

## THE CASE OF PLAGIARISM

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### Abstract

More and more universities adopt rules and follow different practices to avoid plagiarism. Their policies are focused on informing students and staff about the observance of ethics and integrity rules. This paper presents the case of plagiarism and the possible causes that lead a researcher to commit it. The consequences of plagiarism in the academic community depend on the policy of each university and can be divided into individual and social, since they concern not only the member of the university community who commits plagiarism, but also the university itself.

### Introduction

Nowadays, the rapid evolution of technology and the rapid spread of the Internet to all areas of our lives, and mainly to education, facilitate access to electronic libraries and databases of variable content. However, the search for information through a variety of sources is not always accompanied by the necessary critical treatment and understanding of these sources. As a result, the sources are frequently appropriated and copied verbatim without reference to the author. This policy is known as *plagiarism*. But what exactly is plagiarism and how is it associated with the academic community?

In general, the definition of plagiarism can be divided into two major categories: intentional and unintentional plagiarism. In the category of deliberate plagiarism are included incidents where the researcher copies unchanged parts from one or more sources and presents them as his/her own text (Lathrop et al., 2000). In contrast, unintentional plagiarism occurs when a researcher borrows many words or phrases from a source, but does not cite appropriately the bibliography (Lathrop et al., 2000). In the first case, deception is intentional, while in the second it is a result of the researcher's ignorance of copyright issues, and it frequently happens without his knowledge (Martin, 2009). According to *Nature*, (a magazine that deals with issues of plagiarism), since the goal of research is learning, plagiarism is not only morally but also institutionally wrong, because it shortens the learning process and contrasts with the belief of academic supervisors that students should write papers that will benefit them (Fish, 2010).

Nowadays, more and more prestigious publishers dealing with scientific publications, including Elsevier and Springer, use specific software that

controls if the submitted articles contain identical or paraphrased text that has already appeared in published articles. The editors claim to be unsure whether plagiarism has increased over the last years or they now just discover it more often (Butler, 2010). In our country, there has been an increase in cases of plagiarism of online newspapers' content due to a lack of an institutional framework that would protect publishers. For this reason, according to a global initiative of international organizations of publication industry (newspapers, magazines, books, etc.), the editors have established programs like ACAP (Automated Content Access Protocol), an open source tool through which publishers with online presence can be informed whom and how accesses their online content. It is a program installed on the computers or the server of a newspaper and is used by publishers who want to send a strong message that they are interested in how their content is used (Ioannou, 2008).

### **Definition of Plagiarism, Self-Plagiarism and Paraphrase**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Lands, 1999), "Plagiarism is the illegal appropriation, almost imitation, and publication of the language, thoughts, ideas, or expressions of another author and the presentation of them as original work," while according to the Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, "Plagiarism means committing a sort of real theft of the intellectual property rights of the author, presenting his/her work as his/her own" (Plagiarism.org., 2009).

In the academic community, as defined by the Duke University Libraries, "Plagiarism occurs when a researcher, with the intention to deceive or due to careless indifference for the correct scientific procedures, presents information, ideas or expressions of another as it was his/ her own or doesn't give the proper references to the original source" (Duke University Libraries, 2005). Washington State University divides plagiarism into intentional or unintentional:

In the intentional plagiarism the data of the author is thoroughly concealed, in order for the researcher to present the words as his/her own, and thus to cheat, while the unintentional plagiarism is the result of laziness or ignorance, where the researcher simply doesn't know how to properly make reference to sources. (Washington State University, 2009).

It is worth noting, that most universities do not excuse unintentional plagiarism, because usually they clearly post on their websites their policy on plagiarism issues, its consequences and ways to avoid it.

As the examples above demonstrate, plagiarism is defined more as a moral issue rather than as an illegal action that has specific legal penalties. As it will be presented in more detail, the act of plagiarism is associated with:

- Copying verbatim text, or part of it, without proper reference to the source or without using quotation marks
- Paraphrasing another's ideas and theories without proper reference to the author,

- The verbatim translation of a foreign language text
- The use of images without proper reference to the source
- Paying someone else to write a paper
- The use of the writers' own texts in more than one published work.

