour, and counselling interventions. Findings indicate that peer modelling, fear of exclusion, and moral disengagement facilitate the normalisation of malpractice, while assertiveness training strengthens self-efficacy, refusal skills, and value-based decision-making, thereby moderating susceptibility to peer pressure. The paper recommends integrating assertiveness modules into school counselling programmes, promoting integrity-focused peer norm reorientation, and reinforcing institutional policies to uphold academic standards and foster graduate competence.

Keywords: Examination Malpractice, Peer Influence, Normalisation of Deviant Behaviour, Assertiveness Training, Counselling Intervention.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Examination malpractice has persistently undermined the credibility of educational assessments at both secondary and tertiary levels, emerging as a phenomenon that transcends national borders. Globally, it has been noted that between 15% and 25% of students engage in dishonest practices during high-stakes examinations, reflecting a widespread challenge to educational integrity. According to Boahen (2025), in Ghana, such behaviours are not sporadic but often organised, reflecting the influence of peer networks and social norms. Similarly, Ekundayo, Bamikole, and Afolabi (2023) argued that in Nigerian universities, administrative oversight alone has proven insufficient, as students frequently employ coordinated strategies including impersonation and examination leakage, suggesting that systemic measures cannot fully address the issue. Gulee, Dogonyaro, Micah, Musa, and Yayock (2024) further highlighted that in colleges of education across Nigeria's North-West geopolitical zone,

malpractice remains entrenched despite repeated policy interventions.

The social dynamics of academic dishonesty reveal that such misconduct is rarely a solitary act but often a product of peer reinforcement. As Igbe, Ethe, and Ossai (2023) explained, students frequently internalise peer-approved behaviours, perceiving them as necessary tactics to achieve academic success in competitive settings. In line with this, Adekalu et al. (2025) opined that repeated exposure to collective cheating gradually shifts individual moral perception, rendering malpractice an accepted, and at times expected, group practice. According to Boahen (2025), mechanisms such as conformity, fear of social exclusion, and moral rationalisation facilitate the normalisation of these behaviours within peer networks.

Despite growing research on examination malpractice, notable gaps persist, particularly in understanding how peer influence sustains these behaviours and how targeted

psychosocial interventions might disrupt the cycle. Adigun (2025) argued that most studies emphasise demographic or institutional predictors while overlooking students' capacity for ethical resistance. Similarly, Boahen (2025) explained that moral reasoning programmes often fail to account for the social pressures and behavioural patterns that normalise dishonesty. These gaps point to the need for integrative approaches that combine social, behavioural, and counselling perspectives.

In view of these considerations, the present paper examines the influence of peer dynamics on the normalisation of examination malpractice and investigates how assertiveness training within counselling interventions can moderate this relationship. According to Ekundayo, Bamikole, and Afolabi (2023), such interventions may empower students to resist peer pressure without compromising social inclusion. By synthesising empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives, this study aims to reframe examination malpractice as a socially mediated phenomenon and provide actionable insights for promoting integrity in educational settings.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

➤ *Peer Influence and Dimensions*

Peer influence is broadly understood as the process through which individuals' attitudes, behaviours, or decisions are shaped by the norms, expectations, or actions of their contemporaries. According to Wentzel (2025), peer influence extends beyond simple imitation, encompassing subtle forms of social regulation where students internalise group expectations in both academic and non-academic contexts. Mauti, Masagara, and Nyakwama (2025) argued that peer influence operates along multiple dimensions, including informational influence, where students adopt behaviours perceived as effective for achieving academic goals, and normative influence, in which the desire for social acceptance motivates compliance with group practices.

In educational settings, the intensity and direction of peer influence vary according to social structures, age, and the perceived authority of group members. As Atunde et al. (2023) explained, adolescents in secondary schools are particularly susceptible to peer endorsement due to ongoing identity formation and heightened sensitivity to social approval. Wellensiek, Ehlers, and Stratmann (2025) further noted that peer supervision or group monitoring within learning contexts can reinforce positive or negative behaviours, highlighting that influence is not solely coercive but also mediated through collaborative interactions and mutual accountability. Collectively, these dimensions indicate that peer influence is a nuanced construct, shaping students' engagement with academic norms and ethical decision-making in complex ways.

