

Plagiarism in the Sciences: Conference Highlights

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The Conference on Plagiarism across the Science Disciplines was held on 1 October 2005 at the New York University (NYU) Medical Center. The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in collaboration with NYU Medical Center, the City University of New York, Columbia Medical Center, and St John's University sponsored the event. Coming on the heels of another gathering to discuss the problem of plagiarism (Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on Writing, www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/conference), the New York conference featured an array of attorneys, academic researchers, journal editors, and government officials with expertise in various aspects of this form of scientific misconduct.

After some introductory remarks by NYU's senior provost for research, Pierre Hohenberg, and by Lawrence J Rhoades, director of the ORI Division of Education and Integrity, keynote speaker Martin Blume, editor-in-chief of the American Physical Society (APS), reviewed five cases of plagiarism that have occurred in APS journals in recent years. Among the observations he made was that several of the recent instances he has encountered are by non-English-speaking authors from foreign countries, a point confirmed by others during the conference. After Blume's presentation, Alan Price, ORI director of investigative oversight, described the main functions of ORI and a review of recent misconduct cases involving plagiarism that have been handled by his office. He noted that 12% of the misconduct cases investigated by ORI since 1989 involved plagiarism. Price's data were in stark con-

trast with those offered by James T Kroll, head of administrative investigations at the National Science Foundation (NSF), who reported that as of April 2005, 66% of cases investigated by his office had produced a finding of plagiarism. During question-and-answer segments, members of the audience attributed such discrepancies in plagiarism findings to differences between how ORI and NSF define plagiarism and the specific criteria (such as the extent of plagiarism and whether a case involves an authorship dispute) used by the institutions that result in investigations.

Linda Miller, US executive editor of *Nature* and Nature Publishing Group journals, gave an overview and examples of the various forms of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, and presented data from published studies indicating the extent of the problem in specific biomedical disciplines (such as anesthesia and surgery). Miller argued that editors have an ethical obligation to pursue suspected cases of misconduct but noted that problems can arise, particularly when a case crosses international boundaries. She offered various suggestions for the investigation of plagiarism cases and for preventing such misconduct. Immediately after Miller's presentation was a lively discussion panel consisting of all four prior speakers and moderated by Rochelle Dreyfuss, professor of law at NYU School of Law.

The afternoon session began with a keynote presentation by C Kristina Gunsalus, professor of law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Gunsalus, who with Price and Rhoades had also participated in the first ORI plagiarism conference, in 1993 (ori.dhhs.gov/conferences/past_conf.shtml), explored the legal and emotional issues involved in dealing with cases of plagiarism. She noted that dishonesty (misconduct) codes are stronger for college students than they are for faculty, an observation that she acknowledged had

been made by others. In a similar vein, the next speaker, Stephen Baughman, an attorney with Ropes & Gray LLP, remarked that definitions of plagiarism could vary among schools and even departments in the same institution. Both those presentations highlighted some of the difficulties involved in investigating plagiarism cases.

The third speaker in the afternoon session was Sylvain Cappell, professor of mathematics at NYU and chair of the Committee on Professional Ethics of the American Mathematical Society (AMS). Cappell provided an overview of plagiarism in mathematics, describing how AMS handles allegations. He noted, for example, that because AMS's resources are limited, cases are not investigated if it is determined that they will end up in litigation. Cappell's presentation was particularly interesting because relatively little is known about the types of plagiarism that occur in mathematics; such cases seldom receive the publicity that their counterparts in the social and biomedical sciences typically get.

David Wright, professor of history at Michigan State University and former university intellectual integrity officer there, summarized the results of a long investigation resulting from an initial allegation of plagiarism against a college professor. During the investigation, the research integrity officer (RIO) at the plagiarist's institution uncovered other instances of plagiarism from multiple sources in other papers written by the professor. Wright's case raised some intriguing questions regarding the ethical and legal obligations of an RIO in pursuing this and similar cases.

The last conference event was a discussion panel that I moderated with the following panelists: Sharon Myers, professor at the University of Southern California's American Language Institute, Mladen Petrove ki, assistant minister for science

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Plagiarism continued

in the Republic of Croatia, and Helen Nissenbaum, associate professor at the Law Institute in the NYU School of Law. Petrove ki presented a somewhat unusual case of blatant self-plagiarism whereby a student used the entire contents of his master's thesis for his doctoral thesis. The outcome of that investigation resulted in the retraction of the student's doctoral degree. Nissenbaum explored our current cultural value system that holds plagiarism, and particularly self-plagiarism of text, as such serious transgressions. In a somewhat similar vein, Myers expressed her concern about the external pressures that lead scientists, particularly those not fluent in English, to plagiarize. Finally, my own presentation, also on self-plagiarism, concerned an exploration of the appropriateness of reusing previously written text without attribution in a variety of sce-

narios (for example, from published article to grant proposal).

One theme that was echoed throughout the conference was the apparent overrepresentation of nonnative speakers of English in cases of plagiarism. Various reasons were offered, including the difficulty of mastering the English language, particularly for authors from Asian nations, such as China, whose native language uses an alphabet system that is very different from English. Myers noted that it can take years for native speakers of English to develop the proper level of technical fluency in a given discipline; imagine if we were required to publish our work in polished Mandarin using the Chinese alphabet system.

Many other questions were raised during the conference. For example, what is the level of culpability or liability of coauthors when one of the authors of a multiauthor

paper commits plagiarism? How should journals and the various science databases handle papers that have been found to contain plagiarism? Should a register of "text offenders" (a term coined by conference attendee Loren W Greene, who is a clinical associate professor of medicine at NYU) be created and be available to journal editors, academic institutions, and the public at large?

Acknowledging during his closing remarks that considerable progress had been made in tackling the problem of plagiarism in the sciences, Rhoades pointed out that many questions and issues remained unresolved. Clearly, much work remains to be done. 🗨️

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