

BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO REDUCE PLAGIARISM AND DISHONESTY

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Abstract. *Could behavioral sciences help us to understand better what drives people to plagiarism and could help us to propose better anti-plagiarism policy? The aim of our paper is to provide an eclectic perspective that can contribute to a better understanding of issues related to plagiarism.*

Keywords: dishonesty, plagiarism, behavioral economics

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Romania has been scrutinized by the scientific community as numerous plagiarism scandals appeared. Plagiarism was so pervasive that even a former Prime Minister¹ was accused (and convicted) of plagiarism. In response to such a situation, several Romanian researchers launched Integru – a service "which will investigate and expose cases of plagiarism and other academic misconduct in Romania. Each case will be accompanied online by commentaries from international – and independent – reviewers selected for their expertise in the relevant field" [1].

Several other protest actions were intended to be applied, such as boycotts and petitions [2]. However, it took years before the first nine accused individuals finally publicly renounced their academic titles². Besides ethical issues, the case of plagiarism in Romania is an important issue given its detrimental impact on the education system.

Plagiarism is a widespread behavior, growing hand in hand with the increase of new technologies and easy access to information [3].

Therefore, in this contribution, our main question is if behavioral sciences could in any way help to better understand determinants of plagiarism and design better anti-plagiarism policies.

As far as we know, even if several papers have examined the contribution of behavioral sciences to a better understanding of dishonesty and misconduct, the plagiarism issue has not been considered explicitly from a behavioral viewpoint. Without denying the importance of other contributions to this ongoing debate, we want to add some behavioral stones. Let us caution the reader that our goal is neither an exhaustive review, nor an advocacy of behavioral solutions in lieu of other strategies. Rather, we provide some eclectic insights that can contribute to a better understanding and treatment of plagiarism issues.

The remainder of our contribution is organized as follows. The next section describes some behavioral insights that may enlighten some unexpected determinants of academic misconduct. Section 3 briefly describes the most common justifications of people accused of plagiarism. Section 4 concludes and addresses, in an eclectic way, the crucial issue of how behavioral sciences can contribute to the design of anti-plagiarism strategies and policies.

2. SOME UNEXPECTED DETERMINANTS OF PLAGIARISM

There are no criteria for prioritizing intensity and/or severity of plagiarism, as there is no ways for its prescription or to mitigate its impact [4].

According to a standard definition, plagiarism is the use of someone's materials (e.g., ideas, sentences, figures) without giving proper or appropriate credits to the original author [5]. At first glance, we can distinguish between unintentional and intentional plagiarism. In the following, we are only interested in discussing the later.

One very simple motive for plagiarism are status considerations. In Romania, academic titles were considered by some political figures as additional status markers. But in parallel, one other possible explanation is the one emphasized by a recent contribution by Buhai et al. which shows that standards to be promoted in the Romanian academic system are so unrealistically high that "academics of global acclaim, including Nobel Laureates, and the vast majority of John Bates Clark or Yrjö Jahnsson awardees, would not qualify for Economics professorships in Romanian universities" [6]. Faced with this problem, applicants reacted in innovative unethical ways to artificially increase their scientific production to meet the standards.

In this sense, plagiarism, like other expressions of dishonesty, could be easily explained by the traditional analysis *à la* Becker [7]. The extent of plagiarism is determined by the probability of being caught and the potential gain expected from that dishonest action. Nevertheless, this picture, even if it seems, and is, partially convincing, misses an important part of the problem regarding the reasons why people plagiarize. Therefore, additional behavioral explanations should be taken into account: when confronted to the possibility of plagiarizing, individuals balance between the self-interested benefits and the desire of maintaining a positive self-image [8].

In this comparison, several behavioral, contextual and unexpected determinants of plagiarism can intervene. These determinants can act as vicious nudges in the sense that they may create the conditions for plagiarism. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a nudge is supposed to "urge into action" [9]. Thaler and Sunstein popularized the concept

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-ponta-idUSKBN0JU1N520141216>

² <https://english.pressone.ro/historical-moment-the-first-9-romanians-to-renounce-their-doctor-of-science/>

in the area of decision-making, by defining a nudge as "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" [10]. In their conception, a nudge is ethically used to push individuals into a virtuous direction. However, the opposite can also be true: the context in which individuals evolve can push them in vice, i.e. plagiarism: individuals can be honest by nature, but circumstances may tempt them to plagiarize.

There are as many behavioral explanations as the number of possible biases in our brains. Cognitive biases are predictable errors in the ways that individuals interpret information and make decisions [11].

Let us review some of the behavioral determinants making plagiarism easy (neither exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive). For instance, social influence can be one of the determinants of plagiarism: descriptive (what I see) and injunctive (what I am told to do) social norms influence individuals [12]. Individuals conform to norms around them. Even if those norms are immoral, individuals can however stick to them. For instance, watching others plagiarizing and still being positively popularized by the social media and the society can lead the individual to plagiarize. Indeed, norms exist because those following them are expected to fulfil specific tasks and responsibilities. Therefore, individuals can adhere to collective immoral solutions when it is individually rational to adhere to such norms because they are acceptable by the society. In particular, norms can constitute focal points ("everybody plagiarizes"): a slippery slope effect intervenes with the gradual degradation of the social norms available to individuals.

Related to this effect, the depletion effect, according to Baumeister et al., is also a possible explanation: when individuals live in immorality times, in a society in which they are surrounded by immorality, they will maybe resist temptations of dishonesty and plagiarism as long as they can, but, at a certain point, they will not have enough will-power left to resist, because of overuse [13].

