

‘Thou shalt not plagiarise’: from self-reported views to recognition and avoidance of plagiarism

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Throughout much of the literature on plagiarism in higher education, there is an implicit assumption that students who understand plagiarism, who have high ethical views and declare not to engage in plagiaristic behaviour are able to recognise it and avoid it in practice. Challenging this supposition, this paper contrasts students’ self-reported data with their ability to recognise and avoid plagiarism in a proposed case scenario. A questionnaire was adapted from previous literature and administered to a sample of undergraduate first- and second-year university students in an Irish university. Results show that self-reported measures are not a powerful predictor of the students’ ability to recognise the practical case as an academic breach, nor to avoid the breach through referencing. This suggests that students’ understanding and awareness of academic breaches would benefit from experiential learning and that higher education institutions should not merely rely on providing statements and definitions of academic misconduct. Also, the results highlight the potential unsuitability of using self-reported measures to study plagiarism, despite their widespread use.

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Challenging implicit assumptions

Much of the literature on academic honesty has been built upon students’ own reports of their perceptions and behaviour, collected through surveys or interviews. Self-reported incidence of plagiarism is probably the most commonly used variable in previous studies and has been at the core of much of the debate about the pervasiveness of academic dishonesty. Classical studies relying on self-reported views and behaviours by McCabe and Trevino (1993), Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995), Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, and Armstead (1996) and Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne (1997) have had much impact and been replicated in numerous occasions, such as in Trost (2009) in this same journal. Complementary to this, explorations of the ethical views that students hold with regards to academic honesty and perceived severity of penalties are also very common. In this sense, we can add to the studies mentioned above the highly influential works by McCabe and Trevino (1997), Mccabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2002), and Scanlon and Neumann (2002), which Vandehey, Diekhoff, and Labeff (2007) has reviewed and complemented with much other literature in the same vein.

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Throughout these studies, there is an implicit assumption that understanding of plagiarism, declared incidence, ethical views and expectations of punishment are all strong predictors of engagement in plagiarism. Also, the generalised use of self-report measures suggests them as an adequate and reliable measure of the reality on the ground. However, the transference of these measures into applied recognition and avoidance of plagiarism suggests a leap of faith that remains largely unexplored. Indeed, it has been long recognised that there are significant limitations with this approach given the paradox of requiring survey participants to provide honest reports of their own dishonesty (Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, and Armstead 1996). Given the sensitivity of the issue of academic dishonesty, students may be tempted to give politically correct rather than truthful answers (McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2002; Pickard 2006). Indications of the same have been found in the Irish institution where this study took place (Author 2, Author 1, and Author 3 2010).

To compensate for this, some valuable approaches to the investigation of plagiarism move beyond surveyed views and behaviours towards the use of experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies based on observed conduct. Roig (1997) and Brown and Howell (2001) focussed on the recognition of plagiarist behaviour using scenarios of plagiarised material. Rettinger, Jordan, and Peschiera (2004) and Rettinger and Kramer (2009) have explored the causes of students' academic dishonesty using experimental vignette methods. Also, emerging research has exploited the potential of plagiarism detection software to observe incidences of plagiarism and the impact of preventive measures from a behavioural perspective (Author 3 and Author 1 2008). These investigations of plagiarism aim to bridge the gap between what students 'say they do' and what they actually can 'demonstrate to do'. In this sense, Pittam et al. (2009, 165) call for further research that explores students' understanding of authorship directly, 'rather than depending on students' perceptions of their own understandings'.

This study contributes to the literature in the area by treating 'self-reported' and 'applied' observations of views and behaviours related to plagiarism as separate entities, while exploring their association and challenging the assumption that self-reported behaviours are a strong predictor of, or automatically transfer into, practical recognition and avoidance of the issue. We embrace the thesis that, indeed, it is possible that students understand what plagiarism is in concept, declare to hold supporting ethical views and expectations of punishment and even claim to refrain from committing the offence, but they may not necessarily recognise it in practice as a breach of academic guidelines to be avoided.

