

EDITORIAL

## Self-Plagiarism: Some Common Sense, Some Reasonable Accommodation — Please!

There are words and acts in scholarly publishing that are considered unethical, immoral, and in some cases even illegal. When such breaches of conduct occur in scientific publishing, they challenge the moral order of the scientific community by undermining the integrity of the literature and violating the rights of others — colleagues, subjects, readers, the public. When I think of such acts in the academy and in the publishing world, the ones that immediately spring to mind are plagiarism, duplication, cheating, misrepresentation, fabrication, and falsification of data (Mauer, 2007). And every day new acts are added to the list. One of the most recent to make it onto editors' lists of offences is self-plagiarism. I have trouble adding it to mine.

I still recall the first time I heard the term self-plagiarism. It was just a few years ago, when it was the subject of lively debate at a meeting of nursing editors. I was unfamiliar with the practice and confused by the term. I thought I knew what *plagiarism* meant, and I also thought I knew what *self* meant, but I had never put the two words together. It had never occurred to me that one could plagiarize oneself. To me this was an oxymoron. How did these two concepts go together? What was the misconduct here — the scientific transgression?

Since then the issue of self-plagiarism has been debated among editors of medical journals, and recently it has been the subject of editorials and commentaries (Dellaville, Banks, & Ellis, 2007; Scanlon, 2007), with editors of nursing journals weighing in (Baggs, 2008; Broome, 2004). The positions on self-plagiarism have ranged widely. Some view it as a form of ignorance, others as an act of deception by a “transgressor,” and still others as a form of serious scientific misconduct. I have tended to side with those who consider it a minor offence, if an offence at all, and so we at *CJNR* have never adopted a screening system to detect self-plagiarism.

But now the issue has hit home. A few months ago self-plagiarism came calling at *CJNR*. We received an irate letter from a reviewer about a manuscript he had been sent. The reviewer stated that the author had

self-plagiarized from a paper she had already published. He advised that the manuscript be withdrawn immediately and the author be admonished. We investigated. Yes, the manuscript involved overlap with a published paper. The methods and data collection drew heavily from that paper and a table was to be essentially reprinted. However, the manuscript under review related to an aspect of the study that was not covered in the published paper — and indeed the author had cited that paper. When the issue was raised with the author — who by all accounts was a responsible, highly ethical person — she was shocked. She had never heard of self-plagiarism. Moreover, it had never occurred to her that it would be wrong for her to use her own published material in subsequent publications. A lengthy discussion ensued and cautions were issued to the scholar. We decided it was time for *CJNR* to clarify our position and develop policy accordingly.

The World Association of Medical Editors is an invaluable resource for editors of medical and biomedical journals. In its policy and guidelines ([www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals](http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals)), the Association defines plagiarism as

*the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source. The intent and effect of plagiarism is to mislead the reader as to the contributions of the plagiarizer. This applies whether the ideas or words are taken from abstracts, research grant applications, Institutional Review Board applications, or unpublished or published manuscripts in any publication format (print or electronic). Plagiarism is scientific misconduct and should be addressed as such.*

It defines self-plagiarism as

*the practice of an author using portions of their previous writings on the same topic in another of their publications, without specifically citing it formally in quotes. This practice is widespread and sometimes unintentional, as there are only so many ways to say the same thing on many occasions, particularly when writing the Methods section of an article. Although this usually violates the copyright that has been assigned to the publisher, there is no consensus as to whether this is a form of scientific misconduct, or how many of one's own words one can use before it is truly "plagiarism." Probably for this reason self-plagiarism is not regarded in the same light as plagiarism of the ideas and words of other individuals.<sup>1</sup>*

Now, make no mistake, plagiarism is a serious offence. It amounts to both theft and fraud. Scientists who fail to disclose an original source, misappropriate the work of another, or pass another's work off as their

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<sup>1</sup> All italics in the preceding quotes are mine.

own are in fact stealing. They are committing an act of deception for the purpose of defrauding the scientific community and the public. There can be no doubt that scientific plagiarism ought to be subject to sanctioning by the scientific community and even legal action.

But what about self-plagiarism? Where is the violation or crime? What is being stolen, and from whom? What fraud is being committed? What is the nature of the misconduct?

