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# Whose Line Is It? Plagiarism in Economics

WALTER ENDERS *and* GARY A. HOOVER<sup>1</sup>

*"When you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research."*<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we report the results of a survey concerning the nature and the extent of plagiarism in the economics profession. Perhaps more importantly, we report on the practices and policies that professional journals use to curb plagiarism. The motivation for the paper can be understood by reading the following verbatim excerpts from a set of e-mail communications between one author of this paper and the editor of a well-known economics journal. The discussion concerned a referee report that the author was preparing for the editor. In order to provide confidentiality, the names have been removed and are indicated by a set of brackets [ ].

Author (2/7/2003): "As it turns out, some of the wording is remarkably similar to a paper I have written. ... As such, I am not sure how to proceed with my review. I have attached my paper in Word format. ... If you think the papers are sufficiently dissimilar, I will send my review."

Editor (2/7/2003): "It appears to be a pretty clear-cut case of plagiarism. ... Apart from rejecting the manuscript and refusing

any future submissions from the author, I am not sure how I should proceed."

Author (2/10/2003): "... A simple rejection along with a refusal to consider future papers is not sufficient. No one would allow similar behavior from a student to go unchecked. We don't want to see this turn into a major issue. However, we request that you send a copy of your rejection letter (along with both papers) to [the plagiarizer's dean]."

Editor (2/12/2003): "I respect your views and agree that some further steps are called for. I want to seek some outside counsel as well before proceeding. Can you please give me ten days or so to get some additional input?"

Editor (2/14/03): "I have received input from our advisory panel and several colleagues. They and I both are concerned about possible liability for the journal of any aggressive course of action. Without further investigation, though, I would not be ready to make the same conclusion regarding information that might ruin someone's career."

The correspondence ended when Author received a CC copy of an e-mail from the editor to the plagiarizer (2/14/2003):

"Dear [plagiarizer],"

"Thank you very much for your submission. Unfortunately, after careful review, we have decided that we cannot accept [the

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson Izner (1876–1933), *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* 757 (15th ed. 1980).

paper] for publication in [journal]. We appreciate having had the opportunity to consider your work and hope that you consider our journal for future submissions.”

Notice that it was the editor who first used the term “plagiarism” and that the initial intent of the editor was to impose a penalty on the plagiarizer. The fear of litigation and the possibility of damaging a career, however, ultimately altered the decision.

These events led us to investigate the extent of similar occurrences in the economics profession. As such, in April of 2003, we sent out approximately 470 surveys to the editors (or co-editors) of various journals that economists use as outlets for their work. The cover letter gave the editors the option of completing the survey online or using the paper survey that was enclosed. Approximately 42 percent of respondents filled out the survey online. In all, we received useable responses from 130 journals, for a response rate of about 28 percent. Some of the best-known and respected journals are included, along with smaller, more field-specific journals. The list of respondents includes the *American Economic Review*, *Journal of Economic Literature*, *Journal of Finance*, and *Journal of the American Statistical Association*. The complete list of responding journals is available at [www.e-JEL.org](http://www.e-JEL.org) or [www.cba.ua.edu/~ghoover](http://www.cba.ua.edu/~ghoover), while the questionnaire appears in the article appendix.

## 2. Formal Plagiarism Policies

One of our concerns was whether journals had formal policies in place regarding plagiarism. Of the 127 journal editors who responded to this question, only 24 (19 percent) reported that they had a formal policy. The Taylor & Francis Copyright Agreement (2003) is quite representative of most policies:

You warrant that, apart from any such third party copyright material included in the Article, the Article is your original work, and does not

infringe the intellectual property rights of any other person or entity and cannot be construed as plagiarizing any other published work.

The most common response of those without a formal policy was that the copyright agreement signed by prospective authors implicitly certified the originality of the work. For example, the Kluwer Academic Publishers Consent to Publish and Transfer Copyright (2003) agreement states that the author

warrants that the Article is original work and has not been published before in any form and that it does not infringe upon any copyright, contains no libelous or otherwise unlawful statements, and does not otherwise infringe on the rights of others, and that any necessary permission to quote from another source has been obtained ....

