



Erlend Hem (born 1970) is an MD, PhD, and Acting Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association.

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Plagiarism is stealing somebody else's work. That is scientific misconduct.

Thou shalt not steal

On 28 January 2013, the book could be closed on a long drawn-out conflict over a PhD thesis at the BI Norwegian Business School. The case had begun nearly three years earlier, in March 2010, when two professors at the school alerted the management to a possible case of plagiarism. What happened since has been referred to as a farce (1). However, the case is fundamentally important, and it illustrates a discrepancy between law and ethics. In the thesis, the researcher had committed «plagiarism in an objective sense», but had not acted with «gross negligence» and was therefore not guilty of «scientific misconduct», the appeals board finally concluded (2). This assessment may be legally sound, but remains questionable in terms of publication ethics.

«The appeals board wishes to note that «misconduct» is a serious label» (2, p. 13). Yes, of course; plagiarism is a serious matter. It means stealing from someone else's work and publishing it as one's own. For good reasons, plagiarism is considered the most serious form of scientific misconduct, next to forgery and fabrication. The board continues: «Even though the thesis contains plagiarism in an objective sense, in the manner described by the appeals board, most of the thesis is nevertheless the author's own work» (2, p. 13). The appeals board is correct about this too. An expert commission estimated that approximately 15 % of the thesis had been plagiarised – in other words, 85 % had been written by the author. Most of the thesis is «the author's own work». But where will the appeals board draw the line?

According to the Act on ethics and integrity in research of 2006, it is misconduct to plagiarise or commit other breaches of good scientific practice when this is done wilfully or through gross negligence. Hence two criteria must be fulfilled: One must both have violated the rules and have acted wilfully or through gross negligence. It was this final point – the matter of subjective guilt – that let the researcher off the hook. Thus, according to the law, one could not conclude that the author in question had committed scientific misconduct. In terms of publication ethics, wilfulness or gross negligence on the part of the author is less relevant. It is a fundamentally simple matter: Plagiarism *is* scientific misconduct.

The BI case referred to above was investigated in minute detail and the findings were published (2, 3). This is uncommon; normally, such matters are not discussed in public. Those involved will attempt to sweep the unpleasantness under the carpet. At an early stage, BI President Tom Colbjørnsen claimed that the matter should not be pursued further, for reasons including the considerable damage this could inflict on the school's reputation (1, 3). Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, has described this phenomenon in general as «the academic world's customary discretion in cases of plagiarism» (4). Otherwise, most of it was recognisable. A typical feature of

such cases is the desire to explain the matter away. In a plagiarism case in this journal in 2005, when an article had to be retracted because of extensive copying of content, the plagiarist referred to it as a slip-up (5). «This was an unfortunate oversight, whereby my excellent memory may have played a trick on me», the author Karsten Alnæs stated when he was exposed (6). «I have read a great deal, and that's possibly why I recall it so verbatim», the BI researcher claimed (3, p. 13).

The openness demonstrated in the case at the BI Norwegian Business School – against the president's will – has been pivotal in giving the public an insight into the matter. Plagiarism has recently been a topic in a series of high-profile cases in Europe. Examples include Germany's former minister of defence Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Hungary's former president Pál Schmitt, Romania's prime minister Victor Ponta and now in February 2013 Germany's minister of education Annette Schavan. Openness is required to stamp out plagiarism and other forms of scientific misconduct (7).

In the BI case, President Colbjørnsen has been concerned that the concept of plagiarism is poorly defined, and that this constitutes «the most important challenge faced by the academic world at the moment» (8). This is not so. «If you are in doubt, report your source. Be generous, show your hand!» is an excellent piece of advice from Ole-Andreas Rognstad, Professor of Law at the University of Oslo (9, 10). Reporting all sources of material for a scientific publication is a completely fundamental and universal principle. This applies to all aspects of the work, including the text itself, not only the ideas, the expert commission for the BI case noted (3, p. 16). In brief: Behave properly towards your sources. It is as simple as that.

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