

## Student plagiarism: Intended or accidental?

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### Abstract

With the rise of accessibility to the internet, it is easier for students to commit plagiarism. But which students are more likely to do so? Even more important is the extent to which students commit plagiarism on purpose. The aim of this literature review is to answer these questions. It appears that international students who are young, internal (meaning that they are attending their 'own' university) and more experienced (meaning higher years of enrollment) are more likely to commit plagiarism than other students. In addition, students who frequently procrastinate are also more likely to commit plagiarism. Furthermore, intended plagiarism seems to be quite rare, while accidental plagiarism is quite common. The most commonly heard explanation for accidental plagiarism is that students lack knowledge about how to avoid plagiarism. In the discussion section, some suggestions for making students aware of plagiarism are proposed. An increase in awareness and knowledge should lead to a drop in the prevalence of plagiarism.

**Keywords:** plagiarism, students, intended, accidental, academic dishonesty.

### Introduction

“Plagiarism has seemingly existed ever since words could be copied” (Ison, 2012; p.1). According to Fanelli (2010) plagiarism results from the prevailing ‘publish or perish’ culture in academia. This refers to the fact that growing competition forces scientists to produce results that are publishable—at all costs. Such a *modus operandi* can at times compromise the integrity of research. Fanelli (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on a total of 1316 papers and found support for his hypothesis that both scientists’ productivity and scientists’ bias increase in direct proportion to increases in competitiveness within academic environments. Scientists’ bias refers to the fact that scientists are often biased in favor of their working hypotheses. In other words, they tend to select only the information that supports their ideas regarding causation. Although all results, positive or negative, are equally relevant to science, only positive and/or statistically

significant results tend to be accepted by scientific journals (Fanelli 2010).

The above-mentioned article by Fanelli (2010) does not say anything about students, but it is interesting to know whether the same results can be extrapolated to this population. Today’s students are the scientists of tomorrow. Both unethical behavior on the part of researchers, as well as student plagiarism, have emerged as controversial issues in recent years (Walker, 2010). The aim of Walker’s (2010) study was to provide data regarding patterns of student plagiarism. Although not all of Walker’s hypotheses were supported by the results of his study, his results did tend to reaffirm the truth of some common assertions about the nature of student plagiarism. According to Walker (2010) students are more likely to plagiarize when they are studying outside of their native country, young, internal (meaning that they are attending their ‘own’ university; non-exchange students) and more experienced (meaning higher years of enrollment). On the other hand,

Walker found that “plagiarism did not decrease as awareness about it became more widespread”. Finally he states that there is no significant difference between the sexes with respect to frequency of plagiarism. Although other researchers had previously found that men plagiarized significantly more (Park 2003; Rakovski and Levy 2007, as reported in Walker 2010) no significant results were found in Walker’s study. One issue that is not examined by Walker (2010) is the intention of students who commit plagiarism. It is very important to know whether students plagiarize on purpose or accidentally, because accidental plagiarism can be prevented by increasing students’ knowledge. Therefore the research question of this literature review is: *Do students knowingly commit plagiarism or do they do it accidentally?* In this review, first the prevalence of student plagiarism will be further examined. Then students’ intentions will be investigated. Finally, conclusions will be drawn, implications for further research will be discussed, and ideas will be presented for increasing students’ awareness of proper academic standards that will enable them to avoid plagiarism.

Before further examining plagiarism among students, it is important to first define the concept. The online version of the Oxford English Dictionary defines plagiarism as: “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own.”

### **Methodology**

The literature reviewed in this article has been collected through the electronic database of Utrecht University. Because of the limited amount of literature on this very specific topic, it was not possible to organize the articles into a text with different categories of plagiarism. Therefore the articles are only integrated into a minor degree. Where possible, links between the contributions were made, but

these are, for the most part, discussed separately.

### **Prevalence**

It might be useful for professors to know which students are more likely to plagiarize, because such information could enable them to direct information about honest academic behavior and suggestions for avoiding plagiarism toward such students. Two contributions to the topic of student plagiarism will be discussed. These are Walker’s (2010) “Measuring plagiarism: researching what students do, not what they say they do” and “Are college cheating and plagiarism related to academic procrastination?” by Roig and DeTommaso (1995).

Walker (2010) states that answers students provide when asked whether and to what extent they plagiarize should not be trusted. His approach therefore involves providing more reliable empirical data. Three of the research questions Walker addresses are especially interesting, as they deal with the frequency, nature and extent of plagiarism in student assignments. He defines three different types of plagiarism, which are in line with those identified in several previous contributions (e.g. Park 2003; Walker 1998; Warn 2006, as reported in Walker 2010). These are: (1) “*Sham*: refers to sham paraphrasing, the practice of correctly citing a source but presenting the material as paraphrased, when it is in fact a direct quote without the quotation marks.” (2) “*Verbatim*: the practice of simply copying material verbatim from a source without citing the source, thus presenting the material as one’s own.” (3) “*Purloining*: submitting an assignment that is substantially or entirely the work of another student with or without that student’s knowledge.”