Methods

Context

The university where this research took place is an example of what McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2002) term a 'no code' university, that is, although plagiarism is considered a serious offence and this is reflected officially through guidelines, there are no clearly defined integrity policies in place that apply across the institution (although many departments have developed their own), nor is there a high level of student involvement in the promotion of academic honesty. According to these authors, this would be not unusual in universities of the same size (with registration of approximately 13,000 students), where it is difficult to develop and nurture a strong sense of campus community on which an honour code is

developed. Several student services work arduously to integrate plagiarism prevention in teaching and by developing students' writing skills, but time and resource constraints may limit the scope of their intervention.

Research instrument

The concept of plagiarism is exceedingly subjective, and its nature and manifestation have been subject to much debate (Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne 1997; Lyndsay 2003; Park 2003). As a result of inconsistencies in defining plagiarism across studies, it is difficult to obtain clear conclusions, and comparisons are remarkably difficult (Vandehey, Diekhoff, and Labeff 2007). Therefore, it is important to adopt a concrete, well-delimited example of a breach of academic guidelines for the sake of construct validity. For the purpose of this study, a basic working definition of plagiarism based on the work by Scanlon and Neumann (2002) is proposed as copying text and inserting it in a document without citation, while recognising that the scope of academic dishonesty goes well beyond this specific manifestation.

Based on this definition of plagiarist behaviour, a structured questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 787 business, engineering, education and health service students using independent researchers. Administration was conducted in class settings, thus reducing the self-selection bias that electronic data collection usually introduces. The gender ratio was 57% female and 43% male, and the majority of students (72%) were between 17 and 19 years of age. The study was granted university research ethical approval, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses were guaranteed.

The first part of the questionnaire adapted Scanlon and Neumann's (2002) research measures exploring ethical attitudes towards plagiarism, expected punishment and self-reported engagement for plagiarist behaviour. Students were initially asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with two statements ('copying text and inserting it in a paper without citation is wrong/strictly punished in college') using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Next, students were requested to indicate how often they engage in the act of 'copying text and inserting it in a paper without citation' using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*). The second part of the research instrument utilised a case scenario in order to get students to demonstrate their 'applied' (as opposed to self-reported) understanding of plagiarism. An adaptation of Brown and Howell's (2001) research measure based on a case scenario was used to explore students' recognition and avoidance of an example of verbatim writing. An extract from a paper by Friek (1991) was presented as the original piece of text, followed by a piece of writing by a hypothetical student ('JB') who had included two identical sentences from the original text with no acknowledgement to the author (see Exhibit 1). Students were asked to rate the seriousness of the breach of academic guidelines from their own point of view on a scale from 1 (*no breach*) to 100 (*this is an extremely serious breach*), so as to assess applied recognition of the instance of plagiarism. In order to measure applied avoidance, students were also asked whether or not they considered that it was necessary to provide a reference, measured on a scale from 1 (*not necessary*) to 100 (*absolutely necessary*).

Exhibit 1: case study presented to students as example of verbatim plagiarism

The measurements utilised in the questionnaire were adopted in order to test a range of hypotheses on the predictive power of students' declared views and self-reported behaviour, on the one hand, and recognition of an example of plagiarism as a breach of academic guidelines and avoidance of this breach, on the other. Drawing from implicit assumptions in the existing literature in plagiarism, which makes extensive use of self-reported measures, a strong predictive power of these over applied recognition and avoidance is hypothesised:

H1a: Students' self-reported ethical views of plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise a case of verbatim plagiarism as a breach of academic guidelines.

H1b: Students' self-reported ethical views of plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise the need to provide a reference in a case of verbatim plagiarism.

H2a: Students' self-reported expectation of punishment for plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise a case of verbatim plagiarism as a breach of academic guidelines.

H2b: Students' self-reported expectation of punishment for plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise the need to provide a reference in a case of verbatim plagiarism.

H3a: Students' self-reported level of engagement in plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise a case of verbatim plagiarism as a breach of academic guidelines.

H3b: Students' self-reported level of engagement in plagiarism will be a strong predictor of their ability to recognise the need to provide a reference in a case of verbatim plagiarism.

