

IN PRAISE OF PLAGIARISM¹

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Plagiarism is seldom academic fraud, fraud which affects all academia and research. To pretend it is distracts our attention from the real problem. Most plagiarism affects only individuals or organizations. Most is not academic fraud, just fraud.

Function of a citation

Economics used to have the rule that references were for the benefit if the reader. This meant that few papers had as many as half a dozen references. It was considered very bad form to give references which would waste the reader's time, which would not give the reader a deeper understanding. One would certainly not cite papers to show how much you had read, or to acknowledge the source of your ideas.

It was generally accepted that all economic ideas have been around forever and it is how you put them together that matters. So who would you quote – Brown, J., Adam Smith, or San Bernadino de Sienna? I get my inspiration from a paragraph or two from an otherwise pedestrian paper, the inspiration being from the meeting of my mind and the author's, and it is most unlikely that the reader would get any further inspiration from reading the paper. I do not do the reader any favour by citing this paper.

Citing someone to get authority for your ideas was frowned on: there are strong methodological reasons why your paper should stand up by itself. I found another reason. I cited the great economist Chamberlin for a couple of paragraphs which inspired me (ignoring my own advice) and found that everyone using the chapter thought it was all his work rehashed. If my chapter was bad Chamberlin takes the blame.

Certainly all facts had to be supported by citations, but the original source had to be cited, not the person who dug up the facts. Mark Tauger dug up evidence that a fungus outbreak was a major cause of the Bengal famine of 1943, but I do not cite him, acknowledging his

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scholarship, but the source he identified, which I have checked. There is no copyright in facts.

Other disciplines have other traditions. In marketing it is usual to put in an enormous number of references, 70 to 150 references to a routine paper are not uncommon. In my experience it is rare to find that any of these references add to my understanding of the paper. They waste my time. I would be much happier to get two references, to the two papers the author considers really important.

Consultant

Does it really matter than nobody mentions my name when they use my work? As a consultant, my satisfaction comes from knowing I have had an effect, and getting paid, rather than from being famous and not getting paid. I want them to pick up my report and say, “But we knew this already!”. If it really takes off it is part of the zeitgeist within three to six months: everyone always knew this. My ideas appearing in all consultancy reports, civil service minutes etc. without any reference or any acknowledgement that I had anything to do with it. If I write a report to show my brilliance and originality, the best that I can hope for is that in a year someone will say, “Remember what’s-his-name? A lot of good ideas. Pity we couldn’t get them through the committees.”

If anything give away undeserved credit.

Stealing someone’elses credit

In the current academic market, citation indexes are important, so the principled system I was raised in is collapsing.

Stealing of credit. There is no copyright in credit. There is no copyright in ideas There is no copyright in facts. It is not an offence against academia or research, It is at worst like stealing a car from someone.

Stealing a whole paper; theoretical, facts or theory plus facts.

You are stealing the credit someone else should have had. Maybe even giving them more credit. I am always very happy to see someone coming up with much the same results as me; shows I was right all the time. Sometimes I have had the experience of throwing out a wild guess, and being delighted when further research showed it to be confirmed by other researchers, only to find that the uncited source was my wild guess.

Stealing a whole paper; theoretical, facts or theory plus facts.

Sometimes not even that. If I plagiarize a paper in AER and publish it in a dozen unread journals around the world, it does not affect the reputation of the author, because Americans do not know the foreigner.

Minor offense at worst.

Student plagiarism

Student plagiarism is just cheating. Lazy. An insult to your intelligence. Any damn fool can rewrite it in their own words. Stealing from one person is plagiarism, from many research. But no worse than taking a telephone or a computer into an exam room.

Takes attention from serious academic fraud

Why is verbatim so much worse?

Big difference between putting it in your own words and putting it in their words without quotation marks. Why? If you are citing a poet, fine. But otherwise who gives a damn? A mistake easy to make before photocopying, more difficult today. But so what? And important to use the same vocabulary or buzz words.

Claiming duplication

Claiming you have carried out an experiment or checked facts when it was someone else is either plagiarism, when you steal the idea from your research assistant, or serious fraud when you are in effect claiming independent verification of someone elses research.

Cf citation of a research where you are saying research finds that x, read Jones and learn all about it.

Getting a good job or RAE rating

Yes, it is possible to publish a lot by plagiarizing others. You are getting an undeserved reputation and an undeserved job. But this is in the same order as claiming a non-existent doctorate, or research fellowship at Harvard, or claiming that you were Tony Blair's adviser on ethics. It is not a particularly academic fraud.