

## Plagiarism- Cut it at the roots



It's traditional that all articles on plagiarism start with a definition. The Oxford dictionary defines it as "The practice of taking someone else's ideas or work and passing them off as one's own". In other words it is theft. In the words of Joseph Buckwalter, it is an assault on the integrity of scientific research. Plagiarising another individual's work is theft and plagiarizing one's own work is deception [1].

Plagiarism is an evil that has taken the academic world by storm. No, not just the academic world, it has affected us in ways we do not see and in every sphere of life. Whether it be plagiarism of academic content and research papers or plagiarism of movie scripts or soundtracks, it exists and is very much part of our lives. A recent post in the New York Times exposed a US Senator of plagiarizing his thesis costing him his degree [2]. The senator named has gone on record to apologize for his misconduct. The news media constantly cites incidents of plagiarism in the music and film industry, well known composers in Indian popular film music have been known to be INSPIRED by tunes from western music. Inspiration indeed, imitation is certainly not the sincerest form of flattery in all instances.

It's far more difficult in the academic world! A meta-analysis by Fanelli revealed a pooled weighted average of 1.97 percent of scientists admitting to falsifying, fabricating or modifying data at least once [3]. He reported this could be less than the actual value considering the sensitive nature of questioning in the surveys. When other questionable research practices were included the value was much higher. It was also found that misconduct was reported more frequently by medical or pharmaceutical researchers than others. Anil Jain, the former editor of the Indian Journal of Orthopedics, reported in 2010 that 10-15 publications were rejected by the IJO for plagiarism every year [4].

The number worldwide is probably much higher. The tragedy with plagiarism is that it may go undetected and ignorance is the usual defense. The increasing number of journals and publications makes it difficult for editors and reviewers to stay abreast of papers in a given speciality and this makes it even more difficult to detect plagiarism [1].

Let's take our post graduates, for example. They are required to present seminars and projects and a dissertation during their training cycle. It is astonishing how many of these are blatantly copied from the net, in other words, plagiarized. The training in plagiarism begins there itself. The number of dissertations that are plagiarized is far underreported. In addition, the extent of "copy and paste" that exists in each dissertation can often be difficult to estimate as it is often woven into the text cleverly to mask the plagiarism. Clever use of words and subtle change of titles can lead to duplicate submissions that go undetected. A senior professor in our institute once told me of his experience of dissertations in the same batch of students which were found to be identical, and despite rejection, the university in charge ignored the report of the neutral external reviewer and approved the research. Many universities now insist on a mandatory clearance of a plagiarism check and set percentages that are acceptable. This is indeed a welcome move and a good way to set checkpoints in this early research experience that the student undergoes. Our institution insists on less than 15 percent.

The blatant use of slides, pictures and material from the internet on seminars, without adequate citation and acknowledgment of sources, is another example of early training in plagiarism.

Let's go a little backwards in the educational cycle. In the past school children were asked to produce a write up on topics being taught, and were asked to refer to books, newspapers and libraries to do the same. Many school children are now encouraged by teachers to use the internet and use material from sources on the internet. Busy working parents strapped for time and plagued with children's homework find this to be an easy route. This, in my humble opinion, leads to an early grounding in indiscriminate use of available resources. Whilst this is a poor excuse for books, it is also an inappropriate way of training the child, the child needs to be told that material from the net too has copyright and needs to be acknowledged when he uses it. This would ground them in ethics very early in life.

Now why do scientists plagiarize? Most of the time it is the easy way out. It could be the fear of writing in an unfamiliar language, a handicap in being able to summarize findings from another paper in one's own words. It may be a lack of reasoning and ability to critically analyze the data being quoted. At times, it is plain carelessness and laziness. One must not forget the huge pressures on academics to publish to further their careers and their ambitions.

Ignorance is a poor excuse for plagiarism. The roots lie in the way we train the younger generation. We need to encourage originality. The presence of the internet and the wide accessibility of ready to use knowledge of all types makes “copy and paste” a rampant evil with far reaching consequences. The indiscriminate reproduction of the printed word without adequate citation is an insult to the academic world.

In my limited experience, review articles and case reports are highly susceptible and can often be extensively plagiarized. However even letters to the editor are not free from the menace of copy and paste [7]. Sharma et al [7] observed that inexperienced authors may, to a certain extent be responsible for plagiarism, but senior authors also submit plagiarized manuscripts, probably because of the dependence on juniors who write the papers or simply a pressure to publish.

Is there such a thing as accidental plagiarism or incidental plagiarism? Well, in my opinion and those of others it does exist but is usually not pardonable, it is a lame defense for something that is glaringly obvious. Mason [5] has said that sometimes entire sections of the methods section may resemble other studies which use similar research methods. This is very obvious when salami publications (spliced publications, multiple publications from sections of the same research work) are published. This in fact may be a method to recognize salami publications. Plagiarism of data and results is considerably less acceptable and small degrees of plagiarized text may be overlooked or accepted with modification by editors [5].

Now how do you tackle the menace? Much has been done to stem the impact of plagiarism, academic censures and penalties are effective deterrents to academic researchers. To editors and reviewers, plagiarism detecting software (both paid and unpaid or free versions are easily available) is a boon indeed. Whilst they may not be a hundred percent effective they certainly add a weapon to the armory of the intrepid reviewer seeking to detect scientific misconduct. These tools can also be used by authors to check inadvertent plagiarism. A good practice is to write by hand when copy and paste becomes virtually impossible, and then transcribe important passages into the text. When quoting verbatim, cite correctly, cite as often as needed and use inverted commas. Plagiarism can plague you many years after you think you have gotten away with it; all misconduct eventually catches up, one way or the other. In that we may consider the internet to be a boon as nothing stays a secret any longer.

It is essential to be aware and cautious in your scientific writing and avoid plagiarism by being excessively careful. Do not copying entire passages and juggle words, as is common practice. When lot of material needs to be used, seek appropriate permissions and rights. Crenshaw [6] has said that transfer of copyright by authors means that the copyright of the material, rests with the publishers, including images, data and text. Permission is to be obtained, if necessary with a fee, to reproduce this material. This applies even to the author who has published the said material. It's no use defending yourself by feigning ignorance, there's no way out, it's a crime of the highest order in scientific and research circles.

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