Encyclopedia of Information Ethics and Security

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Individual and Institutional Responses to Staff Plagiarism

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INTRODUCTION

The 'publish or perish' syndrome is often mentioned. However, we are now seeing cases of 'publish and perish', speaking from an ethical standpoint. The pressures on academics to increase their research publications come from within universities and also externally from government higher education funding bodies. There are also pressures on universities to portray their own academic staff as being scrupulously honest, and this can lead to the protection of academics who plagiarize.

The glossary defines plagiarism as the act of passing off the work of others (in particular, the writing of others) as one's own. The History News Network (2002) posted three different definitions of plagiarism provided by the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, and the American Psychological Association, thus covering several discipline areas. All definitions reinforce the concept that plagiarism involves an intentional act of using the work of others, and all discuss the obligation of scholars to be meticulous in their use of source material. In addition, the history and language definitions stress that plagiarism is unethical. This article is concerned with incidents of plagiarism involving university academic staff who might be expected to know about, and rigorously adhere to, established norms of academic publication. In this article the term plagiarism will be used to mean intentionally taking credit for work that should not be claimed as fresh work of one's own. This implies more than editorial oversight and can be construed as academic misconduct.

The majority of the published literature is about student plagiarism (e.g., Stoeger, 2005, describes 28 articles on staff plagiarism and 39 on student plagiarism). This article does not address student plagiarism where the questions of training and intentionality are much grayer. For example, there are different cultural interpretations to ownership of knowledge. Students from Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures may need more support in negotiating the norms of Western scholarly discourse (Sweda, 2004). However, there is evidence (Kember, Ma, McNaught, & 18 Exemplary Teachers, 2006) that academic staff worldwide share common educational values and principles.

The article centers around four vignettes. These are stories from my personal experiences since 2002. Only the essential elements of each story are included, and the narratives are disguised to protect the innocent and not-so-innocent. The nationality of the four universities and the gender of the participants have been withheld; however, the overall thread of each story is close to the actual facts. My own university is *not* involved in any of these cases. The first vignette focuses on plagiarism from colleagues; the second concerns multiple publication of the same work—self-plagiarism (Hexham, 2005). In the third and fourth vignettes, the locus of attention shifts to cultural and policy issues in the province of university administration. Key questions are posed and discussed after each vignette. No clear-cut answers are given, but it is hoped that a brief exploration of the ethical issues around the questions will stimulate critical thought.

Figure 1 portrays the 'plagiarism drivers' operating in modern universities that drive individuals and the institutions to respond to situations where plagiarism has occurred. V1 to V4 refer to the vignettes in the article. Positive drivers are those that address the matter—either by the academic concerned acting to correct the error or by the university investigating the allegations. In this article no individuals admitted plagiarism even though this might be seen as the ethical thing to do. Only two of the four universities enacted formal academic misconduct investigations. Negative drivers are those that result in the plagiarism not being resolved and status being maintained by denial and cover-up. In Figure 1 there are two positive drivers, but only one that appears to be functional. In contrast there are four negative drivers, all of which operate. Note that the current rewards systems in higher education encourage academics to play the publications

Figure 1. Positive and negative drivers on individuals' and institutions' responses to plagiarism
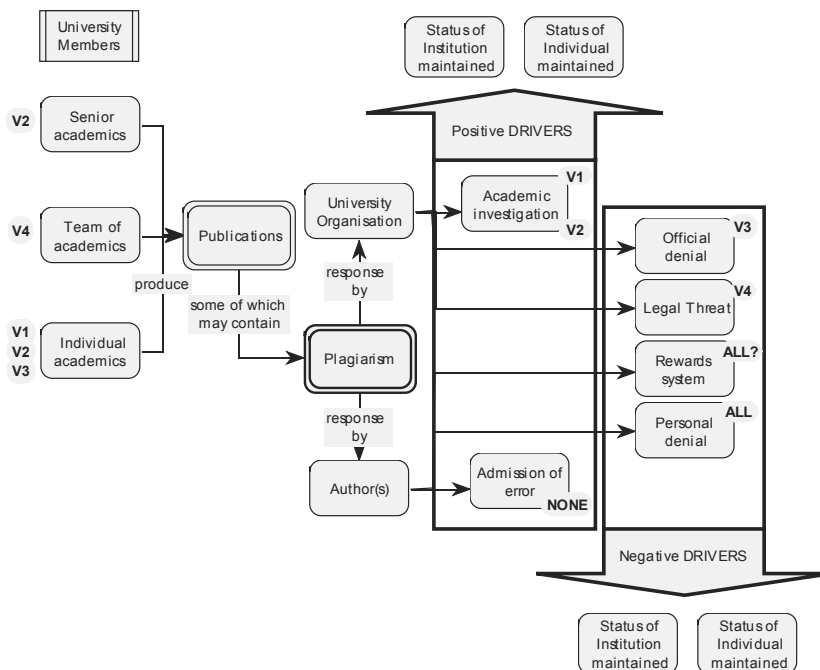
numbers game; this can be a negative driver towards plagiarism.

