

Plagiarism and Responsibility

BRIAN MARTIN*

Plagiarism is more prevalent in academia than normally acknowledged. Because it is a "taboo" topic, administrations are ill-equipped to investigate allegations of plagiarism. Two Australian examples are used to illustrate the need for more openness about and better procedures for dealing with this academic problem.

Plagiarism is not uncommon in academia, but its occurrence has received scant attention in public forums and hardly any in the scholarly literature. In this article I first describe the nature and extent of plagiarism in academia, and then use two Australian examples to illustrate the potential problems this poses for administrators.

The Nature of Plagiarism

Plagiarism has been defined as "the taking and using as one's own of the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another".¹ There are many varieties and degrees of plagiarism. I will deal here with plagiarism of written work in academia and science, although the problem is not limited to these areas.²

The most obvious and serious form of plagiarism is the direct stealing, without significant alteration, of another's work. This can be called *word-for-word plagiarism*. For example:

An earlier version of the first five chapters, which I had sent to several professional colleagues for their critical comments some years ago, was published without my knowledge or consent by one of them in a book of his own.³

Although there have been a number of spectacular examples of word-for-word plagiarism in recent years,⁴ it is not very common simply because exposure is so easy. For academics, the possibility of such exposure — even if exposure does not always occur — is a strong deterrent because of the likely damage to scholarly reputations.

Paraphrasing from unacknowledged sources is the more frequent and hard-to-detect form of plagiarism of writing. This can be called *paraphrasing plagiarism*. Let me consider a particular example. The following sentence is from *The Broken Connection* by Robert Jay Lifton.⁵

Ruth Benedict suggested that whole cultures could be classified according to the Nietzschean duality of Apollonian stress upon measure, control and moderation; and the Dionysian embrace of excess, of 'annihilation of ordinary bonds and limits of existence' in the struggle to 'break through into another order of existence'.*

Lifton's footnote * is to "Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of culture* (New York: New American Library, 1946)". Suppose I were writing an essay. The quotation of the original sentence directly from Lifton naturally would be acceptable, citing Benedict's book as being cited in Lifton's book. But if the sentence is paraphrased, there are various styles and degrees of plagiarism which are possible. Suppose I included this sentence:

I propose here that whole cultures can be classified according to this distinction: a stress on measure, moderation and control as made by the Apollonians, or a stress on annihilation of ordinary bonds and limits of existence in the struggle to break through into another order of experience as made by the Dionysians.

* Dr Brian Martin is a Research Associate in the Department of Mathematics, Faculty of Science, Australian National University.

This would constitute a blatant form of paraphrasing plagiarism: no credit is given to either Lifton, Benedict or Nietzsche. Next consider a more subtle paraphrasing plagiarism: suppose instead that I included this sentence:

Ruth Benedict, the anthropologist, has proposed that whole cultures can be classified according to a distinction made by Nietzsche: a stress on measure, moderation and control as made by the Apollonians, or a stress on 'annihilation of ordinary bonds and limits of existence' in the struggle to 'break through into another order of experience' as made by the Dionysians.*

Such a paraphrase from Lifton is acceptable, so long as the Lifton source is cited, though many would prefer the paraphrase to be rather less imitative of the original. Plagiarism arises when Lifton's understanding of Ruth Benedict's work, and the manner of expressing that understanding, is used without giving credit to Lifton. Thus, if I were to include the same footnote * as above, namely to Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, without consulting that book, and did not cite Lifton, then I would be guilty of plagiarism.

A type of *unconscious plagiarism* could arise if I were to consult *Patterns of Culture*, use the same quotes from it as Lifton does and reproduce in my essay a sentence similar to Lifton's without remembering that I had originally read the sentence in Lifton's book. This can happen quite inadvertently, especially to a person with a good memory for words and phrases.⁶

It is generally considered good scholarship to consult original sources. Thus if I note Lifton's reference to Benedict and as a result then study Benedict (or Nietzsche, etc.), this is commendable. If I develop my own understanding of Benedict's work, there is no need to cite Lifton. Even if my own understanding of Benedict is similar to Lifton's, it is not obligatory to cite Lifton, especially if his comments on Benedict are brief or obvious. On the other hand, if Lifton's analysis of Benedict is extensive and penetrating, then it is usually preferable to cite Lifton. Finally — and this is the crux — if I paraphrase Lifton, or use substantive interpretative ideas of his not found in Benedict, then I must cite Lifton — or be guilty of plagiarism.

It is important to separate out the elements involved here. Paraphrasing is a widespread practice, and is generally considered acceptable so long as the similarity is not too close. A direct quotation is considered preferable to a very close paraphrase. The assessment of what is "too close" is a matter of judgement and taste. As a rule of thumb, Brigid Ballard advises students at the Australian National University that if they have to re-read or look at the original source when summarising or paraphrasing an argument, then it is a close paraphrase and must be referenced.