*Self-plagiarism* (or *redundancy*) is a case similar to plagiarism, which occurs when authors reuse their own previously published work or data in a "new" written product without letting the reader know that this material has already appeared elsewhere. This unacceptable publishing behavior can occur when authors recycle parts of their previous writings by using identical or nearly identical sentences or paragraphs from earlier works in subsequent research papers without quotation or acknowledgement, or when authors create multiple similar papers, which are submitted for publication in different journals but without acknowledging the other papers. Self-plagiarism can be met in forms such as dual or redundant publication, salami slicing, text recycling and copyright infringement. This problem is mainly considered to be a moral issue, since what is being violated is the "silent agreement" between the writer and the reader that the latter will read something original. For this reason, "the concept of self-plagiarism is that the author attempts to deceive the reader" (Hexam, 2005).

Another technique similar to plagiarism is *paraphrase*, which can be roughly described as the presentation of the necessary information and ideas of someone else's text in a different way (Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2010). This means that paraphrasing requires both a selection of different words and a restructuring of sentences but without altering the original meaning or omitting significant information from the paraphrased text (Davies et al., 2007). It requires writing skills such as text analysis, interpretation and synthesis of a new text, incorporating effectively someone else's ideas in the paraphrased text (Plotnick, 2010). Moreover, a successful paraphrase requires considerable intellectual effort in order to understand the exact meaning of the original text (University of Western Ontario, 2010). However, there is always the risk of unintentional plagiarism of the original text due to an incorrect paraphrase. More specifically, a slight change in vocabulary and sentence structure might lead to plagiarism, while a significant change in style, vocabulary, extent and structure of the text could change the meaning significantly and alter the central idea, which eventually leads to the misinterpretation of the original text.

### **Causes Leading to Plagiarism**

Although plagiarism is detected in various areas such as cinema, painting, literature, etc., most studies focus mainly on the academic and school areas, where the problem is particularly evident and gets increasingly bigger.

Rutgers University and Duke University conducted research in 2003 to identify specific instances of plagiarism in these universities (YourDictionary, 2011). The results showed that 18% of 18,000 students admitted that had copied text from the Internet without giving proper bibliographic reference- a significant 8% increase since 2001, according to a similar research. The rates

of these investigations inevitably lead to the question why researchers plagiarize and why this problem constantly increases. Could it be considered as an unavoidable situation, owing to the increased demands of the universities, but also to the easy access to a rich content through Internet? The causes that lead to the spread of the above phenomenon vary and are perhaps as many as the researchers themselves (Rzadkiewicz, 2009).

### **Causes of Unintentional Plagiarism**

Although there will always be dishonest researchers, the main reason why a researcher commits unintentional plagiarism is ignorance of the rules of writing a text and properly citing bibliography, and also confusion about the terms of plagiarism, paraphrase and self-plagiarism (McCabe, 1992).

More specifically, researchers mostly focus on searching for information in order to support an argument and quoting examples to strengthen their position, so eventually they have a difficulty in matching the information with the respective source and thus fail to properly record their sources (Rzadkiewicz, 2009). The problem is even more widespread in cases of electronic sources, where there is the misconception that when a paper is posted on the Internet it is regarded as common knowledge and therefore there is no need to include the website in the bibliography (Rzadkiewicz, 2009).

Surveys show that up to 60% of the researchers are unable to distinguish a paraphrased text from a text-product of plagiarism (Roig, 1999). The problem is greater when researchers paraphrase technical terms or generally vocabulary with which they are unfamiliar. Research published in *Psychological Reports* shows that writing techniques might result in plagiarism when there is a need to paraphrase vocabulary of an advanced level (Roig, 1999). Finally, there is also the possibility that the writers have not developed their writing skills enough and thus it is difficult for them to express themselves appropriately (University of Alberta Libraries, 2011). As a result, the lack of a specific guidance from the universities on the objectives of the educational process strengthens the students' unawareness regarding academic integrity (Lathrop et al., 2000).

### **Causes of Intentional Plagiarism**

As regards deliberate plagiarism, there are many factors that affect the researcher's conscious decision to resort to plagiarism.

The most important factor is that nowadays copying a text is something very easy, not only because of the easy access to online content, but also because the researcher might believe that he will not be caught due to the large amount of online published papers (Ferguson, 2005). In addition, there are many cases where the pressure from both family and university is such that the researchers feel "forced" to plagiarize in order to achieve a better result (e.g., a higher degree) without necessarily gaining knowledge through this process (University of Alberta Libraries, 2011). Another possible cause might be the limited time to properly process a paper, either because of a tight deadline, or due to lack of time management skills (Harris, 2004). Furthermore, there might also be various psychological reasons, such as anxiety and insecurity to

handle a new topic or the belief that anything worthwhile to say about an issue has been already said (Harris, 2004). Another factor that may lead to plagiarism is the underestimation of some courses and, thus, the belief that it is a waste of time writing a paper that does not offer substantive knowledge (Martin, 2009).