The most common reason given by those without a formal policy was that they never encountered a case of plagiarism and therefore found a policy to be unnecessary. One editor stated that “publishing a plagiarism policy suggests that the editors treat the potential contributors as potential cheaters and primitives in general. Not a very polite attitude towards contributors.” Another editor stated:

When I invite a guest to my home, I do not post a sign that shouts at them that removing the silverware is stealing and will be prosecuted according to the law. The reason I do not do this has to do with the high quality of the people that I invite to my home. Similarly, the [Journal] is a refereed professional journal. Warning a professor of economics about plagiarism would seem to be an insult and most professors who correspond with me would say so without hesitation.

Nevertheless, few professors would distribute a class syllabus without a statement of appropriate student conduct and an enumeration of the penalties for plagiarism. A third editor responded that contributors are hesitant to plagiarize because they would be detected: “In my experience, it is rare. The review process is quite deliberate (and

TABLE 1  
WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING CONSTITUTE PLAGIARISM?

	Not at all	Not likely	Likely	Definitely	Total
Unattributed sentences (several)	2 (1.8%)	21 (19.8%)	47 (44.3%)	36 (34%)	106
Unattributed proof (derivation) from working paper	0	10 (9.3%)	35 (32.4%)	63 (58.3%)	108
Unattributed proof (derivation) from published paper	0	5 (4.6%)	32 (29.4%)	72 (66.1%)	109
Unattributed idea	4 (3.9%)	45 (43.7%)	37 (35.9%)	17 (16.5%)	103
Use of privately collected data without permission	3 (2.8%)	18 (16.8%)	35 (32.7%)	51 (47.7%)	107

multiple rounds), making the 'quick hit' from plagiarizing less likely and the costs of being detected more likely."

We should note that warranty and indemnity clauses, as in the Kluwer Academic Publishers contract above, allow publishers to sue plagiarizers for breach of contract and/or fraud. We were not able to find a single instance of such an occurrence. Moreover, since the copyright is held by the publisher, the actual author has little legal ground for such a suit should they seek redress against a plagiarizer.

In summary, although editors seem concerned about plagiarism, few have any formal plagiarism policy. Instead, they tend to rely on copyright law to protect themselves from unauthorized duplication of published materials. To be fair, most journals do try to protect themselves from plagiarism. However, there is an important distinction between plagiarism and copyright violation. The Modern Language Association's Style Guide (see Joseph Gibaldi 1998, p. 151) states: "Using another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source constitutes plagiarism." Since ideas, principles, concepts, and discoveries are not protected under U.S. copyright law, plagiarism need not involve copyright infringement. As such, copyright

law provides no protection for the original innovator of an idea even though the theft of an idea is clearly plagiarism.

### 3. *The Nature and Extent of Plagiarism*

The editors indicated a surprisingly small number of plagiarism cases. Of the 117 editors that responded to the question, 83 editors (nearly 71 percent) said that they see zero cases of plagiarism in a typical year. Of the remainder, 28 editors reported one case, four reported two cases, and two reported three or more cases of plagiarism in a typical year. Hence, the editors reported 42 occurrences of plagiarism in an average year.

Of course, an important factor in the number of reported occurrences is editors' perceptions of the appropriate definition of plagiarism. The editors' responses are reported in table 1.

There are several key features to note in the response pattern. While not unanimous, the large majority of responding editors considered the use of several unattributed sentences or a proof to be plagiarism. Most also thought that the use of privately collected data without permission constituted plagiarism. One dissenting editor noted that, if the data were effectively in the public domain, it

TABLE 2  
IN A CLEAR CASE OF PLAGIARISM, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ARE APPROPRIATE RESPONSES?