➤ *Examination Malpractice; Forms, and Emerging Patterns*

Examination malpractice refers to deliberate acts of dishonesty or misconduct aimed at securing undue academic advantage during assessments. As Adeniran, Bakare, and

Akinpade (2021) explained, malpractice encompasses a spectrum of behaviours, including impersonation, collusion, cheating during written or practical tests, and manipulation of examination materials. Mauti, Masagara, and Nyakwama (2025) opined that the phenomenon has evolved from isolated incidents to systemic practices in many secondary and tertiary institutions, reflecting broader socio-cultural and institutional pressures.

Emerging patterns of examination malpractice highlight the complex interplay of technological facilitation and social networks. According to Segun (2021), students increasingly exploit digital tools for communication and information sharing during examinations, often with the tacit support of peers. Atunde et al. (2023) further argued that collaboration among students during high-stakes assessments has become formalised in some contexts, demonstrating that malpractice is not only opportunistic but frequently embedded within peer-endorsed strategies. These developments suggest that examination misconduct is dynamic, socially reinforced, and resistant to purely administrative solutions, demanding a nuanced understanding of its social and behavioural determinants.

➤ *Normalisation of Deviant Academic Behaviour*

Normalisation of deviant academic behaviour refers to the process by which actions initially perceived as unethical become accepted, expected, or tolerated within a social group. As Adeniran, Bakare, and Akinpade (2021) explained, when students repeatedly observe peers engaging in malpractice without sanction, a collective perception emerges that dishonest conduct is normative and pragmatically justified. Wentzel (2025) opined that such normalisation is reinforced when students associate malpractice with tangible rewards, such as improved grades or social approval, leading to an attenuation of personal ethical standards over time.

The social mechanisms underpinning normalisation include conformity, moral rationalisation, and peer reinforcement. According to Mauti, Masagara, and Nyakwama (2025), students often justify unethical acts by citing peer participation, which diffuses individual responsibility and reduces moral dissonance. Atunde et al. (2023) argued that these dynamics are particularly pronounced in cohesive peer groups where loyalty and collective success are prioritised over adherence to formal rules. Consequently, the normalisation of deviant academic behaviour represents both a social and psychological phenomenon, illustrating how peer influence and group processes sustain misconduct and challenge conventional approaches to academic integrity.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

➤ *Social Learning Theory*

The social learning theory, as propounded by Albert Bandura (1977), posits that individuals acquire behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling within social contexts. According to Bandura, learning is not solely a product of direct reinforcement but also occurs vicariously when individuals witness the actions of others and the

consequences those actions attract. In educational settings, this implies that students may adopt both ethical and unethical behaviours depending on peer observation and perceived rewards. As explained by Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020), adolescents are particularly sensitive to the behaviour of significant peers; when high-performing students engage in examination malpractice without sanction, observers are more likely to imitate such conduct, perceiving it as an effective strategy for academic success.

Furthermore, social learning theory emphasises the importance of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation in the acquisition of behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Moyo and Mlangeni (2022) argued that peer-driven academic misconduct often satisfies these conditions: students attend to peers demonstrating cheating strategies, retain procedural knowledge of those acts, reproduce them in examination scenarios, and are motivated by anticipated academic gains or social approval. In the context of this study, the theory is particularly relevant because it provides a framework to understand how peer influence perpetuates the normalisation of malpractice, while highlighting the potential for interventions—such as assertiveness training—to disrupt these observational learning pathways by fostering ethical self-regulation.