Citation of unsighted primary sources (Benedict) is also considered acceptable and indeed is often quite useful. What is not acceptable is lack of citation of the secondary source (Lifton) when the primary source has not been consulted. (Such citation should be done for both the paraphrase and as the source of the citation to the primary source, if the primary source has not been consulted directly.⁷) This sort of plagiarism is well described as use of unacknowledged secondary sources, and can be referred to as *secondary source plagiarism*.

It is not always clear cut whether unacknowledged sources have been used in a given bit of suspected plagiarism, especially when the paraphrasing is dissimilar to the text of the secondary source. One of the ways used to highlight the alleged plagiarism is to set passages from a work next to passages from the unacknowledged original source which the work has allegedly plagiarised.⁸

When sources are given but it is suspected that unacknowledged secondary sources were used, two bits of evidence may strengthen the suspicion of plagiarism. One is the citation of obscure or inaccessible primary sources which could not reasonably have been consulted. For example, if I were to cite a Russian language source and you knew I did not read Russian, you might reasonably suspect me of using an unattributed secondary source (written or spoken). Another indication of secondary source plagiarism is the copied mistake. If the secondary source makes an incorrect quotation from the original source, and I were to make the identical mistake, you might reasonably suspect that I had not consulted the original. An apparent example of this sort of copied mistake made by Sir Ernest Titterton, a leading Australian proponent of nuclear power, has been documented in detail.⁹

So far as may be judged from available evidence,¹⁰ plagiarism is much more widespread than commonly acknowledged. Cheating and plagiarism are endemic at the undergraduate level, even to the extent of being able to support large-scale commercial operations in selling term papers.¹¹ To be fair, much plagiarism at the undergraduate level is not intended as cheating. Many students simply are not aware of the necessity to give credit for ideas and for passages paraphrased or quoted. Unfortunately, many academic teachers do little to explain scholarly practices in this area. But there is also a minority of students who consciously cheat, and it would be surprising if some of this did not persist into higher levels of the academic community.

Established academics usually cannot afford being exposed as having plagiarised written passages, and hence the most serious problem probably is the stealing of ideas, as in the intensely competitive field of high energy physics.¹² Typically this involves taking an insight or a line of argument directly from another work, but giving that work insufficient or no acknowledgement. That many academics feel that their research is not given appropriate credit is suggested by a survey in which 25% of 1309 scientists asked "Have you ever found that another scientist has published results you published earlier without referring to your work?" answered "yes, probably knew of my work".¹³

Some sorts of minor plagiarism are widespread. For example, it is easy to find examples in which a "classic" reference is cited in a series of research papers when in actuality it has not been consulted and no secondary source is credited.¹⁴

The Significance of Plagiarism

The significance of plagiarism can vary widely, depending on its extent, strategic location, and the context in which it occurs. An isolated instance of plagiarism — one sentence or paragraph, for example — would not usually be cause for concern, whereas a paper copied almost *verbatim* would be considered a gross violation of academic norms. Strategic location refers to centrality in an academic presentation. Plagiarism in crucial points of argumentation is more serious than in a largely extraneous literature review. Finally, the overall context of plagiarism must be considered: the nature of the contribution, scholarly or otherwise.

Even if plagiarism could be established in what is supposed to be original research, it would be necessary to determine its extent and strategic position before assessing its overall significance. Plagiarism is most serious in what purports to be original scholarly research. The previously cited instance of use of sources by Sir Ernest Titterton involved a synthesis of arguments and evidence, and clearly was not meant to appear to be original research.

Some types of secondary source plagiarism are generally accepted. For example, when using well known quotes ("Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely" — Lord Acton), sources are usually omitted entirely. In many newspaper and other journalistic articles, secondary sources are paraphrased freely, often without attribution, and the scholarly apparatus of documentation is normally omitted. Whether these forms *should* be accepted is another question.

Plagiarism is partly a consequence of the academic cult of individual creativity. It is possible to become so obsessed with allocating credit — in order to demarcate one's own contribution — that creative thinking is stultified. The result is scholasticism. Another casualty of the pressure for originality is cooperative work. Staff may forgo useful interactions to maintain the purity of their scholarly products. Students may be forced to forgo valuable cooperative learning to avoid penalties for cheating.