When looking at the characteristics of those who were discovered to plagiarize in Romania, one can notice that most individuals already benefitted from a high status in society (e.g. Prime Minister, Faculty Dean, etc.). Therefore, the reason to plagiarize was not to gain a social or a scientific rank, but not to lose one already acquired (by any means). In this case, two other behaviour effects could be evoked to explain the extent of plagiarism. One of them is the winner effect (the sense of entitlement) [14]. This effect is very simple: once someone feels entitled to a position, a job, a social rank, he/she feels like he deserves the following achievements. The fact that in the past the individual had several "winning" experiences (maybe by immoral and easy means) leads the individual to think that he/she is allowed to also expect this kind of easy future victories (seeking status to low-cost means). For individuals who were propelled to high-status political jobs by dishonesty, the idea of awarding to themselves some academic diplomas was natural.

Related to this situation is the loss aversion effect documented by Kahneman and Tversky [11]. Indeed, all things equal, individuals are more sensitive to losses than to equivalent sized gains: it is psychologically different to behave dishonestly to avoid a loss than to win a gain. If the considered individual believes that by plagiarizing he is

likely to conserve a certain position, he/she is likely to do so. Experimental evidence shows this effect: as documented by Grolleau et al., "the level of cheating is by far higher in the loss frame than in the gain frame under no monitoring. The fear of losses seems to lead to more dishonest behaviour than the lure of a gain" [15].

3. SOME COMMON JUSTIFICATIONS/ EXCUSES OF PLAGIARISTS

Simply speaking, individuals who plagiarize are able to justify it in very creative ways, and are able to rationalize their acts: they find good reasons to justify plagiarism, even by changing the immoral nature of plagiarism. Indeed, individuals accused of plagiarism frequently justify or rationalize ex post their behaviour by some non-mutually excuses/reasons: they deny any intention of stealing others' work and transfer the responsibility to others (e.g., PhD students, research assistants...). Moreover, they justify plagiarism as a victimless practice and pretend that other individuals are benefiting from their plagiarism.

Anand et al. build a table in which they list several reasons on how people rationalize dishonest behaviors [16]. We adapt some of them in Table 1 for the case of plagiarism.

Table 1. How do people rationalize plagiarism (adapted from Anand et al. 2005)

| Strategy | Description |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Denial of responsibility | No other available choice |
| Denial of injury | No one is harmed |
| Denial of victim | The other deserve it |
| Social selective comparison | Everybody is doing the same |

In the same vein, Ariely listed a series of results that need to be taken into account when looking at plagiarism: indeed, plagiarism, as all other dishonest behaviors, will increase with the ability to rationalize, if there are conflicts of interests, if individuals have already committed immoral acts, if individuals watch others behaving dishonesty etc. [17].

Ayal et al. suggested a three-principle framework call REVISE intended to classify forces that affect dishonesty and put in practice forces as to encourage moral behavior [18]. We conjecture that this tool can be easily adapted in the context of plagiarism. The three principles are: reminding, visibility and self-engagement. The first principle, reminding, is built on "the effectiveness of subtle cues that increase the salience of morality and decrease people's ability to justify dishonesty". Legal authorities must issue very visible moral rules: reminders against plagiarism must be easy to understand, and use qualifications as "right" and "wrong", and must be continuously reminded. The second principle, visibility, "aims to restrict anonymity, prompt peer monitoring, and elicit responsible norms". In this sense, people committing plagiarism must be identified as out-group members and not as respected individuals, which will automatically give people the possibility to "distance themselves" from plagiarists. The third principle, self-engagement, "increases people's motivation to maintain a

positive self-perception as a moral person and helps bridge the gap between moral values and actual behaviour".

In another vein, Dinu et al. identified some historical and geographical aspects which generates a certain intensity or frequency of plagiarism: it relates to the appearance of objectivity, usually placed in the past and transferred from one generation to another as profound deficiency of some moral or educational principles (the communist thinking of lack of property and the early capitalism thinking of predatory cultural and entrepreneurial attitude) [4]. We believe this is linked to status problems as suggested earlier. In this case, several measures can be implemented, as described by Grolleau et al., in order to overcome the enhanced plagiarism problems: increasing the number of dimensions on which individuals compare as to avoid status races and the plagiarism solution to gain/conservate status; increasing the number of reference groups for a given dimension on which individuals compare as to allow individuals to benefit from several rankings [19]. As noted, "position seeking is deeply rooted in human nature and ignoring it can lead to flawed recommendations". Rather than fighting status seeking, the legal representatives should channel it "towards productive ends".

In the end, some of those mechanisms can offer policy-relevant tools to decrease plagiarism if easily adapted inside the legal systems, in complement to, or as a substitute of, traditional incentives and punishments, as they have the ability to swich behaviours into responsible directions.

4. CONCLUSIONS: HOW TO DECREASE PLAGIARISM. SOME BEHAVIORALLY-MINDED SUGGESTIONS

We briefly suggest some behaviorally-guided suggestions: as behavioral determinants are at stake, we need to adapt the framing to which the individuals are exposed. Moral reminders, honour pledges and signature at the right time/place will reduce plagiarism [17]. We need to use social influence, such as injunctive social norms (if they are aligned with the anti-plagiarism objective), when there is discrepancy between descriptive, and injunctive social norms and use identity concerns (being a plagiarist or plagiarizing!) [20].

Our note is very short, and we need empirical evidence to test in the field the respective contributions and find an optima mix. Plagiarism is a complex issue, and many dimensions are not addressed here (e.g., self-plagiarism: Frey example).

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