➤ *Conformity and Group Norm Formation*

Solomon Asch's (1951) seminal work on conformity illustrated that individuals often align their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours with majority group opinion, even when such alignment contradicts their own judgement. According to Asch, the core assumption of conformity theory is that social pressure can induce compliance through the desire for acceptance, avoidance of ridicule, or perceived correctness of the group consensus. In academic environments, this suggests that students may engage in malpractice not solely out of personal intent but to align with perceived group norms, thereby avoiding social exclusion. As argued by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), peer compliance is amplified when behaviour is observable, sanctioned implicitly by the group, and associated with tangible or social benefits.

Moreover, conformity theory emphasises both normative and informational influences. According to Reicher et al. (2016), normative influence arises when individuals comply to gain social acceptance, while informational influence occurs when the group is perceived as a reliable source of behavioural guidance. In the context of examination malpractice, students may participate in unethical conduct because they perceive it as a standard practice within their peer group and assume that deviation may result in academic or social disadvantage. This study draws on these insights to explain how group norms can normalise deviant behaviour and why interventions that strengthen personal assertion, such as counselling-based assertiveness training, are necessary to empower students to resist conformity pressures.

➤ *Theory of Planned Behaviour and Subjective Norms*

Icek Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour (TPB) posits that behavioural intention is the most proximal determinant of action and is influenced by attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. According to Ajzen, subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure to perform or avoid a behaviour, and they strongly mediate the likelihood of action when individuals consider peer expectations significant. In the context of examination malpractice, as explained by Fishbein and Ajzen (2015), students' engagement is often shaped by the perceived approval or disapproval of peers, parents, and teachers, highlighting the critical role of social influence in ethical decision-making.

Further, TPB assumes that behaviour is not purely reactive but a product of deliberate evaluation of personal capabilities and social expectations. According to Armitage and Conner (2001), perceived behavioural control reflects the individual's assessment of their capacity to execute a behaviour successfully, which can either amplify or mitigate the influence of subjective norms. Applied to this study, assertiveness training may enhance students' perceived behavioural control, enabling them to resist peer-induced malpractice by bolstering confidence in their ethical choices. Thus, TPB provides a robust framework for understanding how peer influence interacts with individual agency in shaping both the adoption and rejection of deviant academic behaviours.

Bringing together social learning theory, conformity theory, and the theory of planned behaviour provides a nuanced lens for understanding examination malpractice as a behaviour shaped by social dynamics. As Bandura (1986) explained, students learn not only by observing their peers' actions but also by absorbing the unspoken rules those actions convey about what is acceptable within their academic communities. This idea is reinforced by Asch's (1951) work, which showed how the pressure to conform can guide behaviour even against personal judgement. Morrow and Rouse (2020) further argued that when observational learning and normative pressures intersect, isolated incidents of misconduct can become widespread and normalised across student groups. Incorporating the theory of planned behaviour adds depth by recognising that individual intentions and perceptions of control also matter; as McEachan et al. (2011) observed, subjective norms influence students' likelihood to cheat, but factors like self-efficacy and moral self-regulation can strengthen resistance to such pressures. In this context, assertiveness training emerges as a key moderating mechanism, equipping students with the confidence and skills to uphold academic integrity while navigating social expectations.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This paper adopts a qualitative analytic approach, drawing on critical review and synthesis of existing empirical and theoretical literature to examine the social dynamics of examination malpractice and the moderating role of assertiveness training. As explained by Creswell (2018), qualitative analysis allows for the systematic integration of diverse scholarly perspectives, enabling the development of conceptual models even in the absence of primary data. This approach is particularly suited to the present study, as it seeks to illuminate psychosocial mechanisms and counselling interventions that have been observed across multiple educational contexts rather than to test new empirical hypotheses. According to Patton (2022), synthesising findings from prior studies facilitates a deeper understanding of complex behavioural phenomena and supports evidence-based recommendations, thereby providing a rigorous foundation for the proposed integrative model on peer influence and academic integrity.