VIGNETTE 1: THE EDITOR WHO IS A PLAGIARIST

Imagine a packed room at a large international conference. After the presentation two people stand up in the audience. Both accuse the authors of plagiarism. Emotions are high—denial from the authors, anger and dismay on the part of the complainants, and an atmosphere of embarrassed fascination emanating from the audience. What makes the situation more emotionally charged is that the first author is a journal editor. An editor plagiarizing from two sources in the one paper! The follow-up from these public accusations was protracted, despite the documentary evidence that existed. There was careful scrutiny by an independent panel of the publications that the complainants had previously published; the panel verified the significant amount of word-for-word copying found in the conference paper. Almost a year elapsed before disciplinary investigations by the editor's university were complete. Disciplinary action was taken within the university on a confidential basis. While the editor paid some price

within the university, there was little knowledge about the plagiarism incident beyond a few key university staff, the complainants, and a number of associated colleagues. The dust settled and the editor remains as a journal editor.

Questions

There are two sets of questions that can be posed from this case. One set relates to the rights of the journal publishers; the other to the amount of 'punishment' an academic plagiarist should receive.

1. *Should the publishers of the journal be told that its editor is a confirmed plagiarist? Do the publishing company managers deserve to know so they can decide for themselves if this semi-public transgression will damage the reputation of the company?*

The relationship between commercial publishers and academic editors is built on mutual benefit and trust. Publishers obtain the services of experienced academics for little or no cost. In return, the academic builds a reputation and has an enhanced CV to use for career advancement. This relationship is predicated on

the editor's reputation being acceptable to professional colleagues. If that reputation has been diminished by an incidence of plagiarism, then the reputation of the journal may decline. I use this vignette in a research ethics course for postgraduate students. Overwhelmingly, my students vote that the journal should be told. Their reasoning is that their own publications would be diminished if a journal's reputation sank. This may well be seen as a self-seeking response, but for new researchers, publications are precious and my students want to feel confident that they are publishing in high-quality journals. While plagiarism is normally treated as an ethical issue and not a legal one, there are laws that relate to plagiarism in the areas of copyright, unfair competition, and moral rights (Green, 2002). The commercial rights of publishers may be infringed by any taint of plagiarism.

2. *Would revealing this information to the publishers be 'fair' to the editor? Is an internal university investigation enough 'punishment'?*

This is a complex problem. It is interesting that plagiarism was denied by all the plagiarists in these vignettes, even when the documentary evidence was clear to others. This 'denial' syndrome is not uncommon (Schulman, 1998) as the consequences of admitting responsibility for an act that is generally accepted by the academic community as being unethical are very threatening; the positive driver of honestly admitting error does not function well in our universities. However, unproductive punishment is pointless as well. Much greater scrutiny of future academic output is warranted, but few universities are likely to have the inclination to monitor academics in this way. Indeed, as vignette 3 illustrates, many universities are loathe to admit that their academic staff could be plagiarists.