It is also important to assess plagiarism in the context of other violations of official academic morality. Some of these are:

- exploitation of students, technical or support staff, wives or junior colleagues, for example, by claiming undue credit for work that is primarily or solely theirs;¹⁵
- stealing of ideas without proper credit;¹⁶
- blocking of appointments, promotions or publications for personal or ideological reasons;¹⁷
- presenting fraudulent results.¹⁸

It is worth noting that plagiarism of written material is something which, if detected, often can be fairly readily verified. By comparison, many of the above violations of academic norms often *cannot* be clearly substantiated. So in a way it is somewhat unfair to focus on plagiarism when these other sorts of violations are left unrectified.

Two Australian Examples

To illustrate the problems presented to academics and administrators by allegations of plagiarism, two illustrative cases are presented here. My intention here is not to assess the validity of any claims concerning plagiarism, but rather to underscore some wider issues raised by the cases.

Case 1.

Alan J. Williams received his PhD in the Department of Commerce at the University of Western Australia in 1975.¹⁹ In 1977 Dr Williams took up a professorship in the Department of Commerce at the University of Newcastle.

Dr Michael Spautz was a senior lecturer in the same department at the University of Newcastle. In the second half of 1978, Dr Spautz brought to Professor Williams's attention certain questions about the methods and conclusions in Professor Williams's PhD thesis. And From May 1979 Dr Spautz began alleging that Professor Williams's thesis contained plagiarised passages, namely the use of unacknowledged secondary sources.²⁰

Dr Spautz received no response to his satisfaction concerning his allegations, and he gradually publicised his claims more and more widely. This led to two university inquiries, which focussed on Dr Spautz's behaviour. In May 1980 Dr Spautz was dismissed from his tenured position by the University Council. The issues raised by the dismissal are treated elsewhere.²¹

In spite of repeated requests by Dr Spautz, his allegations of plagiarism have not been officially investigated.

Case 2

(This case is presented with names and some details changed to protect the identity of those involved.²²)

Ruth Smith had recently completed her PhD in statistics at a major Australian university, and had several research papers published or submitted for publication. A leading researcher in Dr Smith's field of specialisation, Professor Jones from the United States, alleged that one of Dr Smith's papers included material plagiarised from his own work. When Dr Smith applied for a position at a US university, Professor Jones made a strong intervention to oppose her candidature, especially by making serious charges of plagiarism.

A professor at the US university later wrote to Professor Jones asking for specifics and amplification of his allegations, but none was forthcoming. The case then dropped from view as Dr Smith continued her career in Australia. But although the charges of plagiarism were never made openly, they led to continuation of rumours concerning the status of Dr Smith's work. In addition, documents alleging plagiarism were placed in Dr Smith's personal file where she worked — unknown to her for many years — and used to help prevent her promotion.

Responsibility²³

In many cases, administrations appear to avoid responsibility for looking into allegations about plagiarism. When Dr Spautz raised criticisms of Professor Williams's thesis with the University of Newcastle administration, he was informed this was a matter for the University of Western Australia which had awarded the PhD.²⁴

When Dr Spautz approached the University of Western Australia asking that action be taken about the thesis, responsibility was placed on the examiners of the thesis and on observation of formal procedures.²⁵ The issue could not be taken up with the examiners since they are anonymous, at least officially. Anonymity is a source of and cover for a number of abuses in academia.²⁶ From Dr Spautz's view this abdication of responsibility was an attempt to suppress his criticisms and hence contributed to the vociferousness of his public campaign.

The Smith case illustrates another type of refusal of responsibility: the refusal of a person alleging plagiarism to provide substantiating evidence. In the present climate in which plagiarism is virtually unmentionable publicly, allegations can be very damaging even in the absence of convincing proof. In such cases, when allegations are made leading to rumours and damage to scholarly reputations, it seems that there is no institutional responsibility to provide opportunities for those accused to clear their names. Open adjudication procedures and a more realistic attitude to the frequency and significance of plagiarism would help overcome this unfair consequence for those accused.

It can also be argued that an institution which places material alleging plagiarism on a person's personal file has a responsibility to inform the person, and to allow the material to be challenged and removed if found unproved. Lack of responsibility on this issue is especially grave if staff are not allowed convenient access to their files.

Procedures

First, it is plain that there is a dearth of procedures for addressing cases of alleged plagiarism. This means that those alleging plagiarism, such as Dr Spautz and Professor Jones, have no ready forum to state their case, and likewise that those accused of plagiarism such as Professor Williams and Dr Smith have no obvious scholarly avenue to clear their name. (When charges of plagiarism are made publicly, the accused person could sue the accuser for defamation. Professor Williams has not done this.)

There is nothing to prevent the establishment of special committees, review procedures, and even special journals for treating these cases. There would be some difficulties no doubt, such as defamation law, but there would seem to be no insurmountable obstacles. A proper academic procedure should be welcomed by those alleging plagiarism, so that they can see cases given fair, impartial assessment, and by those incorrectly accused of plagiarism, so that their reputations can be cleared in an acceptable manner.

