Chapter 1

Plagiarism and Ethical Issues: A Literature Review on Academic Misconduct

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the literature on plagiarism and aims at helping readers better understand what plagiarism is, what is at stake, and how to fight intellectual dishonesty. First, it is essential to define plagiarism and to present the historical background related to academic malpractice. Since the advent of the internet, the number of cases of plagiarism has increased exponentially. Many websites overtly encourage acts of cheating and plagiarism, offer or sell programs designed to copy, generate, and even buy assignments and academic papers. The growing number of retracted documents, not only in open access journals but also in journals owned by major publishers, is disturbing. This chapter will notably discuss the rise and thrive of “predatory” publishers, the growth of fake papers, the abuse of fake positive peer review, and the disturbing success of contract cheating. Finally, it should be noted that even though academic malpractice is damaging the reputation of the scientific community, many solutions have been proposed and implemented.

INTRODUCTION

There are many types of academic dishonesty, such as cheating (the cheater copies or asks someone else to write any form of work or publication), contract cheating (the cheater pays someone else to do it), bribery (money, goods, or services in exchange for a favor, such as a good grade or a positive review), misrepresentation (to deceive someone for academic advantage), conspiracy (to create or alter experimental data; to cite references which are not actually used; to plan to do something unlawful), disruptive behavior (online and in the classroom), etc. This chapter cannot be an exhaustive presentation of all types of academic misconduct; it chooses to focus on plagiarism (in academia) and on the rise of contract cheating (among university students). This might concern and interest university professors,
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According to Jinha (2010), from the first modern journal published in France in 1665 to 2009, 50 million papers have been published in the world. Ware & Mabe (2015) state that around 2.5 million papers are published every year. By the end of 2014, there were roughly 28,100 active scholarly peer-reviewed English-language journals and 6450 non-English-language journals. Most articles are published in the US (23%), China (17%), the UK (7%), Germany (6%), Japan (6%), and France (4%). The United States still leads for the number of citations (36%).

Paradoxically, some scholars complain that the explosion of the number of publications, which is set to double every nine years (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015), results in the “narrowing of science and scholarship”, that is, articles referenced tend to be more recent, fewer journals and articles are cited, and a larger number of their references cite fewer journals and articles (Evans, 2008). Journals generally encourage scholars to cite the most recent literature in the field and the older literature is often neglected. Moreover, some argue that a large number of papers are read only by their authors, reviewers and editors or never cited by other authors (Hamilton, 1990; Schwartz, 1997; Collins, 2004; Meho, 2008). The debate is not new and many researchers argue about these results, which seem to be overestimated (Pendlebury, 1991; Garfield, 1998; Van Dalen & Henkens, 2004; Lariviere et al., 2008). One might also contest these results because these studies are relatively old and do not take into account the recent growth of platforms such as Academia.edu, which has 57 million registered users (Academia, 2017) and ResearchGate, which has 11 million users and 2.5 million research items shared on the site every month (Satariano, 2016), where scholars can share their research and publications for free with a worldwide audience; however, following threats of legal action by a coalition of publishers including Elsevier, ResearchGate is forced as to November 2017 to remove around 1.7 million copyrighted papers from the German platform (Oxford, 2017).

Some might argue that the pressure by academic institutions to “publish or perish” emphasizes quantity (pressure to publish a lot) as well as quality (pressure to publish in reputable journals indexed in renowned databases), and that the increased competition amongst scholars has numerous side effects (Colquhoun, 2011; Osterath, 2014; Jacob, Rzhetsky, & Evans, 2015; Chen, 2015). The career of a scholar depends more and more on his/her ability to publish. University faculty is increasingly pressured to attend conferences, write books, and publish articles in international journals with a high impact factor. The fact that “universities and governments would use the ranking of the journal (based on stated or revealed preference) as a proxy for the quality and impact of an academic’s articles” is disturbing. Many studies have demonstrated that highly-cited papers can be published in lower-ranked journals and that a large number of articles published in journals with impact factor are unable to gather citations (Harzing, 2011).

...both administrators and the management discipline will be well served by efforts to evaluate each article on its own merits rather than abdicate this responsibility by using journal ranking as a proxy for quality (Singh, Haddad & Chow, 2007, p.319).

Moreover, journal ranks and citations should be taken with caution, not only because they are “subject to many forms of error” (Harzing, 2011), but also because cases of plagiarism are increasing rapidly and scandals do not spare major publishers, such as Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Wiley, and Informa (Cohen et al., 2016; McCook, 2016).