VIGNETTE 2: MULTIPLE DIPPING

Google is a marvelous boon to the busy academic. It enables one to rapidly find a number of papers on a particular theme. Sometimes these papers are strikingly similar—indeed almost identical. In this case, a colleague noticed the similarity in the titles of several publications in a departmental annual report; all of these papers were claimed as independent publications. A few minutes with Google revealed that all these papers

were essentially the same paper with only minor editorial changes. The same paper had been published in refereed conference proceedings on different continents and in journals, again published in different countries and so possibly with less than usual overlap in readership. What annoyed the colleague who discovered this 'multiple dipping' (many more than two) was that the first author of these papers had a relatively senior academic position and was, as in vignette 1, a journal editor! The editor's supervisor was informed, as were senior university staff. As in vignette 1, there was an internal university investigation and some internal disciplinary action was taken by the editor's university. The editor remains in the same editorial post.

Question

Are the pressures on more senior tenured academics as bad as, or even worse than, those on their junior colleagues?

Bennett (2003) coined the phrase 'insistent individualism'. He explored what he saw as a growing acceptance on the part of academics that building their own careers should be their first priority, and that success in terms of reputation, academic kudos, and personal publicity was the raison d'etre of academic life. For many academics, the main rewards are intangible—satisfaction and a sense of personal worth in contributing to knowledge and the education of the next generation. Indeed, the tangible rewards of money and kudos are often not high, considering the time and energy invested. If an academic takes only a self-seeking approach, then a degree of dissatisfaction and cynicism may well develop. Further, the bar for advancement is constantly being raised and the number of publications expected of any academic is increasing. Pressure to produce publications and an attitude of cynicism about the value of academic work are a dangerous combination. As a result, 'multiple dipping' may well be quite common. The Internet makes it easier to detect this type of misconduct, and certainly annual reports may need more scrutiny. But the malaise goes deeper and the restoration of the health of the academy is the only true cure.

The framework produced by Bennett (2003) is one where "conversation" is the "essential metaphor" (ch. 5) for university life. Conversation implies active and open engagement between all members of the

university—both teachers and students. Rather than regulation, we may need more freedom to revitalize what Bennett described as the "virtue" of "hospitality" (ch. 3)—a university community that cares for each other and for the values of that community. Bennett ended his book with a discussion on the role of academic leaders in promoting an interactive, conversational community. In his model, institutional leaders need to foster a conversational community at all levels of the organization. Our next vignette illustrates the antithesis of Bennett's ethical, hospitable world.

VIGNETTE 3: THE INSTITUTIONAL COVER-UP

In this case, an experienced referee noticed an inconsistency in style in a paper and also the existence of double lines around a table, as one gets when copying a table from the Web. Again, a few minutes with Google reveals two clear instances of plagiarism in the paper. The editor concerned was notified. As this was an internal university publication, the author's Head of Department came to hear of it quite rapidly. The matter escalated when the Head of Department wanted to 'whitewash' the event. The university was provided with full documentary evidence about the two instances of plagiarism, and the vice-chancellor/president of the university became aware of the case. A committee of inquiry was established, but this inquiry was situated in the Human Resources/Personnel division and not in the academic arena. The report on the matter described the plagiarism as "an editorial error." No action, beyond a mild caution on editing, was taken against the author.

Question

Why do universities protect plagiarists? Should such instances become public in the media?

The Web site of the university in vignette 3 has an 'academic integrity' page, including: "All work produced must acknowledge the sources of ideas presented and cite the original written work which informed it." I do not give the URL for obvious reasons, but it is not a unique statement and variants are found on many university Web sites. Is there one set of rules for students and another for their teachers?

I was surprised to find that there are those who publicly ascribe to the view that there is a difference between student plagiarism and staff plagiarism. The Becker-Posner Blog (2006), between Nobel laureate and university professor Gary Becker and U.S. Judge and university professor Richard Posner, hosts many controversial conversations. In April/May 2005, Posner stated and then defended a view that he acknowledged as being "heretical," that "student plagiarism is a more serious offense…a professor who 'steals' ideas or even phrases and incorporates them into his own work not only produces a better product to the benefit of his readership but may well improve his own skills." While I disagree with this view, this blog discussion is evidence that the academic community itself is divided on what constitutes unacceptable plagiarism.

As universities become more reliant on self-generated revenue, the norms and discourses of the business world are increasingly encroaching on academic life (Smyth & Hattam, 2000). Steering a moral course in this rapidly changing academic landscape is challenging. Olscamp (2003) indicated clearly that he believes that moral leadership needs to come from the top. The role of university vice-chancellors/presidents is crucial in establishing a clear set of norms and reducing the ambiguity in university policy.

