

Plagiarism and Self plagiarism from the perspective of academic authors

Lesley Pocock (1)

Mohsen Rezaeian (2)

(1) Publisher and Managing Director,
medi+WORLD International,
Australia

(2) Professor Mohsen Rezaeian
PhD, Epidemiologist
Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department
Occupational Environmental Research Center
Rafsanjan Medical School
Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences
Rafsanjan, Iran

Abstract

This paper looks at the background and history of plagiarism and self plagiarism, reviews aspects of academic self plagiarism from the academic, the institution and publisher's point of view and provides a handy check-list of the current definitions and requirements.

Key words: plagiarism, self plagiarism

History and Background

The concept of plagiarism goes back many centuries. The word plagiarism derives from Latin roots: plagiarus, an abductor, and plagiare, to steal. The first recorded case of plagiarism was by the roman poet Martial who lived from 40 AD to somewhere between 102 and 104 AD. Prior to that the concept was seen in a positive manner as a way of passing down and disseminating great works of literature or art. This likely carried on the previous tradition of humans passing down histories and ideas by word of mouth. (1)

Written material like religious texts were once freely copied and incorporated into later works, and good writing usually meant slavishly imitating a small number of respected authors. However, poets, and playwrights tended to protect their original works. (1,2,3,4)

During the Renaissance, original scholarship became more respected and individual accomplishment was recognized in many more fields than it had been previously (for example, this is when painters began signing their works). By the mid 1600s, accusations of plagiarism and stealing ideas were common in every creative field including the sciences. (1,2,3,4)

The modern concept of plagiarism as immoral, and originality as an ideal, emerged in Europe only in the 18th century, particularly with the Romantic Movement which then extended the idea to art and the visual image. (1,2,3,4)

The first English copyright law was passed in 1709. It had as much to do with protecting the rights of publishers against book piracy as it did with protecting the author's rights against unscrupulous printers, but authors' rights developed very quickly.(5)

However the precise definitions of plagiarism evolved during the 20th century. The word “plagiarism,” in the sense we use it today, first appeared in English in the various battles among Shakespeare and his peers. The Oxford English Dictionary credits Ben Jonson with being the first to use it in print. The word they used was “plagiary,” which is a Latin term for a type of kidnapper or illegitimate slaver. (5)

While the concept of plagiarism has generally been positively accepted, one of the most famous cases of the adverse effects of plagiarism on highly reputable and well intentioned authors involved Charles Darwin in his publishing of “The Origin of the Species” in 1859.

Alfred Russel Wallace, a contemporary of Darwin was also independently working on the same issues: disease and famine, what kept human and other populations in check, recent discoveries, particularly newly observed fossil evidence showing the tremendous age of earth, and how this affected species over great periods of time. (6)

Wallace, in what can be seen as a huge strategic mistake on his part, wrote up and sent his ideas to Charles Darwin who was also a naturalist of great repute. Darwin had also been working on the same issues for decades, but vacillating about publishing due to some of the more controversial aspects of his work, namely the evolution of humans themselves, and decided to quickly publish and get his work out before Wallace (6). The rest is history. This is a prime example of the maxim ‘publish or perish’ and while both authors/researchers had original work and had high integrity, the process itself made one a winner and one a loser.

Current definitions of Plagiarism and Self Plagiarism

While there is some conjecture and controversy currently as to the precise definition and interpretation of plagiarism and self plagiarism, the established protocols, used and recommended by most current academic journals can be found in the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals www.icmje.org and the COPE Code of Conduct http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/New_Code.pdf. (7, 8) These are usually displayed on the websites of each academic journal as Author Information or Instructions to Authors.

The definition of plagiarism is more straightforward, deliberate theft of another’s intellectual property, however the definition of self plagiarism is a totally different issue and one that encompasses many issues both within the influence of the author and those which the author has no direct say over. It can also be subjective and not without bias or legal and economic sequelae.

On the one hand there are some who would argue that using large sections of text from one or more previously published papers in a paper presented as ‘original’, is almost fraudulent (9).

The New England Journal of Medicine insists that Authors should submit to the Editor copies of any published papers or other manuscripts in preparation or submitted elsewhere that are related to the manuscript to be considered by the journal. However, it is clearly unacceptable to submit the same paper to two different journals with the intention of the paper being perceived as two separate, original pieces. (9)

Publishers and Self Plagiarism

While assuming that most publishers are inherently reputable and have their own valid concerns they also have to deal in the legal (and subsequent economic sequelae) of copyright. This is further compounded in academic publishing by the re-use of journal articles in the major databases under exclusive or non-exclusive contracts.

