

# Plagiarism: What Is It, Whom Does It Offend, and How Does One Deal with It?

John D. Armstrong

[abridged and adapted]

## Academic plagiarism is a thorny ethical and practical problem.

In any academic piece of work, authors are responsible for acknowledging credit in the list of authors and in the list of citations from the literature [2]. These citations serve several important purposes: they acknowledge the work of current and previous investigators; they place the article in the context of a body of knowledge; they may support the views expressed by the author or acknowledge conflicts with others' work; and they leave a paper trail such that a source of error or inspiration [1] can be traced to its source. Thus, citations assign credit as well as responsibility [2].

## What Is Plagiarism?

Although misconduct in research practice is not a recent phenomenon [3-5], plagiarism has evoked concern over the past decade in journals and in universities [5-9]. Editors and university tutors have expressed their concerns because plagiarism is the failure to assign credit for ideas, data, or language of one's own or another's writing. Plagiarism encompasses a spectrum of actions in which credit is misappropriated. It may include direct verbatim lifting (copying) of passages without attribution; rewording of ideas from the original in the purported author's own style; uncredited paraphrasing from another's work, perhaps by mistake, which may not be considered dishonest but which is still problematic in other ways; noting the original source of only some of what is borrowed; or blatant appropriation of thoughts, ideas, language, techniques, or data from another and the representation of these as one's own original work, including outright theft of entire articles [2, 5, 6, 10-11]. "In many cases [authors are] not aware of what actions constitute plagiarism [and] believe they fulfilled their duty by citing the appropriate reference, and are unaware of the shortcomings of this approach" [7]. It is not enough to simply list a reference; writers need to understand more about what it means to write about knowledge in a community, which is what the area of study represents.

## Whom Does Plagiarism Offend?

If plagiarism is deception and theft of another's intellectual property, what is the effect of plagiarism on trust? Berk [8] referred to the essential underpinning of trust in the academic world in a recent editorial responding to the discovery of plagiarism on the pages of a journal:

Plagiarism remains, under all circumstances, a serious violation of *collegial trust* [emphasis added], the fundamental principle on which the integrity of research depends. For whatever reason it occurs, it is deception and the theft of intellectual property. Whether minor or major, obvious or borderline, intentional or unintentional, it is a breach of professional ethics that must be exposed and unreservedly deplored.

Fundamental to academic study and the academic profession is that truth has intrinsic, as well as instrumental, value. There is an overriding concern that statements made in teaching or formulated in research should be as true as possible, based on the most methodically gathered and analyzed evidence [12]. The more specific obligations of the academic researcher flow from this concern for truth about particular things and from the idea of truth in general. The cultivation of truth in teaching and research and the respect for truth in one's professional activities constitute the distinctive underpinning of the academic professional [9]. Publications of scientific and scholarly works must be accompanied by truthful attribution of their authorship. Since careers in the academic world are oriented towards the recognition and reward of individual achievement, plagiarism of the work of others and claiming credit for the work of others fails to obey the obligation to acknowledge the achievement of colleagues. This is true even if the plagiarism is committed by mistake, by a writer who would consider him or herself to be honest. Writers should take more care to avoid plagiarism in any form. Thus, the author of a piece of academic writing respects the collegial trust to the extent that he or she accepts personal responsibility for truth telling in the trust and acknowledgment of colleagues' achievements.

If we are morally accountable to one another, then a consideration of plagiarism provides an opportunity to exercise reflective, critical, and collaborative moral thinking. We need to make sure we are not committing plagiarism so that we know we are acting justifiably, in a way that we can convincingly account for in moral terms [13]. This process is fundamental to relationships in our professional community, within the university, and in the world of research.

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