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# Giving and stealing ideas in memory: Source errors in recall are influenced by both early-selection and late-correction retrieval processes



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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies of unconscious plagiarism have asked participants to recall their own ideas from a previous group-problem solving session, and have typically reported that people mistakenly include a partner's responses when trying to recall their own. To date, there has been little research looking at the propensity to include one's own responses when trying to recall a partner's previous contribution to the group. Experiment 1 demonstrated that people make both kinds of source-error during recall, but source errors are more common in the recall-partner task. This pattern was replicated in Experiments 2a and 2b with source-errors and intrusions increasing over a delay. Experiment 3 used an extended version of each recall task, in which participants reported all items that came to mind, whilst indicating which responses were goal-relevant. The tendency for source-errors to occur more for the recall-partner task was shown to be a function of both idea availability and output monitoring, whereas the tendency for source-errors to increase over a delay was shown to be due solely to output monitoring. Thus, unconscious plagiarism errors are one instantiation of the more general problem of source-specified recall, which is influenced jointly by processes at generation and output monitoring.

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## Introduction

There are many reported disputes about the source of ideas in science, art and everyday life (Defeldre, 2005; Taylor, 1965). These usually feature accusations of intellectual theft accompanied by counterclaims of innocence of intent. Both sides in such disputes could use the experimental literature to support their side of the argument: the accusers can cite the many papers on unconscious plagiarism (also known as cryptomnesia) demonstrating people to be guilty of reporting someone else's ideas as their own. In mitigation, the accused could

show that these errors occur even when participants are instructed not to make such errors, or even if they are rewarded for avoiding them (see Perfect & Stark, 2008 for a review). Thus anecdotal accounts and experimental evidence converge to suggest that recall can involve the accidental appropriation of others' ideas, wittily dubbed as *kleptomnesia* by Macrae, Bodenhausen, and Calvini (1999). This term implies that unconscious plagiarism constitutes a form of intellectual theft, similar to the self-serving cases of deliberate plagiarism reported in everyday life. We challenge this conclusion here, by showing that people often mistakenly include their own responses when recalling their partner's answers. In fact, giving away ideas in this manner constitutes a higher proportion of recall output than the more commonly studied error of unconscious plagiarism.

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*Is unconscious plagiarism evidence that we steal ideas from others?*

The experimental literature on unconscious plagiarism is dominated by [Brown and Murphy's \(1989\)](#) paradigm. This begins with a group of participants taking turns to individually generate solutions to a presented problem. Later individual group members are instructed to recall their own responses, avoiding those generated by others. Finally, participants attempt to generate new solutions, avoiding all old responses including their own. [Brown and Murphy \(1989\)](#) reported plagiarism at above-chance rates for both the recall-own and generate-new tasks, a pattern subsequently replicated many times (e.g. [Brown & Halliday, 1991](#); [Foley, Foley, Durley, & Maitner, 2006](#); [Landau & Marsh, 1997](#); [Marsh & Bower, 1993](#); [Marsh & Landau, 1995](#); [Marsh, Landau, & Hicks, 1997](#); [Perfect, Defeldre, Elliman, & Dehon, 2011](#); [Perfect & Stark, 2012](#); [Stark & Perfect, 2006, 2007, 2008](#); [Stark, Perfect, & Newstead, 2005](#); see [Gingerich & Sullivan, 2013](#) for a recent review). Here we focus only on plagiarism during recall.

The widespread adoption of the [Brown and Murphy \(1989\)](#) paradigm has had the unfortunate consequence of producing an incomplete picture of source-errors in recall. Because the prior work only uses a recall-own task, the only errors detectable involve the mistaken recall of a partner's responses. This methodology doesn't measure whether a participant fails to output one of their own responses because they believe it came from their partner. Nor does it measure the extent to which people would give away their own responses when attempting to recall their partner's responses. Consequently, the literature is replete with examples of individuals claiming other's ideas, but contains almost no examples of ideas being given away or withheld.

This focus on people's tendency to plagiarise the work of others is consistent with social research demonstrating egocentric bias in recall of work with partners. For example, [Ross and Sicolý \(1979\)](#) ran a series of studies in which individuals judged responsibility for group work, such as which spouse contributes more housework (Experiment 1) or how much input a supervisor and a student have on a thesis (Experiment 5). They reported a general egocentric bias, such that people attributed the majority of joint work to themselves, such that the combined input from both partners often exceeded the total amount of work. (For similar examples of egocentric bias in recall see [Hyman, Roundhill, Werner, & Rabiroff, 2014](#); [Stephenson & Wicklund, 1983](#).) The notion of an egocentric bias in recall of input is also consistent with the many cases of plagiarism of literary or musical content reported in the media. In contrast, to our knowledge there are no reported cases of artists or writers accidentally (rather than deliberately) claiming their own work being by someone else. In this context, it is perhaps understandable why some have claimed that unconscious plagiarism errors are an example of an egocentric bias ([Macrae et al., 1999](#); [Wicklund, Reuter, & Schiffmann, 1988](#)). However, this conclusion is not supported by research on bias in source judgements.

*Is there a bias towards plagiarism in source-monitoring judgements?*

Memory bias towards or away from the self has been studied most extensively in the source monitoring literature. A common approach in such studies is to have participants presented with one set of items, whilst generating or imagining another set (e.g. [Hashtroudi, Johnson, & Chrosniak, 1989](#)). Later at test, participants are presented with old and new items, and asked to judge each item as to whether it is old or new, and to judge its source. These two judgements are made either independently in two phases (e.g. [Starns, Hicks, Brown, & Martin, 2008](#)), or in a single combined decision (e.g. [Hashtroudi et al., 1989](#)). Three findings are commonly reported. First, memory is superior for items generated rather than perceived, consistent with the generation effect. Second, people confuse perceived items as having been generated and generated items as having been perceived. Third, falsely recognised new items are most often attributed to the external source – the *it-had-to-be-you* effect ([Hashtroudi et al., 1989](#); [Hoffman, 1997](#); [Johnson & Raye, 1981](#)).

[Marsh et al. \(1997\)](#) demonstrated all these effects in a series of experiments looking at the rate of source-errors in recognition tasks involving new items, items generated by the participants, and items generated by other group members. In all experiments, participants were more likely to mistakenly label their own responses as coming from their partners than to label a partner's responses as their own. That is, old items were subject to the same *it-had-to-be-you* bias as new ones. However, a complicating factor in these experiments was that the participants originally generated the answers in groups of varying sizes, and so any individual only generated a minority of items. Thus, the tendency to attribute items to another group member could result from a heuristic reflecting the base-rate probabilities. In the absence of source-specifying information, an item is most likely to have come from someone else. Consistent with this observation, the relative rates of plagiarism (claiming someone else's response was self-generated) and anti-plagiarism (attributing one's own response to someone else) across experiments reflected the relative size of the groups involved. Those experiments in which participants generated a higher proportion of the original ideas resulted in higher rates of claiming other's ideas and lower rates of giving ideas away. Nevertheless, in all studies, giving away ideas was more frequently observed.

The one study to date to look at these two forms of source error in a recall-based paradigm was by [Perfect, Field, and Jones \(2009\)](#). Participants initially worked with a partner to generate solutions to problems concerning health and the environment, and so base-rate generation was controlled. At the start of the experiment, the participant's partner (a confederate) declared themselves to be an expert in one of the two topics under discussion. After the generation phase, participants thought of ways of improving half the ideas from each topic, before later recalling either their own ideas or their partner's ideas, and then finally generating new solutions to the same topics. With respect to the recall tasks, the results demonstrated more

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