In his experiment, Walker (2010) found that about a quarter of the assignments submitted contained some form of plagiarism. The authors of these plagiarized assignments were slightly more often male than female (though the

difference he reported was not statistically significant, as was the case in other studies). He also reported that international students were more likely to plagiarize than domestic students. Furthermore, students aged 21-30, as well as those in their fourth year of study, were most likely to commit plagiarism. Concerning type and extent of plagiarism, Walker (2010) found that, in the first assignment students had to hand in during his experiment, sham plagiarism was slightly more prevalent than verbatim plagiarism. In the second assignment however, the verbatim plagiarism decreased by more than 50%. This could be due to a learning process regarding academic dishonesty. Purloining was scarce and least prevalent among newly enrolled and older students. Walker (2010, p. 54) included the following important statement in the conclusion of his study: “The findings confirmed that students appear to alter their behavior from one assignment to the next when made aware of plagiarism in the first assignment.” This indicates that they did not plagiarize on purpose. This should be kept in mind when reading the rest of this literature review.

Roig and DeTommaso (1995) studied whether scores for cheating on examinations and scores for plagiarism were positively correlated with self-ratings of procrastination and negatively correlated with self-reported grade point average. They found that a low but statistically significant positive correlation exists between cheating and procrastination. Similar results were reported for the correlation between plagiarism and procrastination. Furthermore, they found, as expected, a negative correlation between grade point average and plagiarism. This correlation however, was not significant. From this research, the conclusion can be drawn that students who procrastinate more often, are more likely to commit plagiarism. These authors also question the intentions of students. Roig and DeTommaso state

(1995, p.694): “We note, however, that recent data showed that students often cannot tell the difference between correctly paraphrased and plagiarized text.”

Now we know which variables are most closely correlated with student plagiarism: international student status, relatively younger age, internal students (meaning those attending their ‘own’ university) and more experienced (meaning more years of enrollment). The question remains as to whether and to what extent students commit plagiarism on purpose? In order to answer the research question, several different contributions to the topic will be compared. Thereafter, a conclusion is drawn. Finally, some implications for further research are given and suggestions for making students aware of plagiarism are proposed.

### **Students’ intentions**

As we have seen above, it is not only researchers who plagiarize. Students commit plagiarism as well, although some are more likely to do so than others. The view that student plagiarism is a problem is commonly shared (Barry, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2012; Ison, 2012; Kohl, 2011; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995; Walker, 2010). However, little research has been done on the prevalence of student plagiarism (Ison, 2012; Dee & Jacob, 2011). However, Kohl (2011) concluded from an analysis of 500 papers of undergraduates that 90% of the papers contained incorrect information or lacked needed citations. This percentage decreased to 40% in later semesters. If students in Kohl’s sample had been plagiarizing intentionally, the percentage would not have decreased, since the probability of getting caught remained the same. The decrease in prevalence of student plagiarism is an indication that students do not commit plagiarism on purpose. Similar conclusions are drawn by other authors (Barry, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2012; Ison, 2012). Below, information will be provided about arguments several authors provide for this statement.

Kohl (2011) reviewed the content of about 500 papers of undergraduate students involving different disciplines. She did this with a new system, the voluntary plagiarism check (VPC) that was developed at the University of Education, Freiburg (Germany). Almost all students that handed in their assignments said they had experienced considerable stress, uncertainty and fear while writing academic papers. Around half of the students questioned whether they could write a good paper without plagiarizing. This indicates that the same feeling of excessive pressure experienced by researchers is also present among students. The most mentioned reasons by students for using VPC were: “(1) fear of negative consequences in the case of mistakes, (2) awareness of gaps in one’s own knowledge, (3) insecurity in the face of inconsistent information for correct academic writing (e.g. citing styles), (4) high level of conscientiousness because of planned academic career and (5) compensation for the lack of input on correct academic writing in academic disciplines” (Kohl 2011, p.97). Kohl (2011, p. 98) writes that “there is great uncertainty about correct academic writing and considerable pressure when composing one’s own texts.” Intended plagiarism was extremely low, but the fact that 50% of the students stated that it is acceptable to borrow single sentences or shorter passages from texts without citing (Kohl, 2011), shows that students often do not know what exactly plagiarism is. The VPC results also indicate that students often do not know when they are committing plagiarism, because there was a broad acceptance of VPC. Personal feedback was especially considered very helpful. Students who knowingly commit plagiarism are not expected to enthusiastically endorse a plagiarism-detecting system.