Should these cases be made public in the hope of pressuring the weaker institutions into a more ethical stance? Vignette 4 adds caution to this line of action. Let us explore what can happen to a whistleblower.

VIGNETTE 4: PROTECTION FOR WHISTLEBLOWERS

A member of an editorial committee was surprised to see a paper on a project without the authorship of the key designer. The paper concerned was a team software project that had been discussed in professional circles on other occasions. So, before publication, the existing authors and the designer were asked to clarify authorship of the paper. The designer knew nothing about the paper and was very annoyed at being overlooked. The existing authors insisted that the designer had no rights to the paper, despite the fact that key sections of the paper were verbatim reproductions of design documents that all acknowledged were the work of the designer. The designer now worked elsewhere and the former colleagues did not consider that there was

any existing claim to publications emanating from the project. The editorial committee was not prepared to publish the paper without the designer as an author and so the existing authors withdrew the paper. There was a lengthy e-mail correspondence about the authorship of the paper in question. Some of the comments in these e-mails were acerbic, though not in any way abusive. None of the e-mails was made public beyond the immediate persons involved in the decision-making process on the authorship of the paper. What occurred next came as a surprise to the editor and the designer. Both received quite threatening legal letters from the university concerned saying that they had made unwarranted allegations against that university's academic staff members and that their comments were defamatory. A formal demand was made that an apology should be made to the authors who had plagiarized the design documents. Both the editor and the designer ignored the letters and there was no further action taken by the university. The designer had been contemplating more public action, but was not prepared to fight aggressive legal battles and so remained silent.

Question

What protection is there for whistleblowers? What protection do individual academics have against large and powerful universities?

Universities are becoming increasingly litigious (Adler & Adler, 2002). In order to understand the current policy climate, it is useful to refer to the substantial literature on university research ethics processes. As Haggerty (2004) pointed out, a formal rule-driven process can be problematic and counter-productive to the process of informed scholarly decision making about ethical matters. He examined how the formalization of research ethics processes in universities has led to 'ethics creep', a progressive change in ethical decision making towards the selection of 'safe', though possibly inappropriate, research methods. If the rules become all-dominant, then sensible application of those rules and procedures can suffer. On the other hand we want to avoid the sensationalism of 'moral panic' (Fitzgerald, 2005), where heightened emotions can cloud careful analysis of issues. Policy related to complaints processes thus needs to be structured and clear in order to avoid ad hoc and hasty reactions, and also not overly rigid

so that judgments can be made about the motives and honesty of all people involved in any dispute.

Many universities have responded by having active and balanced policies to protect whistleblowers. Examples are the University of California (2002) and the University of Melbourne (2003). These policies give clear protection to those who divulge material about what they genuinely consider to be a matter of academic misconduct. There are examples of successful whistleblowing (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1996). However, sadly, not all universities appear to have the wording or spirit of such policy protection.

In concluding, I return to the concept of an academic community discussed under vignettes 2 and 3. I want to end this article on a positive note. I feel somewhat battle-scarred by the experiences portrayed in these four cases (and others) and have a sinking feeling that what I have described is just the tip of the iceberg. Our universities need to be more vigilant about academic misconduct and more straightforward in dealing with cases when they become apparent. But, more importantly, our universities need to strenuously emphasize values of integrity and scholarship, and to nurture those values in new cohorts of academics. Universities have a tremendously important potential role in the twenty-first century; we must not abrogate that potential or that responsibility.

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KEY TERMS

Academic Community: There are many people in any university from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. The extent to which the members of a university feel aligned with that university's set of values is a measure of the strength of the academic community.

Institutional Leadership: A set of qualities that people in senior roles in an organization should have. In the context of universities, leadership is the ability to foster a sense of academic community.

Insistent Individualism: An absorbing and continuing focus on self-interest, rather than the good of the community.

Multiple Dipping: Republishing the same work in a number of publications without due acknowledgment that the work has been published before.

Plagiarism: The act of passing off the work of others (in particular, the writing of others) as one's own.

Whistleblower: A person who alerts authorities about dishonest or unethical acts being committed within the organization. In the context of this article, these acts refer to plagiarism as an example of academic misconduct.