Finally, the competitive environment in the academic community leads student-researchers to adopt the attitude that the unique objective is high grades at any cost, rather than the knowledge gained by writing an original paper (Roig, 1997). This belief, in conjunction with the perception that the plagiarizers not only remain unpunished, but also are rather rewarded with high grades, has as a result that even the most conscientious ones copy a prepared paper with the excuse of the “unfair competition” (Auer et al., 2001).

### **Ways to Avoid Plagiarism**

#### **The Policy of Universities Abroad**

Most universities present on their websites their policy regarding issues of plagiarism and academic ethics in general and suggest practical solutions to avoid inadvertent plagiarism.

For example, the library of Northwestern University suggests that researchers should write down the references from information which is neither a result of their own research nor common knowledge, and use quotes when they “borrow” the exact words of a writer (Northwestern University Library, 2005). The University of North Carolina insists on correct note taking, because, according to the university's guide, the researcher should first develop the proper technique for recording his/her own notes based on the words of another writer and then use his/her own vocabulary for writing a paper. This technique results in a paper, which differs from the original in writing style and, thus, the writer doesn't risk being accused of plagiarism (University of North Carolina, 2011). Another way to avoid plagiarism is to be fully informed about the handled subject, because according to Dominic Corey, “Only when you have your own thoughts and ideas, you become creative and you are not tempted to copy and steal words of others”. He also suggests the use of free online software in order to detect unintentional plagiarism (Corey, 2008).

Generally the researcher should be informed, especially by the electronic guides of universities and libraries, regarding proper note taking, proper use of citations and quote marks, and what it is considered as common knowledge (Marshall C., 2010). With regard to technology, it should be noted that it could be used not only to detect plagiarism, but also to understand the meaning of plagiarism and find ways to avoid it (Snow E., 2006).

#### **The Policy of Greek Universities**

Regarding Greek universities, plagiarism is considered mainly as a matter of ethics that can damage the reputation and dignity of the offender. In other words, researchers that deliberately commit plagiarism hurt mostly themselves, not only because it adversely affects their reputation in their subsequent academic and professional career, but also because in that way they will not develop basic research and writing skills (Bora, 2011).

It should be noted that recently many penalties have been charged to members of the university community (not only students but also academic supervisors) due to proven plagiarism detected in scientific writings, students' tasks, dissertations, etc. Although most of these cases were brought to justice, they were eventually suppressed in the academic community, as it is a standard practice among academics to cover up plagiarism accusations against their colleagues (Giannarou, 2009).

Specifically, last year, the Ministry of Education started a campaign against plagiarism in the academic community, because, according to the minister, many complaints about this issue have arrived and continue to arrive at the ministry, especially by professors or researcher candidates (Lakasas, 2011). These complaints have reached an unacceptably wide scale in Greek Higher Education, at the level of undergraduate and postgraduate students, PhD candidates and university professors who used another's scientific paper for their personal academic development. Therefore, young researchers have sent a declaration to the ministry requesting, among other things, the establishment of mechanisms to control the originality of the intellectual works produced, the adaptation of the universities' code of ethics in order to prohibit and convict plagiarism, and the recognition of plagiarism as an independent disciplinary offense that demonstrates lack of academic integrity and should result in severe sanctions. That means that, the institutions should be obliged to examine the reports of plagiarism, to decide fairly and without delay on the outcome of each accusation and to apply immediately and independently the proposed measures.

### **The Contribution of the Academic Supervisor**

Although the responsibility for avoiding plagiarism falls mainly on the researchers themselves, the academic supervisor also has the opportunity, through several techniques, to guide the students properly to help them avoid plagiarism. It is suggested that the academic supervisor should openly discuss this issue in order to demonstrate to the students that he/she is aware of websites with already written papers and of plagiarism detection software (Leland, 2002). Therefore, the problem might be managed by spending time in the classroom to educate students on how to avoid plagiarism (Wilhoit, 1994).

Regarding the papers undertaken by students, it is proposed to encourage them to select their own topic, because if they are interested in it, they are less likely to resort to plagiarism (Leland, 2002). It is also recommended to guide students regarding bibliography and deadlines, in order to help them organise their time efficiently and to ensure their personal involvement in the writing procedure through progress reports, meetings and group work (Leland, 2002). Moreover, the academic supervisor should reward and give emphasis to the benefits arising from the right quotation of bibliography, since most students do not seem to realize that by citing a source, they strengthen their position, proving not only that they already have researched the subject and combined their findings, but also that they respect the copyright and the creators' arguments (Harris, 2004). In general, academic supervisors should contribute

to change the way that students face their obligations, by encouraging close cooperation among students and by guiding them effectively.

