

Plagiarism is worse than mere theft

A long-delayed report of a meeting on plagiarism in Washington two years ago is none the worse for the delay, but should be a reminder that most institutions are still poorly equipped to deal with it.

AMONG scholars, plagiarism is the worst of bad behaviour. In the strict sense, when it entails the copying out of other people's words embodying their ideas, it is not just deception but theft — the theft of other people's creativity and of their conception of what the world is like. But plagiarism is also a deception of all who read the stolen texts: not only does the thieving author win credit for notions that are not original, but readers are unable to reconstruct the route by which they have come to see the light of day.

Plagiarism in the literal sense is also the most tangle of academic misdemeanours, which can be dealt with by the simple question, "Have the words been copied, or have they not?" That means that when a plagiarist is unmasked, the case appears open and shut. So it is no wonder that plagiarism is often the most easily punished of academic misdemeanours. People are asked to resign their posts, and often do so meekly. So why does plagiarism remain the most common of accusations of misconduct against academics?

Two years ago, the US Public Health Service's Office of Research Integrity (ORI), the successor of the earlier Office of Scientific Integrity at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), together with various committees of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Bar Association, held a conference in Washington to brood on plagiarism, and it has just circulated an account of the proceedings. Despite the passage of time, the document remains a good read, and a startling one. (ORI says that the text will not be published as ink on paper, but that it will send interested people a disk on request.)

It deserves a wide audience, and not simply for the riveting discussion, by Dr Frederick Newsome of the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, of the sense in which Pythagoras was a systematic plagiarist. The tale is that Pythagoras had been urged by his elder Thales to travel to Egypt and to attach himself to the priesthood who were then the custodians of the Nile Valley's wisdom. Young Pythagoras did just that, returning to Greece in his early fifties brimful of notions about the immortality of the soul, the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle and the symbolic significance of simple geometrical shapes that became the hallmark of the Pythagorean School. Newsome tells how upset the

Egyptians were to see their credit stolen.

The contemporary cases of plagiarism raise a different question: how can established academics, almost by definition not neuronally deficient, be so artless in their intellectual burglary? Two of the several cases described in detail at the ORI meeting involve the use by a senior scientist of material from grant applications submitted by others and seen in the course of the senior people's duties as reviewers of grant applications. In both cases, the senior people had taken 'background material' from the grant applications to include applications of their own, even copying over errors in the lists of references, but without attributing them to the authentic source.

One would expect that somebody bent on stealing another's text would at least embellish it with original prose, and that it would be an elementary precaution to make sure that the references are correct. Does guilt, or the wish not to face up to the enormity of the crime being perpetrated, prevent plagiarists from taking elementary precautions against discovery? Certainly they appear as one to hide from the near-certainty that, in the normal course of the peer-review process, their fake will be sent to the plagiarized person for review. That also happened in the well-known case in 1979 when Dr Helen Wachslicht-Rodbard, then at NIH, was sent for review a proposed article from Yale containing six paragraphs (including some crucial mathematics) from an earlier article of her own; she was able to conclude (correctly as it turned out) that the authors of the proposed article were also the authors of a hostile review of her earlier article.

Plagiarists appear also to be amateurish in their attempts to cover up their crime when challenged. One of the scientists who had submitted part of another's grant application as his own claimed that the villain was a postdoctoral fellow once working in his laboratory who had been shown the grant application and who, separately, had been asked to write a document suggesting future directions of research. But the scientist concerned declined to identify the postdoc.

The interest of these cases is not just prurient. They are a reminder that even well-established researchers will do the most outrageous and foolish things in the scramble for repute. The particular value of the ORI discussion is that, in attempting to reach a definition of plagiarism, it knocks on the head several legends behind

which plagiarists are inclined to hide. The idea that unpublished material is fair game for unattributed quotation because it does not enjoy the formal protection of a publisher is both common and false. (The ORI meeting, with all those lawyers in attendance, might have made more of the absolute protection enjoyed by unpublished writings, to which even the 'fair use' provisions of copyright law do not apply.) So is the notion that familiar ideas are in some sense in the public domain so that the language in which they are expressed can be copied freely.

The record of the meeting also clearly brings out the evident difference between scientists' and lawyers' conceptions of what constitutes plagiarism. To lawyers, the crime is akin to copyright violation, to scientists it is more like the commercial crime of 'passing off', by which a manufacturer may seek to claim a distinguished brand-name for inferior goods, or to outright forgery, where an individual may falsify the signature on a large cheque.

So how prevalent is plagiarism? The ORI meeting did not attempt an answer. But if the known plagiarists are so consistently discovered by their amateurish way of working, one is bound to ask how many cases there are of people who have taken more care and escaped detection. Certainly it is a common observation that published articles often refer inappropriately to their antecedents, perhaps crediting an earlier author with a technical development, but not with the insight to which it led him or her. And the steady rumble of complaints from authors originally published in languages other than English that their work has been misappropriated is a sufficiently dense smoke as to suggest that there must be fire somewhere.

What is to be done? Perhaps the chief value of ORI's meeting is that it showed that several universities in the United States have organized themselves effectively to deal with complaints of plagiarism. It will be interesting to see how quickly they can spread themselves to deal with cases other than those centred on flagrant copying. It is more important that other universities should follow suit. And while there are good general reasons for suspecting that making 'research ethics' a formal part of the education of graduate students will serve no purpose, the scale of common self-delusion about plagiarism does seem to require specific instruction of the propriety of correct attribution **John Maddox**