Statistical analysis was conducted using PASW 18 (SPSS 18.0) and included both descriptive and predictive methods. The responses to the case scenario were initially coded into three differentiated categories: 'agree' (scores greater than 70), 'neutral' (scores between 30 and 70) and 'disagree' (scores less than 30). These cut-off points were chosen on the basis of an expected normal distribution of responses, and though subjective, greatly contributed to initial descriptive explorations of the results. Regression analysis through curve-fit estimation was then conducted in order to examine responses to the case scenarios in terms of students' response to self-reported variables. Nonlinear regression models were utilised compensating for any violation of the assumptions of linearity (normal distribution of variables, constant variance of the dependent variable and linear relationship between dependent and independent variables).

Results

Exploratory analysis

The first section of results, examining the students' self-reported data, shows that 75% of students can be classified as having high ethical views, that is, they agree or strongly agree that in their view, copying text and inserting it in a paper without

citation is wrong. This view is supported by the stated expectation that this behaviour can result in strong punishment (81% of the sample). Additionally, 84% of students surveyed report low levels of engagement in plagiarism as they stated that they never or rarely engage in copying text and inserting it in a paper without citation, as is commonly found in other studies of self-reported use of uncited sources (Rettinger and Kramer 2009). Therefore, analysis of the data addressing self-reported views and behaviour illustrates that the majority of students hold strong personal ethical views about plagiarism, expect to be punished if caught in fault and also report that they rarely, or never, engage in plagiarism.

According to the hypotheses formulated, it would be expected that these views will transfer into practice as measured in the case scenario. In contrast, as illustrated in Figure 1, only 30% of the students sampled agree that inserting a piece verbatim into their work without a reference constitutes a breach of academic guidelines, although the majority of students (64%) agree that a reference was required in this case. Interestingly, the results for our sample are comparable to Brown and Howells' (2001) for their 'no treatment' group.

Hypotheses testing

The curve-fit analysis has obtained significant regression models across the six research hypotheses formulated. In all cases, the cubic linear regression emerges as the model that can explain a largest percentage of the variance of the dependent variables (results are summarised in Table 1).

Since statistically significant regression models that explain the relationship between dependent and independent variables have been found, it is deduced that, indeed, self-reported views and behaviours exert some predictive power over subsequent applied recognition and avoidance of plagiarism. However, our hypotheses address the tacit but pervasive view in existing literature that self-reported views and behaviours are indeed an adequate and reliable measure of the reality on the ground, as they are, more often than not, the main and only measure used. The low percentage of variance of the dependent variables that can be accounted by changes in the dependent variables (ranging from 2.6% for H3a to 7.4% for H1b) hardly

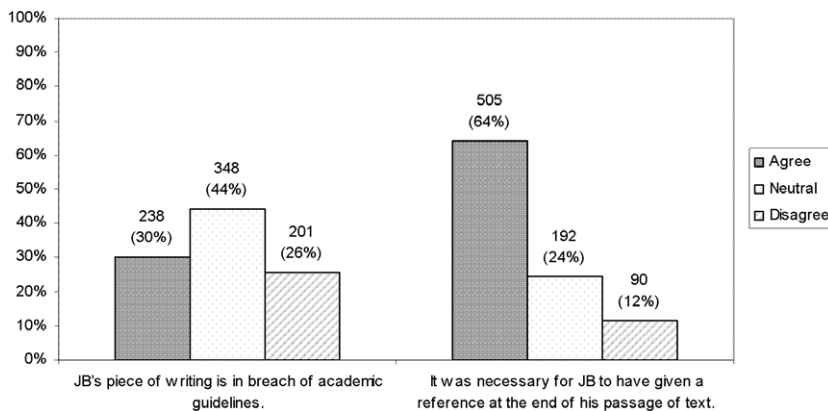


Figure 1. Results for applied recognition and avoidance of the academic breach presented in the case scenario of verbatim plagiarism.

Table 1. Model summary and parameter estimates of cubic linear regression model for each of the proposed research hypothesis.

Hypothesis	Model Summary				
	R Square	F	df1	df2	Sig.
H1a	0.034	8.815	3	750	0.000
H1b	0.074	19.883	3	748	0.000
H2a	0.027	6.872	3	736	0.000
H2b	0.040	10.142	3	734	0.000
H3a	0.026	6.696	3	763	0.000
H3b	0.042	11.048	3	761	0.000

5 supports this view. Therefore, although not completely refusing the existence of a small predictive relationship, the hypotheses are partially rejected.