The educational institutions must also guide the students to research information thoroughly and to analyze their sources. More specifically, they should organise seminars regarding the proper recording and analysis of the sources, the correct use of quotation marks, the paraphrase technique and finally practical ways to avoid plagiarism (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2006). Moreover, the universities' webpages should provide not only a clearly defined policy on issues of academic ethics, research and plagiarism, but also advice to students who have queries on proper recording of sources (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2006). In case of a plagiarism suspicion, the authorized council should firstly examine whether it is a case of deliberate plagiarism and then report and punish the offender (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2006).

Research shows that students who study in faculties with clear policy on academic integrity issues are less likely to copy and plagiarize, and even if they do so, they admit it more easily than students in universities without a clear code of conduct (McCabe et al., 2001). This happens because in the first case, "students feel part of a society that requires trust and honesty among students and between students and university," while in the second they conform to the academic ethics due to "the fear of punishment" (McCabe et al., 2001). In conclusion, the best way to avoid unintended plagiarism, since universities do not accept unawareness as excuse, is for the students to ask and consult their academic supervisors and to work hard to develop their own writing skills (Arnott, 2009)

### **Conclusion**

Although the consequences of plagiarism range from a zero in a paper and a failure in a course up to the expulsion from the university, the phenomenon of plagiarism has reached dimensions of epidemic proportions (Halasz, 2009). Non-Greek universities consider the issue of plagiarism a matter of honor and the consequences are severe, because the universities state that it is the researchers' responsibility to be informed on how to avoid it (Hillard, 2009).

For example, the authority council of the University of Virginia demands the suspension of students found guilty of plagiarism and also the cancellation of the certificates of those who have already graduated (Virginia University, 2001). The Penn State University makes clear on its website that the consequences of plagiarism range from "disciplinary warning, disciplinary trial and temporary, permanent or indefinite removal" (Penn State University, 2005). The Illinois State University reports on its official website that "at least for one year disciplinary trial and additional appropriate educational penalties is the punishment for such actions" (Illinois State University, 2006). The Colorado State University takes equally seriously the issue of plagiarism, because it states that the student, in this case, not only hasn't met the demands of the course, but also has acted against the consolidated policy of the university, regarding the academic ethics (Colorado State University, 2011). Another example is the Haverford College in Pennsylvania, where the

university honor code imposes penalties ranging from low grades to writing a public apology for plagiarism in order for the student to understand his own mistake and become again part of the college community (Demirjian, 2006). Finally, according to the University of Kentucky, plagiarism is an act that “is easily detected, easily proved, but usually hardly punished.” Therefore, in accordance with the policy of this university, the minimum punishment should be a C degree for the plagiarized paper (Toreki, 1998). Another important consequence is that the victims of plagiarism may have financial demands if it is found that their work has been plagiarized (Association for Computing Machinery, 2006). As regards unintentional plagiarism, the incorrect bibliography quotation and use of quotation marks leads to a 10-20% decrease in the students’ score (Smith, 2011).

On the other hand, if the university has no specific policy regarding plagiarism, it is common practice that the academic supervisor who realizes plagiarism incidents decides the punishment, depending on the seriousness of the issue and the frequency of similar incidents by the same student (Bora, 2011). According, however, to Jill Cutler, head of the committee of the University of Yale, although every year the university estimates about 35 cases of academic plagiarism, many academic supervisors, while they realize the problem, don’t try to prove it, because it requires hard work by them (Demirjian, 2006). Therefore, it is certain that the problem is far greater than that observed in the statistics and the responsibility weighs also the academic supervisors.

In conclusion, the consequences of plagiarism include, among others, the elimination or suppression of students’ creativity and critical thinking, since plagiarism is an action against the goal of education, which is the maintenance of a learning environment that encourages students to become independent thinkers (Halasz, 2009). So, it is concluded that, in the beginning of the researcher’s career, plagiarism might be an easy alternative to write a paper, but in the future this strategy cannot help him/her to develop his/her skills (Gomez, 2010). In other words, the above examples demonstrate that the “easy solution” for writing a paper can cost the students their entire academic career and follow them up to their professional career (Smith, 2010). Except from the personal consequences, such an action is unfair for the other students and for the reputation of the university, since it actually puts at risk the entire evaluation system (Baylor School, 2003).

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