V. DISCUSSION

➤ *Peer Influence and the Social Construction of Examination Malpractice*

Yusuf et al. (2021) assert that peer influence exerts a profound effect on students' engagement with examination malpractice, operating through both overt and subtle mechanisms that shape behaviour in academic settings. As Atunde et al. (2023) explained, students frequently learn not in isolation but within peer networks where norms, attitudes, and strategies are communicated and validated. Direct instruction, such as demonstrating cheating techniques, coexists with indirect cues like observing peers achieve success without repercussions, allowing misconduct to be modelled and internalised. Mauti, Masagara, and Nyakwama (2025) argued that these processes illustrate how academic dishonesty is socially transmitted, with peer observation providing both procedural knowledge and tacit approval. In this way, cheating is learned as much through social interaction as through individual decision-making, highlighting the foundational role of peers in shaping ethical behaviour.

The influence of peer groups is further amplified by loyalty expectations and fear of social exclusion, which compel students to conform even when it conflicts with their personal values. Adeniran, Bakare, and Akinpade (2021) explained that resisting group-endorsed misconduct can result in social marginalisation, ridicule, or perceived disloyalty, creating powerful incentives for participation. Segun (2021) opined that collective rationalisation often accompanies this pressure, with students justifying malpractice as necessary for group success or survival. Wentzel (2025) argued that such dynamics embed misconduct within the social fabric of peer groups, making non-participation psychologically and socially costly. Together, these mechanisms illustrate that peer influence extends beyond simple suggestion, encompassing social expectations, moral rationalisation, and the compelling desire to maintain group membership.

Moral disengagement and diffusion of responsibility serve as additional psychological mechanisms through which peer influence sustains examination malpractice. Bandura (1999) explained that individuals can rationalise unethical behaviour by minimizing personal accountability or attributing responsibility to the group. In educational settings, students often justify cheating with statements such as "everyone is doing it," which diminishes personal guilt and ethical hesitation (Moyo & Mlangeni, 2022). Atunde et al. (2023) argued that when misconduct is organised collectively, individual culpability is blurred, enabling participation without full acknowledgement of ethical implications. This moral disengagement interacts with the social pressures described earlier, reinforcing participation in malpractice while normalising behaviour across peer networks.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate the centrality of peer norms in shaping academic dishonesty. As Yada and Nazif, (2025) observed in secondary schools, students were significantly more likely to engage in malpractice when they perceived peer approval or widespread participation. Adeniran, Bakare, and Akinpade (2021) similarly noted that in Nigerian secondary schools, peer behaviour strongly predicted individual engagement in cheating, independent of demographic factors. Wentzel (2025) further argued that repeated exposure to group-endorsed misconduct diminishes moral hesitation, creating a shared understanding that malpractice is acceptable or necessary for academic success. Collectively, these findings underscore that examination malpractice is socially constructed: it is not simply a product of individual choice but emerges from the interplay of peer modelling, conformity pressures, moral rationalisation, and observable group norms.

➤ *Normalisation of Examination Malpractice*

Examination malpractice often begins as isolated acts of individual deviance, yet over time, repeated participation and observation within peer groups can transform it into a collectively accepted behaviour. As explained by Oyekola, Ojuolape, and Akintayo (2025), students who witness peers engaging in unethical conduct without repercussions may gradually perceive such behaviour as normative, diminishing personal moral restraint. Fehintola, Ogunniyi, and Fehintola (2025) further argued that the transition from individual transgression to group-endorsed practice is facilitated by social reinforcement, where conformity and fear of exclusion encourage adherence to established peer behaviours. This gradual normalisation embeds misconduct into the social fabric of the academic environment, making it increasingly resistant to isolated disciplinary measures.

