

Opinion

Plagiarism: Where Unawareness Makes a Lame Excuse

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It is said that duplication, co-submission, and plagiarism are “the three major sins of modern publishing.”¹ This is something that everybody acknowledges, but can we claim it is negligible if the “sin” is minor or if we are unaware of or question its sinful nature? The young Iranian medical research community is going through critical times; publication ethics ought to keep pace with our scientific production, before we have to face the consequences, some already showing their signs.

Journal editors in Iran are now meeting the threat of plagiarism. We did a systematic search of the plagiarized sentences in 80 papers submitted to our journal which revealed that 55% of the manuscripts had at least one plagiarized sentence.² This is a sign of a vicious circle of poor academic practice and scientific misconduct. From 1996 to 2007, Iranian researchers published 8797 citable medical papers (*Scopus*[®]) and ranked 39 in the world, but their *H*-index (an index that estimates the importance and impact of contributions by a scientist or a country)³ was 40 with which Iran stands in the 69th place.⁴ There are many factors contributing to this relatively low citation rate including the vicious cycle of poor methodology and plagiarism. Authors who write only to “seek academic career promotion” do not usually pay enough attention to the quality of the work and thus achieve their goal more easily by “copy and pasting”.

The main root of the problem is the authors’

unawareness of the meaning of “plagiarism.”⁵ They usually not only do not know all the regulations, but also believe that some types of plagiarism are justified! In this short passage, I’m going to describe what “plagiarism” really is.

Plagiarism can be classified as shown in Table 1.^{6,7} All of these types are definitely considered plagiarism and only their extent and limits are controversial in some cases. For instance, this is indisputable that using sentences of the others and just changing some words here and there is an example of plagiarism, even if we properly cite the

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reference. Here, the controversy is only over distinguishing inappropriate from appropriate paraphrasing.⁶

In addition, there lie some other problems. “Ethical writing” is taken for granted. Some authors neglect precise referencing and do not mind appropriating the others’ words, while ethical writing is not only honesty but also accuracy.⁸ The

language problem is another pretext, while it can be solved by recognizing medical writing as a required profession in a research project and giving it a place among the expenses. And, last but not least, our academic authorities usually do not consider quality and encourage this initiation of “scientific mass production” to quantitatively pace the world.

I believe that the first and foremost measure to be taken is education at three levels: Education of our students by the universities, our researchers by the research centers, and our authors and reviewers by our journals. Ironically, journals have no educational responsibility, but they cannot wait for the first two forgotten levels. Editors usually have to convince authors who show resistance when asked to comply with the rules. Therefore, first they should be armored with the detailed knowledge of

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Table 1. A classification of scientific misconduct*

Types of Scientific Misconduct	Description
1. Fabrication	“Making up data or results and recording or reporting them” ⁷
2. Falsification	“Manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results” ⁷
3. Plagiarism	
a. Plagiarism of ideas	Using another person’s ideas, processes, or results without giving appropriate credit ⁷
b. Plagiarism of text	Using another person’s words without giving appropriate credit ⁷
i. Without citing the source	
- Verbatim copying	Using the text or any materials of others without acknowledging the source
- Paraphragiarism	Using the text of others with a few changes or mixing the others’ texts without acknowledging the source(s)
ii. With citing the source	
- Verbatim copying	Using exact words of others with citing the origin but without using quotation marks
- Inappropriate paraphrasing	Using texts of others while citing the origin but only with minor changes in the words or structure
- Copyright infringement	Using a large part of others’ words (in quotation marks) that violates the copyright
4. Self-plagiarism [†]	
a. Duplicate publication	Publication of paper that are identical or the same in hypothesis, results, and conclusions
b. Salami publication	Publication of each part of the results of one study in several papers
c. Practice of text recycling	Using one’s own text in several different papers

*Adapted from the paper by Roig and the definitions of the Office of Research Integrity.^{6,7} The definitions are applicable for any part of a written work (text, table, figure, etc.) and are regardless of the extent (either a sentence, a paragraph, or a large body of the text); †Self-plagiarism is considered either as an independent entity or as a subcategory of plagiarism. Here, it was not possible to include it under the plagiarism classifications just because of the nature of this classification.

publication ethics and then try to pass it on to their authors to change their attitudes. A group of journal editors and researchers headed by Dr. Farrokh Saidi from *Iranian Academy of Medical Sciences* is now working on a Persian guideline for the editors and authors to take the first step. Such measures can push the universities and the Ministry of Health to take education of publication ethics seriously.

Further measures include adoption of a clear policy by the journals to deal with plagiarism, proper reaction of universities to unethical practice of their faculty, and finally, establishment of a nation-wide center like the Office of Research Integrity⁷ for protecting the integrity of scientific products (by the Ministry of Health, perhaps). However, education and making the academic community sensitive to the issue are the prerequisites.

Herein, I would like to list some points that in my opinion have to be considered to secure publication ethics:

- We should avoid establishing new definitions! In theoretical discussions, we can dispute the rational basis of some regulations;

however in practice, we have to comply with the universally-accepted definitions of plagiarism if we are willing to continue communicating with the world.

- The attitude of hiding our flaws should be changed. Journals even gain credit if they declare their cases of misconduct. Also, authors of an article should have the courage to acknowledge responsibility of any deviation from ethical writing instead of putting the blame on the others.⁹
- The editors have to insist on the highest standards of ethical writing if they expect completely trustworthy submissions in the long-term. In practice, however, some believe that editors have to develop a flexible policy to deal with sinners and avoid discouragement at the beginning of the way.
- Unfortunately, there are some cases of double standards applied to developing countries. Thus, to keep ourselves away from all allegations, we need completely transparent scientific productions.
- No disappointment, if the current law does not support the editors! Dr. Asim Kurjak,

whose plagiarizing practice was valorously pursued by the editors,¹⁰ apparently got away with it and he is still publishing in the internationally recognized journals. However, the bad reputation remains and the world knows this famous example of plagiarism.

- Many editors are concerned about the legal complexities of accusing a plagiarizer. However, journals do not have the power to police misconducts and are not even responsible to take legal actions. The institution that supports a study or to which the author is affiliated is in charge of acting against the plagiarizer. Editors should just make the institutions and the readers informed of the cases.

- The editors, however, have to respect the authors' rights to be informed and the chance to respond. Offence and uncertain accusation must be avoided.⁶

- "Good-faith whistleblowers" should be welcomed and encouraged. Readers should be sensitized about plagiarism and they should know that they can, or let us say, "should" inform the journals of any cases of misconduct that they find, and they should be reassured that they are protected from possible retaliation of the alleged person, as foreseen in the law set forth in some countries.¹¹

- Finally, regardless of all definitions and controversies, we have to make a very fundamental change in our readers and writers' viewpoint: This is not a police game, and as authors, we are not trying to only escape from allegations. The goal of a writer is to win the reader's trust their words. There is an unwritten contract between the reader and the author that all unquoted words in a paper are original.⁶ So, even the slightest kinds of plagiarism (for instance the similarities of a few sentences in

our text with another paper) should be avoided since they may ruin the trust of the reader. This is the best and only guide for drawing a line between unethical and ethical writing, which is of course totally dependent on the authors' common sense.

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