

Principles and practice of plagiarism: Perpetrators' perspective

Amitav Banerjee

*Department of Community Medicine, Dr. DY Patil Vidyapeeth, Dr. DY Patil Medical College, Hospital and Research Centre, Pune, Maharashtra, India
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One of the most daunting tasks for reviewers and editors is checking for plagiarism in the submitted manuscripts. Though there are many software packages available for checking plagiarism, the ultimate decision about whether or not plagiarism has occurred involves human judgment. Analogous to crime detection, it is helpful to know the mind of the criminal (plagiarism is also a crime as it amounts to stealing, and it infringes on copyright).

Like most habits, the habit of plagiarism also has its roots in the formative years. Unfortunately, the education systems in some countries have not evolved in a way that fosters creativity. Rather, imitation and rote learning are rewarded.^[1] Medical students memorize from textbooks and swear by them with a fervor usually reserved for religious texts. It is also not unusual to find that texts authored by Indian faculty contain large portions of text plagiarized from books published abroad.

Research and publication call for innovative and creative thinking, as well as citing the sources of ideas and wording that are not one's own. A mind whose educational foundation relies on rote learning is not in a position to indulge in innovative and creative thinking. Lack of familiarity with the English language also contributes to plagiarism as plagiarizing is easier than paraphrasing.

Against this background, examples of few instances of plagiarism encountered by the editor of this journal (Med J DY Patil Univ), and the responses from the perpetrators when confronted, further puts the phenomenon in perspective.

One of the reviewers of a particular manuscript gave the following comments, "Dear editor, the case report is good and well-described. However, most of the introduction and discussion has been copied ad verbatim from other sources and textbooks." When these remarks on alleged plagiarism were forwarded to the author he replied, "But I have done review of literature, how can I do review of literature without copying from other sources!!"

In another instance, one reviewer from abroad suggested the author add one extra reference in an otherwise well-written manuscript. The author, in the revised manuscript, copied whole paragraphs from that particular reference (which unfortunately for the author, was the work of that same reviewer). When the revised manuscript was sent back to the referee for re-review, he took a very serious view and responded with harsh comments rejecting the manuscript outright based on the plagiarism. The author, when apprised of the reviewer's wrath, was perplexed. He thought the reviewer should be happy that his work has been cited word to word (any paraphrasing of the original text would have been sacrilege in the author's view!). This also illustrates that some authors may see using the words of others without quotes as a form of paying homage to others.

The most difficult task is to convey to authors the concept of self-plagiarism and duplicate publication. Authors should not copy large portions from their previous published work. The editorial board of this journal (Med J DY Patil Univ) had a nasty

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Address for correspondence:

Amitav Banerjee, Department of Community Medicine, Dr. DY Patil Vidyapeeth, Dr. DY Patil Medical College, Hospital and Research Centre, Pimpri, Pune, Maharashtra, India. E-mail: amitavb@gmail.com

surprise some time ago. The, then, current issue of the journal had gone online. Within a week, we noticed that an original article in the issue was similar to another original article by the same authors with a slightly different title in the current issue of another journal which had gone online just a day before. When confronted with this instance of self-plagiarism, the author expressed surprise on being informed that this practice was highly unethical. Their logic was that if plagiarism amounts to stealing how could someone steal one's own work? The editors had to publish a retraction due to this duplicate publication in the forthcoming issue of the journal.

Such authors should be educated that duplicate publication is unethical. It wrongfully inflates the curriculum vitae of the authors. Besides, it causes additional burden on the peer-reviewers. It also causes information overload for researchers, without actually adding anything new. The same paper can be published in two different journals only with the permission of both the concerned editors. This may make sense when duplicate publication can serve the purpose of addressing a particular issue to two different target audiences. With the availability of online access of most journals, nowadays such situations are not very common.

The above-mentioned examples of plagiarism and the responses of the perpetrators indicate that often plagiarism is due to acts of omission rather than of commission. In such cases, we try to take as tolerant a view as would be feasible within the constraints of editorial responsibility and legality. We also use the opportunity to educate the authors on the nuances of plagiarism and self-plagiarism.

However, apart from above-mentioned instances, there are many instances where plagiarism is deliberate and driven by desperation to publish and publish in record time. In such a context, publishing a paper is taken as an end in itself to raise one's publication count to meet the criteria for appointments and promotions. The authors of such work do not expect readers to take their work seriously. Many of these papers are published in "predatory journals"^[2] which will just about publish anything so long as the authors pay. These journals are mushrooming exponentially, particularly in developing countries such as India. Academic regulatory bodies have recently framed rather stringent publication criteria for appointments and promotions without realizing how difficult it is to carry out worthwhile research for publication in real time.

Deliberate plagiarism is highly unethical and deserves penalty. Regrettably the same academic bodies, which have framed such stringent criteria regarding publications for tenure and promotions shy away from taking stringent action

against the perpetrators of plagiarism and other unethical publication practices. The first impulse on the part of academic institutions is to hush up the matter fearing adverse impact on the reputation of the institution. To quote Dr. Wager from Committee on Publication Ethics, "Institutions don't like to proclaim when things go wrong. I would like to campaign for a change, so that rather than a misconduct finding against a university being a black mark, it is seen as a badge of honor. You should say, – Don't go to a university that hasn't had at least one person fired for misconduct, because it means they are not looking for it properly."^[3] We are happy to say that as a journal we have been earning our badges of honor since we are publishing critical comments on published papers as well as "retraction" when indicated.^[4,5]

For education of all authors, we recommend some very good readings on plagiarism and its adverse consequences listed in the references.^[6-8]

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