# How prevalent is academic misconduct in management research?

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ABSTRACT

We survey 1215 management researchers, including editors, researchers, and reviewers, about their views and experiences with four types of academic misconduct: plagiarism, self-plagiarism, coercive citations, and questionable reviewing practices. Management researchers hold strict views on plagiarism, though editors report on frequent instances encountered. We find that many management researchers consider self-plagiarism acceptable. There is also a high percentage of editors who report on authors being coerced to add citations of reviewers or journals to their submission. Similarly prevalent is so-called "honorary authorship," where colleagues and supervisors who did not take part in the work are added as co-authors. Lastly, nearly half of the editors who responded report having witnessed conflicts of interest in peer reviewing. We conclude that the current system of peer reviewing is in need of change, and we discuss possible ramifications to overcome the persistence of academic misconduct.

## 1. Introduction

Management research has recently come under increased scrutiny. The retraction of an editorial piece on research ethics due to self-plagiarism attests to the growing concerns around the topic of plagiarism in general and self-plagiarism in particular. (Schminke & Ambrose, 2011; Schminke & Ambrose, 2014). Martin (2016) discusses the case of a self-plagiarist, later caught, who has amassed sixteen retractions related to redundant and duplicate publications.

Against this background, we surveyed 1215 management researchers who attended the annual meeting of the Academy of Management. Forty-one percent of journal editors who responded report that that in a typical year they find no incidences of plagiarism.[1] That would seem encouraging until it is shown that 53% responded that they encounter between 1 and 5 incidences of plagiarism annually. To say the least, this is troubling.

The results raise some important questions as to why plagiarism is so pervasive in management research. First, the instances reported by the editors may emanate from the very definition of plagiarism itself. The Modern Language Association states: "[t]o plagiarize is to give the impression that you wrote or thought something that you in fact borrowed from someone…." This raises the question—perhaps linguistic or philosophical—of whether it is possible to borrow from oneself. As such, differing understandings of plagiarism and self-plagiarism could

account for the various instances reported by editors and researchers.

Second, it may well be that management researchers simply do not consider self-plagiarism problematic. Scholars may feel outraged when they see others fabricating data, but do they consider self-plagiarism dishonest too? In an editorial for *Research Policy*, Martin (2013: 1008) defines self-plagiarism as "…the practice by an author (or co-authors) of reproducing text, ideas, data, findings or other material from one or more earlier (or contemporaneous) papers by the same author(s) without explicitly citing or otherwise acknowledging those other papers." In management, Bedeian, Taylor, and Miller (2010) report that > 80% of respondents to their questionnaire have witnessed faculty members who "published the same data or results in two or more publications."

Lastly, and more problematic, the persistence of plagiarism and self-plagiarism raises the question whether the root causes of occurrence lie in the academic incentive and publishing system (Woodside, 2009). For example, Martin (2013) lists several instances of redundant or duplicate publications and self-plagiarism cases that happened at the journal *Research Policy*. Misconduct then may involve intentional and unintentional processes (Honig, Lampel, Siegel, & Drnevich, 2014).

While different viewpoints on plagiarism may be attributed to unintentional misunderstandings, intentional wrongdoings (omitting citations on purpose; duplicate publications, gaming the review process) may expose more severe problems. This, therefore, also raises the

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[1] In the following, we refer to those respondents who indicated editorship as "editors." All other respondents are referred to as "management researchers." Groups are composed as non-overlapping, such that those in an editorial role are not included in the remainder of the researcher group.

question whether peer review processes are intact or whether problems with reviewing may exacerbate the plagiarism problem. Research along these lines is especially important, as Honig et al. (2014: 16) attest that when ensuring research quality "[…] peer review is the first line of defense".

We extend prior work by providing an analysis of scholar's experience with, and opinions on, plagiarism, self-plagiarism, coercive citations, and questionable reviewing practices. Specifically, we contrast views of editors and researchers on cases which they have witnessed or encountered. In addition, we compare driving factors and root causes to the underlying instances of misconduct observed.

## 2. Data and methods

### 2.1. Dataset

Between August 1, 2016 and September 20, 2016, we sent out 38,426 emails to participants listed in the Academy of Management Annual Meeting online brochure between 2005 and 2015. Approximately 8682 emails bounced back and 2575 yielded out-of-office (indication of institutional or email change) replies. After the initial email was sent in the first week of August, we sent a reminder email some four weeks later. To preserve anonymity, responses to the survey were not linked to the respondent's identity. We received 1215 useable replies, which corresponds to a direct response rate of 4.47%.[2] Hence, we are confident that we are representing a wide range of viewpoints in the profession. However, we do not claim that results are derived from an unbiased sample of researchers in management academia. By soliciting responses from only AoM participants, it is quite possible that groups of scholars with vastly difference experiences and viewpoints have been excluded. Additionally, we received some indication that our online Google-hosted survey may have been blocked in China. Thus, later, any regression analysis derived from these data should be viewed with caution.

