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Plagiarism among Collaborators

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Plagiarism is widely regarded by scientists as unethical because it denies a person credit he or she deserves, and it involves lying about who is responsible for ideas, words, data, or methods (Shamoo and Resnik, 2009). The U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) classifies plagiarism as a type of research misconduct and defines it as “the appropriation of another person’s ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit” (OSTP 2000, p. 76262). The OSTP definition applies to research funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), and other federal agencies. Policies and guidelines adopted by scientific journals, research institutions, and professional associations also prohibit plagiarism (Shamoo and Resnik, 2009; Resnik et al., 2010; Anderson and Steneck, 2011).

Most of the recent discussions of plagiarism in science have focused on unattributed copying of text from another scientist’s paper. In response to this problem, many publishers now use computer programs to detect similarities between submitted manuscripts and published papers in electronic databases (Anderson and Steneck, 2011; Resnik, 2012). While copying of text from other researchers is undoubtedly an important concern, plagiarism can also arise even among collaborators. Consider the following hypothetical case based on real events:

Dr. Jones, Smith, Williams, and several graduate students and technicians collaborate on a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded study exploring the relationship between five different mutations and diabetes in a transgenic mouse model. They publish a paper that estimates the contribution from each mutation individually and jointly, as well as interaction effects. While conducting this research, they also developed a hypothesis that explains the interaction effects, but they do not publish this idea, because they are planning to explore it in another paper. Unbeknownst to his collaborators, Dr. Jones develops this hypothesis in a review article he publishes on genetics and diabetes without giving any credit to his colleagues. Dr. Smith happens to read this paper and notices that it discusses their hypothesis without any attribution. The hypothesis is presented as Dr. Jones’ idea. Dr. Smith is very upset about this situation.

One could argue that Dr. Jones’ has committed plagiarism because he has appropriated an idea generated with his collaborators without giving them proper credit. They jointly developed the hypothesis concerning interaction effects of diabetes genes in the mouse model, but he took sole credit for this idea. However, if Dr. Smith pursues a plagiarism allegation against Dr. Jones, his complaint may be dismissed by institutional officials as an authorship dispute, and the matter may not be pursued any further, because the Office of Research Integrity (ORI), which oversees NIH-funded research, has stated as a matter of policy that it treats allegations of plagiarism among collaborators as authorship disputes, and it will refer these matters to funded institutions for resolution. Since ORI will not pursue this

matter, this institution may decide to drop it as well. According to the ORI policy on plagiarism:

Many allegations of plagiarism involve disputes among former collaborators who participated jointly in the development or conduct of a research project, but who subsequently went their separate ways and made independent use of the jointly developed concepts, methods, descriptive language, or other product of the joint effort. The ownership of the intellectual property in many such situations is seldom clear, and the collaborative history among the scientists often supports a presumption of implied consent to use the products of the collaboration by any of the former collaborators. For this reason, ORI considers many such disputes to be authorship or credit disputes rather than plagiarism. Such disputes are referred to PHS agencies and extramural institutions for resolution. (ORI 1994)

The effect of ORI's policy is that it handles relatively few plagiarism cases. Since the ORI was established as a federal agency in 1993, only 8% of confirmed cases of misconduct have involved plagiarism. By contrast, 61% of confirmed cases of misconduct handled by the NSF's Office of Inspector General (NSF-OIG), which oversees NSF-funded research, have involved plagiarism (Anderson and Steneck, 2011). Although the NIH funds primarily biomedical research and the NSF funds research in the biological, physical, social sciences, mathematics, and engineering, it is unlikely that the difference in percentage of plagiarism cases handled by ORI and NSF-OIG is due to scientific disciplinary variations alone. ORI does not review many cases of plagiarism because it has sent a message to institutional officials that it is interested in only certain types of plagiarism, such as plagiarism involving unauthorized textual copying from another researcher.

One could argue that ORI's policy is misguided. ORI justifies its policy on the grounds that when scientists collaborate on a project there is a presumption that any of the collaborators may use the products of the collaboration. This presumption is often false, however. When people jointly produce property, they do not automatically consent to allow their partners to use the property without permission. For example, suppose that Tom, Jane, and Joan build a house together and they own it jointly. Unbeknownst to Jane and Joan, Tom rents out the house for week to some guests for \$400 and collects the money for himself. Most people would agree that Tom has violated Jane and Joan's property rights concerning the house, and that they should have given their permission to rent out the house, since they are joint owners. Scientific research raises similar concerns. When scientists conduct research together, collaborators should be consulted about how research products will be used. Given the importance scientists place on receiving proper recognition for their contributions, most researchers would not allow collaborators to use products of the collaboration, including ideas, data, figures, methods, or text, without explicit permission and proper attribution. In the hypothetical case discussed above, Dr. Jones' collaborators did not give him permission to publish their hypothesis without attribution, so he has violated their rights to receive proper credit and committed plagiarism.

One reason why ORI may have adopted a policy that ignores plagiarism among collaborators is that it does not want to get bogged down in contentious authorship disputes, which can be difficult to resolve. It already has its hands full dealing with fabrication, falsification, and obvious cases of plagiarism, and it does not want to take on additional burdens. While ORI's position is understandable, it sends the wrong message to investigators and institutional officials. It is saying to NIH-funded investigators, in effect, that it is acceptable to use the products of collaboration without attribution or explicit permission, because ORI will not investigate these situations. Although institutions are still free to investigate and adjudicate plagiarism among collaborators on their own, they may be reluctant to do so if they lack ORI's backing and investigative resources.

Moreover, the line between plagiarism and an authorship dispute is not as clear as ORI supposes. Authorship disputes usually arise in science for two reasons: someone contests the authorship attribution or the authorship order. Suppose that a person collects data for a study and they are not listed as an author on the paper, though they are mentioned in the acknowledgments section. If they demand to be listed as an author and not just acknowledged in the paper, this would be an authorship dispute, but it would not involve an allegation of plagiarism, because their data would not be used without attribution. However, if the person's contribution is not acknowledged in any way in the paper, then this authorship dispute could involve plagiarism, since their data would be used without attribution. Thus, while not all authorship disputes involve plagiarism allegations, some disputes do. Drawing an absolute distinction between plagiarism and authorship disputes is a misleading way of thinking about the ethics of scientific research.

Plagiarism among members of the research team shatters the trust that is essential for effective scientific collaboration; it is like stealing from one's friends or family. To promote integrity and trust in research plagiarism policies should address plagiarism among collaborators, and research institutions should investigate and adjudicate such situations, even if ORI chooses not to.

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