What is deemed unacceptable duplication may contravene copyright law or violate copyright licenses. It is one of the reasons that when issues of plagiarism arise that the publishers firstly get together with the author and the involved academic institution if there is one, and try to sort out the problem between themselves before it becomes a point of law. A resolution is usually argued successfully and usually results in one or more of the publishing houses withdrawing that publication. The academic institutions involved then take their own measures internally.

Copyright of an academic’s work is normally transferred to the publisher as a requirement of publication in scientific, medical and academic journals. Therefore plagiarism and self plagiarism is a copyright violation and the publisher concerned is the one legally liable, unless they have grounds to sue the other party or parties.

It is the obvious reason why plagiarism and self plagiarism can tend to be a punitive rather than a conciliatory approach on behalf of publishers. A ‘winner’ is usually decided upon and that winner retains copyright of the given work.

Self-plagiarism takes on yet another dimension as an issue of integrity, additional to the legal and copyright concerns of publishing houses. The reputation of the academic publishing house (or academic institution) can be diminished if they are seen to publish repetitive and non original material even though papers may have been deemed to be original at the time of acceptance. Electronic software can be used by such publishing houses and we will discuss this further on, but this does not get around issues of submission of the manuscript concurrently to two different publishing houses, or unintentional plagiarism or self plagiarism and indeed electronic software can encourage deliberate concealment of aspects of similarity.

The reputable academic author is best advised to discuss any concerns on these matters with their academic institution and the preferred publisher prior to, or at time of submission. They should also try to do as much research and cover as much ground as possible to ensure their work

is original, but allowing for the fact that some academics will have access to greater information resources than others.

The other obvious aspect is full attribution of all other sources of their material be it their own earlier publications or references from other works, as far as is humanly possible. Others, academicians and publishers, can then judge for themselves, prior to publication if they find the use of those sources admissible or not.

These same parties, academic institutions and publishers, should, have a wider and greater knowledge of the existence of other works on the same topic than the author, and will have their own resources to consult.

An academic publishers' editorial on this topic states "Self plagiarism comes down to the central issue of deception, were the authors trying to deceive the editors, the referees, and the readers into presenting recycled data, text and figures as entirely new material ?"(10)

Detecting plagiarism

Electronic software can provide users with a 'copying' and 'similarity' report through online searches and the most widely used is "Turnitin" (11). While these are good first line tools for publishers, institutions and academics they can actually encourage fraud and plagiarism, including self plagiarism. A quick check by running your material through such software, readily highlights what needs to be changed or paraphrased. This does not alter the content, or the source of the content, rather it assists in veiling it. An articulate person, such as an academic, can be quite skilled at re-presenting written work.

While a good first line tool, the issue goes way beyond running work through electronic software. Electronic software while giving a lot of detail does not show 'intention to deceive' and much implied deception, especially in the non English speaking world, can come down to lack of language skills and lack of availability of proper and relevant information and assumed inherent knowledge (17).

Attribution, referencing, showing sources and particularly discussion with all parties concerned would be the ideal approach and this currently happens to a fair degree but it cannot show intention to deceive. Currently the best and fairest way to do that would be psychological assessment and indeed a court of law. For practical reasons this does not occur, leaving the process somewhat subjective and open to bias or influence.

Dealing with plagiarism and misconduct

While details of dealings and consequences can be found clearly and in full in journals and on their websites the current accepted processes are listed as follows:

Pursuing misconduct by Editors

Editors have a duty to act if they suspect misconduct. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers. Editors should not simply reject papers that raise concerns about possible misconduct. They are ethically obliged to pursue alleged cases.

Editors should first seek a response from those accused. If they are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the relevant employers or some appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body) to investigate.

Editors should follow the COPE flowcharts where applicable (7,8).

Editors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a proper investigation is conducted; if this does not happen, Editors should make all reasonable attempts to persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem. This is an onerous but important duty.

Ensuring the integrity of the academic record: Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it must be corrected promptly and with due prominence. If, after an appropriate investigation, an item proves to be fraudulent, it should be retracted. The retraction should be clearly identifiable to readers and indexing systems.

Relations with journal owners and publishers.