Following Enders and Hoover (2004) and Arce, Enders, and Hoover (2008), we begin by eliciting editor's and management researcher's views on plagiarism. We examine editors' views on current and possible future policies regarding plagiarism. Editors further replied whether they have encountered other forms of misconduct related to the review process (yes/no for seven individual items).

### 2.2. Dependent variable

#### 2.2.1. Views on plagiarism

We ask respondents whether they consider unattributed sentences, unattributed proof or derivation from published work (others and one's own), and data use without permission each as plagiarism (not at all, not likely, likely, definitely). We subsequently derive a factor analysis whether these items are all regarded as one form of plagiarism or whether different forms exist. The factor analysis reveals two distinct factors on which the items load: 1. Questions that relate to taking unattributed sentences, proof, and derivations from one's own working papers or published papers; 2. Questions that relate to taking unattributed sentences, proofs, and/or derivations from other people's working papers and published papers. We label these two constructs *plagiarism* (Cronbach's alpha: 0.68) and *self-plagiarism* (Cronbach's alpha: 0.7). Both are used as dependent variables in Table 3.

#### 2.2.2. Views on responses to plagiarism

With the insights into what management editors and researchers judge to constitute plagiarism, we also elicited their views on what

deterrent actions would be necessary. First, we asked whether there should be a notification to the original author(s) of the plagiarized work. In addition, we asked respondents which of the following responses to plagiarism were appropriate: a) informing the original author, b) informing the department chair, dean or provost, c) banning future submissions to the journal, and d) making a public announcement of the plagiarism. The factor analysis reveals one unique factor comprising all but one item—informing the original author. Cronbach's alpha is 0.61 for the three items. We treat this variable *punishment* as our dependent variable in Table 5 but also estimate another set of regressions using *author notification* as the dependent variable in Table 6.

#### 2.2.3. Editors' responses on incidences of plagiarism

Building on the previous analyses, we also collected information from editors about the extent of plagiarism they had encountered at their respective journals. This section deals with their responses. Editors gave affirmative answers from a list of instances provided in a typical year. Coding is as follows: 0 instances = 1, 1–5 instances = 2, 6–10 instances = 3, 11–20 instances = 4, 21–50 instances = 5, > 50 instances = 6. The variable is used as dependent variable in Table 8.

#### 2.2.4. Editor views on questionable research practices

We also asked journal editors about other acts of unethical behavior they have encountered. Again, they gave (yes/no) answers whether they had encountered instances of a) peer reviewing with a conflict of interest, b) faked peer review, c) citation coercion by reviewers, d) citation coercion by editors, e) citation gaming by delaying publication, f) honorary authorship, and g) coercion to add supervisors as authors. We sum over all of these instances to arrive at a count measure of instances of malpractice reported by editors. In addition, we use the responses to citation coercion, peer reviewing, and authorship coercion as separate dependent variables in Table 10.

### 2.3. Independent variables

To elicit what explains different views on plagiarism and self-plagiarism, and to understand how appropriate editors and management researchers find potential deterring actions, we rely on several explanatory variables. These relate to the respondent's experience with the academic publishing process, general views on the field of management research, academic track record, and personal characteristics.

Firstly, we asked individuals to indicate whether they are serving as *editors* (Managing Editor, Editor-In-Chief = 1, 0 otherwise) and/or *department or associate editors* (Department/Associate Editor = 1, 0 otherwise), or are *reviewing* for journals included in the Financial Times 45 journal list (Has reviewed for FT45 journal = 1, 0 otherwise). Note that individuals can serve as managing editors and department/associate editors at the same time; hence, classifications are not necessarily mutually exclusive. All editors and management researchers can also act as reviewers.

We elicited general opinions about the status quo of their field by asking how they view the *incentives to publish* in their respective field. We asked individuals to what extent they agree (5 point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) with the following statements: "There are strong incentives to publish statistically significant results in empirical management research" and "There is an overrepresentation of *p*-values in the tail of the distribution just below alpha = 0.1".

We asked respondents, "How many scientific papers did you (co-)publish in peer-reviewed scientific journals (2006–2016)?" The variable scientific publications takes on the following values: 1 = 0 publications, 2 = 1–5 publications, 3 = 6–10 publications, 4 = 11–20 publications, and 50 ≥ 20 publications. Hence, a higher number is reflective of a more productive scholar. We also use a variant of this measure conditioning only on the *number of FT45 journal list publications*. The coding scheme is equivalent, and respondents were provided

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[2] The questionnaire design and analysis was carried out outside of the US. No university or other institutional review board has been involved in this research. The US-based co-author of this work was not involved in consenting or data collection, nor did he have access to identifiable data.