	Not at all	Not likely	Likely	Definitely	Total
Notify the original author (if possible)	2 (1.8%)	9 (8.2%)	21 (19.1%)	78 (70.9%)	110
Notify plagiarist's department chair, dean, provost, etc.	11 (11%)	42 (42%)	23 (23%)	24 (24%)	100
Ban future submissions to journal from plagiarist	1 (1%)	23 (21.5%)	38 (35.5%)	45 (42.1%)	107
Public notice of plagiarism	19 (19.2%)	50 (50.5%)	17 (17.2%)	13 (13.1%)	99

might be considered "poor form" to use it without permission, but it should not be viewed as plagiarism.

The editors were almost evenly split, however, on the use of an unattributed idea. There is no question that it can be more difficult to detect the use of an unattributed idea than unattributed sentences or equations. In fact, one editor expressed the possibility that an author may hear an idea and later develop papers without knowing where the idea came from. Nevertheless, the passing off of another's idea as original is clearly plagiarism.

As mentioned earlier, ideas can be plagiarized without a copyright violation. Hence, copyright law provides no protection from someone plagiarizing an idea heard at a conference or seminar or read on a website. The copyright agreements provided by the journals are simply copyright transfers from authors to publishers. As plagiarism can occur without copyright violation, copyright infringement can occur without plagiarism. In fact, several editors wrote that they were concerned about authors submitting a work that is essentially the same as another paper that they have already published. A related issue was that of simultaneous submissions of similar papers. These are clearly issues of copyright violation since, by definition, it is not possible to plagiarize yourself. Similarly, a few editors noted the possibility of senior

faculty members exploiting the work of graduate students or adding their name to a paper without making a substantive contribution to the work. John List et al. (2001) found that thirteen percent of the American Economic Association members responding to their survey believe that the research contained in the top thirty journals involves this type of plagiarism.

#### 4. Responses to Plagiarism

Table 2 reports what the editors deem to be appropriate responses to a clear case of plagiarism. Notice that 99 of the 110 responding editors stated that they would likely or definitely inform the original author of plagiarism if it were possible. Unlike our experience with [editor] mentioned earlier, almost 78 percent of responding editors would ban future submissions to the journal from a plagiarist. In fact, three editors noted that their journals keep logs of plagiarists; hence, the ban on submissions exceeds the stewardship of an editor. On the other hand, less than half of responding editors would publicize the incident or notify the plagiarist's superior.

Some editors noted that banning plagiarists from future submissions and making a public notice would be appropriate if the paper was discovered to have contained plagiarized material after it had already been

printed. Moreover, there have been a few public notices of plagiarism appearing in economics journals.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, plagiarism policies are influenced by potential litigation. Initially, [editor] was willing to ban our plagiarist from future submissions to the journal. Recall that he later suggested that potential litigation influenced the journal's response to the plagiarism. Of the 114 editors responding to question 7 of our survey, forty (35.1 percent) indicated that their behavior towards plagiarism is *somewhat* influenced by the potential for litigation, and five (4.4 percent) indicated that the potential for litigation *greatly* influences their behavior regarding plagiarism. One editor replied that his journal has an insurance policy to help pay legal costs if the journal is sued.

Sixty-nine (60.5 percent) replied that their behavior towards plagiarism is not at all influenced by the threat of potential litigation. Since 57 of these editors have no formal plagiarism policy, it is possible that some would recant when faced with a similar instance of plagiarism. One editor, however, was very clear that his journal has taken very aggressive stances against plagiarism: "We have had two incidents in the last two years. One constituted deliberate, premeditated plagiarism, in our view. We reported the case to the institution employing the perpetrator." The plagiarist was fired.

### 5. Policies to Combat Plagiarism

The question eliciting the strongest opinions asked editors if they favored a code of ethics for the economics profession. Professional organizations involved with licensure and/or certification typically have an explicit code of ethics. Of the 111 editors responding to this question, 73 (65.8 percent) reported that the economics profession would benefit from such a code. Dissenting editors indicated that "a code of

ethics is a good idea but would do nothing to curb plagiarism because it would be 'pro forma' and unenforceable." Another indicated that a code "is not applicable to economics the way it would be for biochemists or accountants."