Second, in cases in which plagiarism can be reasonably established, there are few accepted procedures for applying sanctions. In most cases administrations have the formal power to investigate and penalise transgressions such as plagiarism. But these powers are almost never used for this purpose. Perhaps it is expected or hoped that all exposed plagiarists will automatically resign or otherwise atone for their transgressions, or that the embarrassment will disappear in some other way. Manifestly this will not happen all the time, especially considering the range and varying degrees of plagiarism.

As discussed before, some types of plagiarism are very widespread. Of course, the commonness of wrongdoing does not excuse the individual transgressor. But it is here that the academic community closes ranks. Because plagiarism is generally considered a clear cut transgression — by non-academics as well as academics — and because it is much more widespread than normally acknowledged, publicity on this topic is assiduously avoided by academics. If regular and above board procedures were established to judge allegations of plagiarism by academics, there would be several important consequences.

First, there would be a reduction in cheating, achieved mainly by the promoting of wider awareness of prevailing scholarly standards. This would mean that genuinely original work would be more likely to receive proper credit, without the debasement resulting from a climate of cheating and suspicions about it.

Second, the public image of academics could take a severe battering if the "dirty linen" of plagiarism were displayed openly. Indeed, this is happening already due to the increasing number of publicised cases of fraudulent results. Yet in the long run such publicity would permit a much more realistic understanding of the human limitations of academics, who after all are people with ethical failings like anyone else.²⁷

A third consequence of open and routine procedures for handling cases of alleged plagiarism would be a shake up of the academic hierarchy. If substantiated plagiarism were considered to warrant stiff penalties — and as noted above, there are no widely agreed-upon sanctions — then those academics high in status and power would have much more to lose. Because plagiarism can be investigated years or decades later,

anyone who had once plagiarised would henceforth be vulnerable to exposure. A taste of this is found in exposes of flaws and cheating by eminent figures such as Cyril Burt and Isaac Newton.²⁸

It is apparently because of these latter two consequences that many leading academics and administrators are extremely reluctant to take action against plagiarist colleagues — especially against senior academics. Plagiarism is treated more as a taboo topic than as a normal, albeit undesirable, feature of scholarly life.²⁹ This is unfortunate, since it is through exposure that the incidence of plagiarism and other violations of proper academic behaviour is most likely to be reduced.

Implications

Until standard and open procedures for handling claims of plagiarism are established and accepted, it seems that rigid and unrealistic attitudes toward these occurrences, to their significance, and to responsibility for them will prevail. This conclusion applies equally whether any particular charges of plagiarism are sustainable or significant or neither. However, neither improved rules and procedures by themselves, nor changes in attitudes by themselves, would be sufficient to remedy the situation.

It has been argued here that it would be desirable to establish formal procedures for addressing cases of alleged incompetence or plagiarism, for example, by the formation of investigatory panels to look into suitably presented allegations, in a way not permitting responsibility for investigation to be avoided by referring it to others. But until attitudes towards plagiarism become more realistic, in terms of recognising the actual extent of and the degrees of plagiarism, and their significance in relation to other violations of standards of scholarly behaviour, such investigations could well be unfair for those accused. So perhaps what is first needed is more openness and publicity about plagiarism and similar issues. But then again the establishment of formal procedures and some exemplary investigations would help in attaining this.

A strong force restraining any of these developments is the vested interest most academics, and especially leading academics, have in the image of scholarly activity which is free of the slightest taint of scholarly "sins" such as plagiarism. As long as tertiary administrations, and academics generally, avoid openly mentioning and avoid taking responsibility for such "taboo" topics, cases such as those discussed here will continue to occur.

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David Blatt gives the following example. In the nuclear physics literature various authors define the Euler function $P(u)$, a particular function of the variable u . There are at least two distinct definitions of $P(u)$ in the literature, differing by a factor of 15. In each case the original 1937 paper by Euler, in German, is cited. However, the function $P(u)$ was not actually defined in Euler's paper. (For definitions of Euler's function see references 1, 2, 3, 4, 15 and 16 in Blatt, D. W. E. & McKellar, B. H. J. "Three-Body Force in Nuclear Matter", *Physical Review* C11 (1975) 614-620.)
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29. For example, a handbook of research methods (Barzun, J. & Graff, H. F. *The Modern Researcher*. Rev. ed. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), apparently has no mention of plagiarism or other related transgressions. Although this omission may stem from a feeling that such violations of scholarly standards are too obvious to warrant discussion, the actual prevalence of such occurrences belies this assumption.