Cultural and institutional factors further reinforce the normalisation of malpractice, creating environments where unethical practices are tacitly tolerated or inadequately addressed. According to Ekim and Ekanem (2020), home and school variables, including parental supervision, school ethos, and institutional accountability, play a decisive role in shaping students' attitudes toward examination integrity. Similarly, Ekundayo, Bamikole, and Afolabi (2023) observed that in Nigerian universities, weak enforcement mechanisms

and inconsistent monitoring allow malpractice to persist, signalling to students that ethical breaches carry minimal consequences. Gulee, Dogonyaro, Micah, Musa, and Yayock (2024) argued that entrenched administrative lapses, combined with peer reinforcement, foster a culture in which cheating becomes socially acceptable, further normalising deviant academic behaviour across educational levels.

The consequences of such normalisation for academic integrity and graduate competence are profound. Igbe, Ethe, and Ossai (2023) explained that when malpractice is widely accepted, the reliability of assessment outcomes is compromised, undermining the credibility of qualifications and the competence of graduates. Fehintola, Ogunniyi, and Fehintola (2025) opined that students who repeatedly engage in normalized misconduct may develop habitual ethical disengagement, which extends beyond examinations into professional and civic life. Moreover, as Oyekola, Ojuolape, and Akintayo (2025) argued, the internalisation of group-endorsed deviance not only erodes individual moral standards but also perpetuates cycles of misconduct, creating cohorts of graduates whose skills and integrity are questioned by employers and society at large.

As highlighted by Ekim and Ekanem (2020), the normalisation of examination malpractice emerges from the interplay of individual susceptibility, peer reinforcement, and structural-cultural enablers. Therefore, interventions aimed solely at individual behaviour are insufficient; meaningful reduction of malpractice requires addressing both the social pressures that legitimise cheating and the institutional weaknesses that permit it. This perspective reinforces the need for psychosocial strategies, such as assertiveness training, to equip students with the capacity to resist peer-driven pressures while upholding academic integrity.

➤ *Assertiveness Training as a Counselling Intervention*

As explained by Islam, Abubakar, and Bello (2023), counselling provides structured opportunities for individuals to understand their behavioural patterns, manage social pressures, and develop adaptive coping mechanisms. Within this framework, assertiveness training represents a targeted intervention in counselling psychology, aiming to equip individuals with the skills to express thoughts, emotions, and ethical choices confidently while respecting social norms and others' rights. Kirana, Mutiah, and Prayona (2024) argued that such training is particularly effective for adolescents and young adults, as it strengthens self-regulation and resilience in the face of peer pressure, which is a critical factor in contexts of academic dishonesty.

The principles of assertiveness training centre on fostering self-awareness, clear communication, and the ability to maintain personal boundaries. Yosep et al. (2024) explained that structured exercises such as role-playing, modelling, and reflective discussion—encourage participants to identify situations where social pressures challenge their ethical choices, and to rehearse adaptive responses. Barasa (2020) highlighted that assertiveness interventions in peer counselling contexts cultivate proactive behavioural patterns, enabling students to resist compliance with group-endorsed

misconduct. Similarly, Blegur, Haq, and Barida (2023) emphasised that these principles are not only behavioural but also cognitive, integrating reflection on personal values and consequences of unethical conduct into training sessions.

Psychological mechanisms underpinning assertiveness training include enhanced self-efficacy, value assertion, and refusal skills. According to Kirana, Mutiah, and Prayona (2024), self-efficacy empowers students to believe in their ability to act ethically, even when facing collective peer pressures. Value assertion reinforces internalised moral principles, enabling individuals to prioritise integrity over conformity (Yosep et al., 2024). Refusal skills provide concrete strategies for declining participation in deviant behaviours without jeopardising social inclusion or relationships. Islam, Abubakar, and Bello (2023) observed that these mechanisms collectively reduce susceptibility to peer-induced misconduct and promote autonomous, ethically consistent decision-making.

The relevance of assertiveness training to ethical decision-making in examination situations is both practical and preventative. As Barasa (2020) explained, students trained in assertive behaviour are better able to navigate complex social contexts, resist peer suggestions to cheat, and uphold academic integrity. Blegur, Haq, and Barida (2023) further argued that by reinforcing self-regulatory capacities, assertiveness interventions enhance the likelihood of ethical choices translating into consistent behaviours, thereby contributing to the long-term development of responsible graduates. In essence, assertiveness training provides a structured, evidence-based pathway for mitigating the influence of peer pressure on academic dishonesty, supporting both moral and professional development.