Barry (2006) also conducted an experiment, but in a manner very different from that of Kohl (2011). She used

paraphrasing assignments to research whether practicing citing, paraphrasing and referencing is a better technique than merely teaching students definitions of plagiarism in order to get them to understand what is right and what is wrong. Barry (2006) supports the idea that students might plagiarize because they do not know how to paraphrase and cite correctly. In her study, Barry (2006) let students write definitions of plagiarism before and after 6 weeks of practicing paraphrasing and citing original sources. The reason for this was Barry’s (2006) experience with student writing, which supported the idea that a lack of knowledge about plagiarism and how to avoid it led many students to plagiarize (Barry, 2006). The results of Barry’s (2006) experiment suggested that students can learn from a series of assignments which are designed to increase their understanding and knowledge of plagiarism. The increased scores in plagiarism detection were likely due to the paraphrasing practice in the experimental group. Barry (2006) calls for such procedures to be implemented for every undergraduate, because they have been shown to be effective in reducing later plagiarism. According to her, practicing honest academic behavior works better than simply listening to the rules of citing, paraphrasing and referencing.

Dee and Jacob (2012) investigated, using a field experiment, whether an educational tutorial reduces plagiarism. They initially assumed that plagiarism is an intentional act because of “electronic access to full-text resources and cut-and-past word processing” (Dee & Jacob 2012, p. 398). In more general terms, they ascribe the increase in plagiarism to technological change and shifting social norms among young adults. Results of the tests they administered showed that Asian, African-American and lower-performing students are more likely to plagiarize than other students. As to the question of intentionality, their results provide evidence that the educational tutorial

substantially reduced the prevalence of plagiarism (Dee & Jacob 2012). A survey that followed up the field experiment suggests reduced plagiarism was associated with no change in the perceived probabilities of detection and punishment, but that increasing student knowledge was responsible for the reduction. This again shows that lack of knowledge is mostly the cause of student plagiarism.

Ison (2012) examined plagiarism at the advanced graduate education level, namely plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. “It is claimed that unintentional plagiarism is common among graduate students, who may not have received explicit instruction in paraphrasing, lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism or are unaware of proper citation methods” (Gilmore 2010, p.15 as reported in Ison 2012, p.228). Of course it is not always possible to distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism, because students can always claim that they did not plagiarize on purpose. Despite this problem, or maybe because of this problem, Ison (2012) found a prevalence of plagiarism that was within the ranges of previous research. In 14% of the examined dissertations, medium- and high-scale plagiarism was found. Like Dee and Jacob (2012), Ison (2012) ascribes the increase of plagiarism to the proliferation of the use of the internet. Ison (2012) states that it is very well possible that students unintentionally plagiarize, but draws no conclusions regarding the prevalence of intended versus unintended plagiarism.

Intended plagiarism is especially rare, while accidental plagiarism is quite common (Barry, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2012; Kohl, 2011). One of the main reasons for plagiarism is lack of knowledge among students concerning citing, paraphrasing and referencing. This lack of knowledge may have several causes, but can also be solved in numerous ways. In the discussion section some options will be provided to

reduce the lack of knowledge among students concerning aspects of plagiarism.

### **Conclusion**

First of all, it should be noted that too little research has been done on student plagiarism. The studies reviewed in the present paper that students do not commit plagiarism on purpose most of the time; unintentional plagiarism is a lot more common. Students appear to alter their behavior when given corrective feedback and when they become more experienced in academic writing. Research has shown that students do not commit plagiarism on purpose most of the time. However, Ison (2012) refused to draw this conclusion, because he could not prove that accidental plagiarism is more common. Further research should be done on plagiarism among students, as well as among researchers. Clarity regarding the causes of plagiarism should lead to effective ways of reducing incidence of the behavior. Dee and Jacob (2012) emphasize the importance of doing research on a large number of actual student papers instead of self-reported behavior, because the latter are less reliable. Self-reports contain facts about what students say they do, not what they actually do. When it is more clear who exactly plagiarizes and why, universities can adjust their policies and/or alter their courses in order to reduce student plagiarism.

### **Discussion**

The authors whose articles are discussed in the above sections offer several possibilities for increasing student knowledge. Explicit practice in how to cite, paraphrase and reference appears to be a good way to experience how it works and automatically learn what the rules are (Barry, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2012). Kohl (2011) used a voluntary plagiarism check with individual feedback afterwards. This worked very well too. Since student plagiarism could easily lead to academic dishonesty in one’s later career as a

researcher, awareness is extremely important. Kohl (2011) concluded that only 20% of researchers reported having explicit instruction about honest academic practices. The figure should instead be close to 100%. Therefore universities could, and maybe should, introduce a course for every study where students explicitly learn how to cite, paraphrase and reference. This could also be integrated into an existing, mandatory course for first-year students. Since we know which students are more likely to plagiarize than others, those subgroups can be specially targeted in some way.

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