As with many issues in research ethics, it is a question of intent or degree. The worst-case scenario is duplicate or redundant publication resulting from the submission of the same manuscript to two or more journals without the knowledge of the editors concerned. The author may have elected to alter the title or to make minimal changes, but for the most part the text is the same. One can speculate on the motivation here: padding one's publication record or curriculum vitae. The misconduct occurs when a journal believes it is presenting an original, unpublished work when in reality it is not. The author has in fact plagiarized his or her own work and defrauded the publisher. Moreover, the author more than likely has contravened copyright law. The prevailing practice is for authors to relinquish copyright to the journal in exchange for publishing and disseminating their work. The work is owned by the journal, not the author. Duplication and redundant publication meet the criteria for plagiarism (theft and fraud) even in the case of an author's own work, for they are in violation of the author's contract with the publisher.

Nothing is quite so clear-cut of course. There are exceptions to the rule of redundant publication. For example, a paper may merit republication in a different language. In this case, the publisher will have to secure translation rights from the original publisher or secure permission to republish and cite the original source. When there is transparency and disclosure among all parties (i.e., the author, the publishers, the readership), duplication and redundant publication move out of the realm of fraud and scientific misconduct and into the realm of scientific integrity.

That was an easy one!

The murky water, and where I have difficulty with the idea of self-plagiarism, is when authors quote or repeat small sections of their own published work. Sometimes a study's findings are carved up into so many publications that the actual study gets lost. The root problem here is not so much self-plagiarism as what is called "salami publication." That said, there are instances when reporting on a single study in several publications is warranted. For example, a multi-site, multidisciplinary study may call for multiple publications, each addressing different issues and using different data. In such a case, why would repeating the Methods section or describing the study's rationale and background be considered self-plagiarism? Why is this practice considered self-plagiarism rather than a

useful linking of various parts of a study that when put together form a whole?

There's something in the publishing world called "fair use." Fair use allows an author to cite and quote from a publication without having to seek permission from the publisher or pay a copyright fee. We need to consider what constitutes fair use by an author drawing from his or her work. Authors should not only be allowed to liberally quote from their own work but be encouraged to do so. Productive, creative thinking is built on years of experience, knowledge acquisition, insight, and reflection. Ideas need to be honed, developed, incubated, and refined, and this takes time. A worthwhile idea has depth, texture, and nuance. It is only through well-considered and deliberate language, well-constructed sentences, and well-chosen examples and metaphors that one can trace the development, evolution, and transformation of an idea. Given the current climate of suspicion, scholars may be afraid to use previously published work and thinking may fall victim to discontinuity and disjointedness. If ideas have to be reworked and reworded for each new publication, it could become increasingly difficult to trace them and make links among them.

At *CJNR* we have a policy governing duplication and redundant publication. We ask authors to sign a form stating that their submitted work is original and has never been published. We are now considering mechanisms for enabling authors to link submissions to previous publications, to improve ease of reading and reviewing. Authors will be allowed to repeat some sections of a published work without having to revise and reword, so long as this adheres to the rules of fair use and does not violate the agreement with the journal that holds copyright.

We are well aware that scholars and editors work in an environment where easy access to online information and the heightened pressures of the academy are converging to produce new forms of plagiarism and "cheating." This has given rise to a culture of mistrust and suspicion in the scientific publishing community. Editors are on high alert for fraud and are under increasing pressure to subject manuscripts to software capable of detecting ingenious forms of misconduct — which for some include self-plagiarism.

Plagiarism is number one on my list of publishing offences. Self-plagiarism doesn't make it onto the list at all.<sup>2</sup>

In dealing with self-plagiarism, we at *CJNR* choose to steer a course of transparency and disclosure. We rely on a spirit of partnership with our authors — putting stock in their competence and their commitment to

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<sup>2</sup>My list grew longer just last week, when I read for the first time, in the *Guardian*, about "contract cheating" — the hiring of another person to write one's papers.

responsible authorship — on the conscientiousness of our reviewers, and on our own wits to help ensure the integrity of both the literature and scientific practice. In short, we choose common sense and reasonable accommodation.

**Laurie N. Gottlieb**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

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