➤ *Moderating Role of Assertiveness Training*

Within the context of examination malpractice, assertiveness training functions as a moderating factor, shaping how peer influence and the normalisation of misconduct translate into unethical academic behaviour. As explained by Islam, Abubakar, and Bello (2023), moderation in psychosocial interventions allows researchers and practitioners to identify protective factors that can buffer individuals from harmful social pressures, highlighting the conditions under which certain behaviours are more or less likely to occur. Kirana, Mutiah, and Prayona (2024) argued that students with assertiveness skills are more capable of articulating ethical decisions, refusing participation in malpractice, and maintaining social relationships without compromising integrity. Yosep et al. (2024) further explained that assertive behaviour disrupts the automaticity of peer influence, enabling students to critically evaluate the risks and moral implications of conformity before acting. In this sense, assertiveness operates as a practical mechanism that diminishes the direct effect of peer pressure on cheating, fostering autonomous decision-making even within socially coercive environments.

Beyond reducing conformity, assertiveness functions as a protective psychosocial competence, reinforcing self-efficacy, moral reasoning, and refusal skills. Barasa (2020)

highlighted that students trained in assertiveness demonstrate higher confidence in upholding ethical standards and experience reduced anxiety in ethically challenging situations. Similarly, Blegur, Haq, and Barida (2023) argued that assertiveness enhances coping strategies, allowing students to negotiate peer expectations without internalising deviant norms. By strengthening these psychosocial resources, assertiveness training creates resilience against the social and normative pressures that often underpin the normalisation of examination malpractice

Building on these insights, an integrative model can be proposed in which peer influence acts as the primary driver of engagement in examination malpractice, normalisation

represents the social reinforcement process that amplifies deviant behaviour, and assertiveness training serves as a moderating intervention. According to Oyekola, Ojuolape, and Akintayo (2025), such a model positions assertiveness not merely as a skill but as a psychosocial buffer that reduces susceptibility to peer-driven misconduct, enabling students to navigate ethical dilemmas with confidence. In this framework, the interaction between social pressures, collective norms, and individual competence highlights that academic dishonesty is not simply an individual failing, but the outcome of dynamic interplay between social, cognitive, and moral factors, which can be mitigated through structured counselling interventions.