Discussion

10 We have found that, according to our working definition of plagiarism as using text without acknowledgement, students claim it is wrong, expect to be punished if caught in fault and declare not to engage in such behaviour. However, contrary to logical expectation, this is practically unrelated to their capacity to recognise the case of plagiarism presented as a breach of academic guidelines and to avoid such breach by referencing original sources.

15 Arguably, the methodological design is subject to limitations. The use of a Likert scale may limit the statistical power of the contrasts, as there can be different interpretations of what ‘very frequent’ means. This was, however, adopted directly from the influential work by Scanlon and Neumann (2002) as a measure of self-reported plagiarism, which is at the core of the argument of this paper. Also, the investigation of applied recognition and avoidance as designed by Brown and Howell (2001) constitutes a proxy of behaviour, rather than a measure behaviour per se. The investigation could have observed directly the characteristics of students’ learning artefacts. As this is often difficult, the case study could have been otherwise enriched by more contextual data. Further research may build up, for example, in the research work by Bermingham, Watson, and Jones (2010) by adding contextual information to the case study about the percentage of the work being unreferenced. Also, the collection of more qualitative responses could have added further light to our interpretations.

25 This being said, the results reinforce the argument at the centre of this paper: the relationship between students stated views and behaviours regarding plagiarism and their ability to apply these views in practice is assumed rather than demonstrated. Arguably, students may have considered that the case scenario did not present enough evidence of ‘copying and inserting text with no acknowledgement’, as it was based on only two verbatim sentences taken from the original text and no additional contextual information was provided in the practical example. Students may have engaged in rationalisations related to the student’s intention to plagiarise, and the content of the rest of the essay. It is also possible that ‘plagiarism’ in the students’ eyes is being increasingly associated with the most blatant examples of academic dishonesty like lifting whole papers from peers or paper mills, or extensive ‘copy-paste’ from Internet sources, rather than merely poor academic writing.

Indeed, Colnerud, and Rosander (2009) corroborate in their study that extensive cheating by means of plagiarism means no or little work and effort, and therefore, students moral rejection is clear. Thus, although having claimed to hold high ethical views with respect to inserting verbatim text in a paper without citation, students in this sample may have considered the example too irrelevant to be considered as an academic breach. This supports the view proposed by Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne (1997) and Pittam et al. (2009) that students are unsure about what exactly does and does not constitute plagiarism, and it is often viewed as a less serious form of cheating. Experiential learning for students that focusses on the boundaries between quotation, referencing and paraphrasing is called for, using strategies such as suggested by Uemlianin (2000), Barry (2006) and Landau, Druen, and Arcuri (2002). As well as developing technical aspects of writing, different authors (MacDonald 2006; Ellery 2008; Colnerud and Rosander 2009; Pittam et al. 2009; Author 2, Author 1, and Author 3 2010) advocate for interventions to reduce ignorant deception by discussing the issues surrounding students' authorial identity as early as possible in their university careers. MacDonal and Carroll (2006) recommend assessment-led solutions that focus on using low-stake, formative assessment as a key aspect in this training. The crucial question is not as much establishing if students can reference, but whether or not they are acquiring the required skills to become autonomous and critical learners.

It is also interesting to note that students in our sample were generally able to indicate that a reference was due in the practical scenario provided, despite in general not acknowledging the case as an academic breach, which leads us to think of the missing subjective link with academic guidelines as an additional explanation to our findings. In other words, it is possible that students do not struggle as much with the recognition of plagiarism per se, but with the identification of plagiarism as being intrinsically linked to the institutional guidelines on good academic practice. This supports the view stated elsewhere (Park 2003; Trost 2009; Colnerud and Rosander 2009; Author 2, Author 1, and Author 3 2010) that plagiarism is commonly unintentional and results from students not being aware of proper protocols, or not understanding that they are meant seriously. Indeed, Colnerud and Rosander (2009) argue that plagiarism 'makes one think of breaching moral norms, although not that serious and since it is not that well defined, one might not be aware of the breach'. In our study, one of the quotations illustrates some of the students' psychological distance from academic guidelines and a somewhat cynical view that academics 'make too much of a fuss' about plagiarism:

[Plagiarism is] 'The most heinous crime that anyone can commit, in all honesty the 10 commandments should probably be amended to include: "thou shalt not plagiarise".'
 [Plagiarism should be avoided by] 'Summary executions, so as to make the idea of plagiarism so horrible no student would do it. Perhaps monitor all internet traffic and carry out random interrogation. Put plain clothed police in the library. Encourage/Reward denouncing plagiarisers.'