Even in the presence of a code, plagiarism can be difficult to detect. A clever plagiarizer of an idea will not use the exact wording of the original paper. For example, Laura Miller (2003) discusses the complexities of Lewis Perdue's legal case against Dan Brown (author of the recent best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*). Perdue's *Daughter of God* and *The Da Vinci Code* both involve Vatican intrigue, hidden manuscripts, and clues that are hidden in paintings. The issue is complicated by the fact that many economists work on "timely" topics, so that several people can be working on the same idea simultaneously. A famous example is the publication of Stanley Fischer (1977) and Edmund Phelps and John Taylor (1977) in the same issue of the *Journal of Political Economy*. Each paper acknowledges the others' independent formalization of the notion that staggered wage contracts allow the monetary authorities to stabilize the economy using a feedback rule.

Although the editors of 117 journals report a minimum of 42 instances of plagiarism per year, the number is certainly small relative to the total number of submissions. Our conjecture is that reputation effects deter many potential plagiarists. Certainly, blatant plagiarism is easily detected and can destroy the plagiarist's reputation. Yet, our plagiarist did not have a national reputation, was from a medium-sized college, and probably wanted an additional publication to help insure promotion from associate to full professor. As such, it is troubling that 53 percent of the majority of journal editors are not willing to report a clear case of plagiarism publicly or to inform the plagiarist's chair, dean, or provost. A second conjecture is that shortening the time between manuscript submission and eventual publication would reduce

<sup>3</sup> See KYKLOS (1999) and *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (1984).



some forms of plagiarism. The longer an article circulates in mimeo form with limited distribution, the greater the likelihood of someone deliberately (or inadvertently) incorporating key features of the paper.

### 6. Conclusions

It could be argued that potential plagiarists are less likely to submit an article to a well-known journal. We used an ad hoc method of selecting twenty well-known U.S.-based and international journals from our list of respondents. The responses from this set are very similar to those of the entire sample. Where there are differences, editors from the list of twenty experience a bit less plagiarism and are less inclined to a code of ethics.

The key findings from our survey are:

1. Editors tend to rely on copyright law to protect themselves from unauthorized duplication of published materials. As such, there is little protection for the innovator of an idea presented at a conference, contained in a student's paper, or posted on the web. Moreover, the editors were almost evenly split on the notion that the use of an unattributed idea constitutes plagiarism. Thus, the relatively small number of reported instances is less than the actual number of occurrences.

2. The majority of editors are not likely to publicize an instance of plagiarism. About thirty percent of the editors would

be willing to publish such a notice and only 47 percent are likely to notify the plagiarist's superior. Thus, for the majority of journals, the penalty for plagiarism is a ban on future submissions and notification of the actual author.

3. A reasonable majority of editors (73 out of 111) favor a code of ethics for the economics profession. A few editors attributed some forms of plagiarism to poor training and mentoring by advisors and senior colleagues. Enumeration of the various forms of plagiarism and the appropriate penalties could aid potential authors and provide editors with behavioral guidelines if they detect plagiarism. A code could also help journal editors in any potential litigation arising from an attempt to impose sanctions on plagiarists.

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## APPENDIX

## Responses to Selected Survey Questions

2. Does your journal have a formal policy regarding plagiarism? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

	Yes	No	Responses
All	20 (18.7%)	87 (81.3%)	107
List of 20	4 (20%)	16 (80%)	20

6. In a typical year, how many cases of plagiarism does your journal experience?

	Zero	One	Two	Three or more	Responses
All	68 (70.1%)	23 (23.7%)	4 (4.1%)	2 (2.1%)	97
List of 20	15 (75%)	5 (25%)			20

7. Does potential litigation influence your behavior with regards to plagiarism?

	Greatly	Somewhat	Not at all	Responses
All	4 (4.2%)	31 (32.6%)	60 (63.2%)	95
List of 20	1 (5.3%)	9 (47.3%)	9 (47.3%)	19

8. Many professions have a professional "code of ethics". Do you think the economics profession would benefit from such a code? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

	Yes	No	Responses
All	63 (67%)	31 (33%)	94
List of 20	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)	17