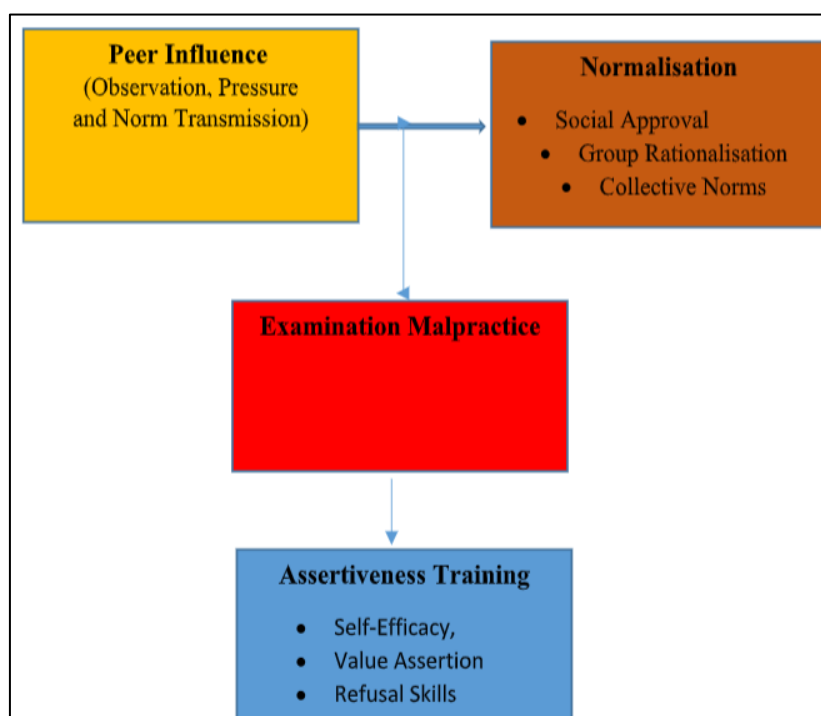


Fig 1: Integrative Conceptual Framework of Peer Influence, Normalisation, and Assertiveness Training in Examination Malpractice

VI. IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS FOR COUNSELLING PRACTICE AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Preventive counselling frameworks in schools and universities are essential to curb examination malpractice before it becomes habitual. By identifying students at risk and providing structured guidance, institutions can support moral awareness, self-regulation, and ethical decision-making. Embedding such frameworks within routine school activities helps normalise reflection on ethical conduct and reduces the perception that malpractice is socially acceptable.

Integrating assertiveness modules into guidance programmes strengthens students' capacity to resist peer pressures. Training in self-expression, value assertion, and refusal skills equips students to navigate ethically challenging situations confidently. These modules also foster resilience, allowing students to uphold integrity even when confronted

with peer-endorsed misconduct. By combining skill-building with reflective exercises, assertiveness interventions serve both preventative and empowering functions within the broader counselling framework.

Reorienting peer norms and promoting integrity education further reinforce ethical behaviour. Encouraging group discussions, participatory activities, and reflection on the consequences of malpractice can shift perceptions of what is acceptable within peer groups. This approach helps cultivate a culture in which honesty is celebrated and unethical behaviour is collectively discouraged. Aligning individual moral development with positive social norms strengthens the overall ethical climate in academic settings.

At the institutional level, policies must be clear, consistent, and enforceable. Transparent monitoring systems and fair disciplinary protocols signal that malpractice carries real consequences, reinforcing ethical expectations.

Supporting professional development for counsellors, teachers, and administrators ensures that preventive and educational initiatives are systematically implemented. When psychosocial interventions, normative reorientation, and institutional oversight operate together, they create an environment in which students are both capable and motivated to uphold academic integrity.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing examination malpractice requires a multi-layered approach that integrates social, psychological, and institutional strategies. The discussion highlights that malpractice is not merely an individual lapse but a socially mediated behaviour, reinforced through observation, conformity pressures, and collective rationalisation within student groups. Peer networks serve as conduits for transmitting both tacit and explicit norms, gradually legitimising deviant conduct and embedding it within the academic culture. The theoretical foundations drawing on social learning, conformity, and the theory of planned behavior clarify how individual intentions, perceived control, and normative pressures intersect to shape ethical decision-making in high-stakes academic context.

Assertiveness training emerges as a critical mechanism for mitigating the influence of peer pressure and the normalisation of malpractice. By enhancing self-efficacy, reinforcing personal values, and equipping students with refusal skills, assertiveness interventions provide both protective and empowering psychosocial resources. This suggests that counselling programmes integrating assertiveness modules can foster ethical resilience, enabling students to navigate peer-driven pressures while maintaining integrity. The practical relevance extends to both secondary and tertiary educational contexts, offering a proactive strategy for safeguarding academic standards and promoting responsible graduate competence.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. First, schools and universities should establish preventive counselling frameworks that identify at-risk students and provide structured guidance to reinforce ethical decision-making. Second, assertiveness modules should be embedded in guidance curricula to develop students' confidence and refusal skills, ensuring they can resist peer-endorsed misconduct without fear of social exclusion. Third, peer norm reorientation initiatives, such as integrity education and participatory workshops, should be implemented to cultivate a culture in which ethical behaviour is socially reinforced. Finally, institutions must adopt clear, consistent, and enforceable policies, complemented by transparent monitoring systems and professional development for educators and counsellors, to signal that malpractice carries tangible consequences.

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