The relationship of Editors to publishers and owners is often complex but should in each case be based firmly on the principle of Editorial independence. Notwithstanding the economic and political realities of their journals, Editors should make decisions on which articles to publish based on quality and suitability for readers rather than for immediate financial or political gain. (7,8)

Discussion

If the intention to deceive is the defining quality, especially when it comes to something nebulous like writing up of "ideas and knowledge" we are right to ask, who is qualified to judge? It would seem the job of a psychologist or an expert legal team in defining the intention to deceive if maximum fairness is to be achieved. This can happen. If plagiarism or self plagiarism is unintended authors can still feasibly have their work rejected on other grounds, legal and copyright. People's lives and livelihood are at stake in these cases. If there is no 'direct evidence' of intention to deceive (one way or the other) rulings can only be subjective. The rule of law adopted by most countries is the assumption of innocence until guilt is proved. The International Copyright Act under which most journals are published, while inherently sensible is somewhat more mechanical and driven by process, rather than relying on absolute truth.

"Ireland's (2009) editorial guidance to authors, whose work has been initially rejected by reviewers, may be useful in this context. Ireland states that for a paper to be considered

a 'new submission', it must meet all three of the following criteria: "(1) address modified or new research questions, (2) use new theoretical arguments, and (3) use additional or new data to test the proposed relationships (Ireland 2009, p. 10)." (9)

In seeking a definition of self-plagiarism in an Australian pilot study, lack of clear guidelines led the publishers to rely on the concept of 'fair use' according to the Australian Copyright Act which considers 10% textual re-use as acceptable. The British Medical Journal also uses a baseline of 10%, by requiring authors to send previous publications that overlap by more than 10%. (9,12)

The above quotes are a question in point. They do not identify 'intention to deceive' and do not clearly identify the purpose or type of article, or the purpose or the way in which the material has been re-used, rather it is an arbitrary percentage, a convenient process.

In essence if we are going to be completely fair to all concerned then each case of student, academic or commercial plagiarism, needs to be worked out on its own merits in a court of law.

Marking a student or academic 'down' for perceived and subjective intentional plagiarism can be just as much a crime against them and their future prospects in life and their academic reputations so should never be less than fully studied.

Unfortunately most of this is argument and conjecture and does not provide an answer - rather it shows that without an exact and legal process that is fully adhered to and consistent across all academic institutions and academic publications, there is no answer and the system may be flawed and subjective as a result.

Also the heavy requirements on academics to publish whether there is research of any importance or reputations happening at their institution or if there is anything of significant merit to report or not, may be causing the problem. Maybe there should be less emphasis on number of publications and more on the merit of publishing particular research or study.

While deliberate fraud is unacceptable one major and seemingly obvious issue argued here is the assumed deception by authors in self plagiarism cases, when we should assume the opposite, that most academic authors have high integrity. It could be argued that some aspects of what is deemed self plagiarism may in fact be restrictions of academics' rights (restriction of fair trade) by institutions and publishers along with normal human issues, like impaired memory over time. Additionally an author may find very valid reasons to build on and further develop a work already done. Such is the way in the pursuit of knowledge.

Regarding who is qualified to judge the intention to deceive, currently it seems to be the one seen to have the most

to gain or lose from that judgement, e.g. the university or journal to which the paper was submitted.

Too often authors are left in legal and copyright limbo and there has been little to no discussion on the rights of the academic author. Most arguments relate to legal and copyright issues of publishers.

There are very few 'new ideas' in this world. Indeed in medicine, Updates are an essential part of medical practice, as new medical techniques and therapeutics, are devised and Continuing Medical Education and proper patient care depend on this constant re-assessment. The 'shelf life' of medical education and publications therefore is deemed to be 2-5 years from a medical publisher's perspective. If the time factor in this case was also incorporated with the 10% re-use limit there should be a different set of rules for plagiarising in the medical publishing field. An author may be remiss not to re-visit their own and other's previous published work.

Rather than labelling re-use of what is essentially ongoing research and development, i.e. an author's intellectual property and ideas, as academic fraud, we may need more common sense and justice applied.

There seems to be some consensus that 'individual' or 'manual' assessment of an academic's publication is the preferred route where a multiplicity of factors can be viewed, but this does not help the academic author prior to the writing of the paper and the 'personal', manual' approach is still subjective and open to bias, be it academic or personal bias or publisher bias.