As a means of avoiding this 'heinous crime', the need to reference material taken verbatim from another source found widespread support in our study, but the correspondence to guidelines of good academic behaviour was missing. This idea is supported by the finding by Ellery (2008) that one of the main underlying reasons for poor understanding of academic requirements (despite her students having received

direct instruction and practising of plagiarism avoidance techniques) ‘was in fact a lack of real engagement with the issues at hand’. In this context, top-down attention to the issue of plagiarism is called for in order to minimise neutralisation, while promoting personal and social responsibility as a core value of education (Rettinger and Kramer 2009). The experiential approaches to developing students’ writing skills should be standardised across the university and integrated in the curriculum, yet this should not be the exclusive responsibility of individual lecturers. Based on the empirical results, it appears that there is a need to follow international trends to formalise the inclusion of learning and teaching strategies in anti-plagiarism policy and practice at institutional level (Brown and Howell 2001; McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2002; Devlin 2006; MacDonald 2006; Walden and Peacock 2006). Obviously, the establishment and continuous strategic support to writing centres is essential. Another possible intervention may be the introduction of an honour code (to date more prevalent in the American than the European context), as a way to clearly communicate to students that academic integrity is a major institutional priority and students have a significant role to play in plagiarism avoidance and policing initiatives (McCabe and Trevino 1993; McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2002; Vandehey, Diekhoff, and Labeff 2007).

Finally, attention needs to be paid to the role played by the institution and its academics, as while in theory and rhetoric we recognise the importance of academic honesty, we do not always actively engage with it. Indeed, the psychological distance with academic guidelines that students have demonstrated may reflect that of their lecturers and institution. Vandehey, Diekhoff, and Labeff (2007) argued that many college instructors are reluctant to address plagiarism cases because of unclear disciplinary procedures and lack of support. Bermingham, Watson, and Jones (2010) points to the lack of consistency of what constitutes a major or a minor offence when it comes to plagiarism and to the tendency to avoid formal procedures treating academic misconduct as a minor case to be dealt with informally. Furthermore, students’ lack of engagement with the issue is underpinned by the inherent contradictions of measuring academic accomplishment. As Selwyn (2008) notes, ‘with the classification of a university degree providing the overriding measure of a student’s academic success, online plagiarism could be seen merely as a manifestation of a wider dishonest “tactic of resistance” from within the undergraduate student body’.

Therefore, there is great need for more comprehensive approaches to academic honesty that facilitate applied recognition both by the student body and by the academics themselves. To this end, MacDonald and Carroll (2006) outline an holistic institutional approach that recognises the need for shared responsibility. Until definitions of academic breaches are clarified further and integrated in the learning experience, disciplinary protocols defined and development opportunities provided, the situation is unlikely to improve.

Conclusion

The results of our investigation are in line with previous studies where students claimed to hold strong ethical views regarding plagiarism, not to engage in such behaviour and to expect strong punishment for it (Scanlon and Neumann 2002). However, this paper has explored the disconnect between these claims and the students’ ability to actually recognise plagiarism as a breach of academic guidelines and avoid it accordingly. For the university in question, the implications concentrate

on the need to continually emphasise that plagiarism is a breach of academic guidelines and that breaches will be regarded as a serious offence, while implementing experiential approaches to learning plagiarism avoidance skills in partnership with lecturers. Our main contribution to the literature focusses, however, on the observed mismatch between self-reported and applied research instruments in the study of plagiarism. Our results support Culwin's (2006) criticism of the influential study by Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) for being based on self-reported behaviour. The author argues that 'this would result in the true incidence being under-reported as individuals are to some extent practising self-deception when they engage in misconduct. Subsequently in order to preserve this deceit they will deny, even anonymously, that they have done so' (Culwin 2006, 168). This represents an interesting opportunity for further research, which could be extended by presenting wider, more contextualised cases, or indeed examining students' writing directly, while being more critical of self-reported research instruments as a source of valid information.

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