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Plagiarism and health promotion: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Valéry Ridde

Without mentioning the resignations of several German ministers, today we are forced to admit that the practice of plagiarism in the domain of health is not a rare one. Plagiarism and duplicate publications represent 25% of fraud-related retractions for articles referenced by PubMed (1). The field of health promotion clearly has not been spared from this scourge.

And yet, it seems to me that those associated with the Ottawa Charter, be they in universities or in scientific journals, have not yet confronted the issue head on. It has nothing to do with 'modern times' as this practice seems to go back centuries, although the advent of the internet and powerful software allows us to catch fraud more easily. Health promotion professors who bring up the issue of plagiarism in their classes are rare indeed. The scientific journals associated with the IUHPE are all concerned with ethical issues, but few if any have adopted a clear policy with respect to plagiarism, taking the time to thoroughly inform readers and potential authors. Yet plagiarism is 'the tip of the scientific fraud [iceberg]' (2), as the writer of one medical and scientific publication-related blog to watch (in French) calls it (www.h2mw.eu). It is one of the better-known 'worst practices' (see the US Office of Research Integrity at <http://ori.hhs.gov>). If the editors of clinical medicine journals seem ill-equipped to judge questions regarding plagiarism (3), then what about those of health promotion journals?

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) offers a guide on what to do in the case of suspected plagiarism (http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/02B_Plagiarism_Published.pdf). Some journals have started to adopt policies on self-plagiarizing (<http://publicationethics.org/text-recycling-guidelines>), which seems to be becoming an urgent matter in a world where researchers are unfortunately pushed towards producing ever more work and they are harassed by 'predatory' journals (<http://scholarlyoa.com>)

on a near-daily basis, a toxic by-product of the development of Open Access, which in and of itself is essential to improve access to knowledge. I myself was recently a victim of this desire to make my work widely accessible. Some West-African students simply copied and pasted my workⁱ, without citing the source. In their Master's thesis, I discovered a long chunk of text from one of the papers I had posted for free on the internet. Unfortunately, they were not sanctioned. Even more recently, when I had just uploaded the slides from one of my lectures in Europe on Slideshare in order to make it accessible to a wider audience, a European student wrote to me asking why I had not enabled downloading, even though the contents can be seen on the website... Plagiarism, however, concerns every continent (1,4), every language and every kind of plagiarizer. The thesis of a Canadian colleague of mine was copied by a senior university professor in Belgium in a chapter of a book published by a prestigious French university press who refused to inform readers, thereby showing that a lack of ethics is not the sole province of those directly committing plagiarism.

We could go on citing examples forever, but it would be more useful to look at two websites, <http://www.plagiarismadvice.org> (in English) and <http://responsable.unige.ch/index.php> (in French), which are also remarkable teaching tools. In order to act, certain universities have adopted policies against plagiarism and gathered resources to train faculty (<http://www.bioethique.umontreal.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/plagiat-fraude.pdf>; in French), which allows professors to inform their students in advance of any irreparable mistakes. In all of the syllabi given to students at the beginning of a course, I now systematically include a link to my university's plagiarism policy webpage. Unfortunately, this was an insufficient warning for one student, who plagiarized an entire World Health Organization report in the final paper he/she turned in this summer.

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I therefore believe that it is essential to better inform and train students on this issue, as what is at stake is the integrity of the coming generation of health promotion experts and researchers.

Health promotion has always placed importance in preventative rather than curative measures, *Hygeia* instead of *Panacea* (5). Isn't it about time for scientific journals and health promotion professors to prevent plagiarism, before they are forced to cure it and perhaps even call the police (6)?

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Note

- i. In French, 'copy and paste' is *copier-coller*, which is the title of a useful blog (<http://archeologie-copier-coller.com>; in French).

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