Authors therefore need to be seen less as potential criminals, rather, the positive aspects of clearly presenting their (new) work and making it easier for them to adapt to the many situations academic authors face, should be the focus from all concerned in the process. Evaluation of what is self plagiarism still carries a certain amount of luck over fairness. If an author is writing in a particular field and necessarily using commonly accepted jargon and terms, a simple similarity assessment is hardly solid evidence.

We may be stifling aspects of growth and development in certain disciplines accordingly, just so an institution can 'tabulate' an academic's progress within the academic promotional system. Additionally novel work may be deliberately stymied due to lack of promotional advancement opportunities within an institution e.g. there may be more than enough Professors in that discipline already at that institution. There may also be more or less opportunities, professional or financial resources, within any given institution for academics to develop their ideas and protocols to meet arbitrary judgements.

Are the needs of universities and publishers for example, the needs of academics and their students - not necessarily.

Is no idea worthy of going into print somewhere unless it is say 90% different to another idea. Ongoing thought is

natural and we are all influenced by outside forces and other's knowledge thoughts and opinions. And this makes the topic of self plagiarism a much bigger topic. Thought can be developed and refined over time.

Life is a natural and continual process of learning and while we need to attribute academic work and development fairly we also need to recognise and accommodate the realities. Innovation mainly comes from reviewing, applying, developing and refining knowledge and processes.

It is well known that the human mind can be quite deceptive, particularly so, to those who own that mind. Neuroscientists have shown that each time we remember something, we are reconstructing the event, reassembling it from traces throughout the brain. Psychologists have pointed out that we also suppress memories that are painful or damaging to self-esteem. We could say that, as a result, memory is unreliable. We could also say it is adaptive, reshaping itself to accommodate the new situations we find ourselves facing. (13, 14, 15)

Also what is the correct copyright and reference attribution to education and ideas. We remember many facts from our university days. Do we have to evaluate our lifetime's education and attribute and reference it. It can verge on gross silliness taken to extremes. The facts we learnt at school and university, in general press, news items and documentaries tend to be lumped together in the memory. This makes it very hard to judge intention to deceive if the mind itself cannot place facts and may alter them over time.

Currently academic institutions and publishers control the processes and hand out the judgments. We all need to rely on the integrity of academic publications and not waste our or authors' time in reinventing the wheel, however these matters should not be judged flippantly and proper process as well as reasoning needs to be applied.

Recommendations

The best way for academics to avoid plagiarism and self plagiarism particularly, is to publish original research or original developments or substantial updates on existing research. This does not get around the problem of other authors concurrently working on the same topics however if you have done your own research and have the data to show, your intention not to deceive should be plain. It is a common practice in academic publishing to also look at other studies and compare your results with theirs - whether they agree or disagree. Most of the problems may be circumvented by making your full intentions clear in the abstract and to outline how you particularly got to your conclusions, the date that these processes occurred and whether it was previous work, new work and developments on existing work.

If you anticipate some resistance from your academic institution there should be a method or protocol within that

institution to properly evaluate the project prior to writing up the results and subsequent paper.

We provide our own checklist as follows:

Recommendations Checklist

1. Firstly check the author information on the website of the journal you are submitting to. They should have a complete list of author requirements.
2. Also if English is your second language consult if necessary a qualified English speaker and writer both to fully explain written requirements and to check the manuscript itself. There may be well known cultural references in other languages that are not familiar to you.
3. Keep and date all your original work, research, surveys, data collected and so on.
4. Make sure your abstract outlines the process of how you gathered the data for your article. If it is, for example, an argumentative essay and you have not overtly referenced any other published work or your previous work, still check that you or others have not previously covered this ground. If you have, attribute it and verify for yourself that your new work is not designed for the same purpose or to come to the same conclusions.
5. Make sure you have attributed/referenced any work, directly taken from your previous articles, or another publication or author.
6. If you are unsure that your work is not self plagiarism check with your academic institutions and peers about any concerns you may have.
7. If still unsure, seek the opinion of the journal you intend and wish to publish with and obtain their opinion and outline any concerns you may have, presenting your data and processes at the same time.
8. Don't send your paper to multiple publishers at the same time. If concerned about any possible delays in receiving an answer from your chosen publisher do prior research on how long the review and evaluation process takes at your chosen publishing house.
9. Finally, if you are acting with full integrity you should not have many concerns. If it turns out that you have inadvertently plagiarised or self plagiarised because of the many issues we have discussed in this paper, be full and frank with those publishers and your academic institution, and also remind them of your own legal and ethical approach and your own rights. You should not be assumed guilty unless proven to be so.

Recommended reading

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