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Understanding plagiarism

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Plagiarism is copying ideas, thoughts, and others' work and presenting them as one's own without acknowledgment which is akin to intellectual property theft. A meta-analysis found that the researchers admitting to plagiarism or other forms of scientific misconduct is at 2.9 percent.[1] While people are hesitant to admit themselves indulged in plagiarism and other scientific misconduct, they are upfront in pointing out at others. This has been shown in one of the studies where 1.7 percent have admitted to plagiarism while the witness to plagiarism is at 30 percent.[1] The next most prevalent form of plagiarism is stealing others' ideas and passing them on as their own without acknowledging them. A meta-analysis revealed that 15.5% of researchers witnessed others who had committed at least one Research Misconduct, while 39.7% were aware of others who had used at least one Questionable Research Practice.[2]

Plagiarism is a pervasive issue that has plagued the scientific community and the academic world for a long time. On the one hand, it stains the integrity of the researcher while on the other, it renders the credibility of the institutions questionable. Ethical bodies and scientific journals play a pivotal role in identifying, preventing, and addressing issues of plagiarism to preserve the trust and faith of the scientific community.

Types of plagiarism, scope and impact

Plagiarism can occur in a vast array of forms, ranging from subtle use of ideas from an informal meeting or paraphrasing without proper attribution to obvious copying of texts, legends, and data. Plagiarism can be of different types, viz., complete plagiarism, direct plagiarism, mosaic plagiarism, self-plagiarism, accidental plagiarism, paraphrasing plagiarism, etc. The people indulged in plagiarism can range from students, who mostly do so inadvertently, and do so to make the research work look nicer, not even realizing that copying others' work without acknowledgment is wrong, to high-level academicians or scientists who do so for name, fame, or financial/academic benefit. Irrespective of the types or forms in which plagiarism exists, it can lead to the dissemination of fake/false or misleading information, hence indenting the public trust in scientific research findings, generating inaccurate evidence leading to the formulation of inappropriate guidelines, and also unfairly put the ones adhering to ethical guidelines to a disadvantage.

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Why do people plagiarize?

Looking into history, plagiarism has been prevalent since the Middle Ages whereby it used to be a common practice to copy a part of religious work to compile them into a new one. Even well-known figures like Shakespeare and Leonardo DaVinci have been accused of copying ideas from other sources to create their masterpieces. But then the concept of intellectual property rights had not taken deep roots.[3] Jonathan Bailey has summarized the reasons for people plagiarizing as lack of confidence, procrastination or lack of motivation, lack of time including inappropriate time management, overconfidence in not getting caught, and accidental plagiarism due to an error.[4]

Detection and Prevention

Rapid transformation into the digital age has made it possible to have access to virtually unlimited data for authors, making it harder for custodians to detect plagiarism when they do exist. Vigilance from the stakeholders, including authors, reviewers, editors, and scientific publication bodies, in detecting and preventing plagiarism is of utmost importance. Although the use of plagiarism detection software like iThenticate, Turnitin, Grammarly, etc. has contributed a lot to the detection of plagiarism in recent years, it needs a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional approach to dealing with plagiarism. Creating awareness and educating at the grassroots level, strictly implementing clear guidelines, and fostering a culture of integrity are some of the essential tools in the battle against plagiarism.

It is the primary responsibility of the authors to ensure the integrity of the research and publication of their work. Being aware of plagiarism, diligent literature search, accurate use of information and citing them, precise and transparent methodological details as well as unbiased, honest display of research findings are essential for eliminating plagiarism. This can be facilitated by the institutions, research committees, and ethical bodies by fostering positive research environments by promoting ethical research practices. Regular training, including refresher courses, access to literature, and financial support for research all are means of motivation to enhance the research culture in an institution. On top of that, it is pertinent to make researchers/ authors aware of existing guidelines (e.g., COPE guidelines) and possible consequences of not only plagiarism but other forms of scientific misconduct as well. Journals need to work together to establish a standard and share best practices. An unbiased and transparent editorial process, public records of retractions and corrections, setting up ethical guidelines for authors to follow can help encourage authors to distance away from plagiarism/scientific misconduct, and hence maintaining the integrity of scientific publication. Rewarding authors who manifest an understanding of the value of originality, and quality work over quantity, can reduce the temptation to plagiarize.

Conclusion

Science relies on trust and integrity. In whatever form plagiarism exists, it is one of the key factors that undermines the very essence on which the scientific community is founded. From authors to watchdogs, it is a collective responsibility of everyone to prevent plagiarism so that the literature can be maintained in the purest form possible. From acts of rewarding authors with ethical research and publication practices to creating awareness of the consequences of plagiarism, institutions can play a pivotal role in deterring authors from indulging in plagiarism.

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