

Applying Ethical Theories: Interpreting and Responding to Student Plagiarism

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# Applying Ethical Theories: Interpreting and Responding to Student Plagiarism

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**ABSTRACT.** Given the tremendous proliferation of student plagiarism involving the Internet, the purpose of this study is to determine which theory of ethical reasoning students invoke when defending their transgressions: deontology, utilitarianism, rational self-interest, Machiavellianism, cultural relativism, or situational ethics. Understanding which theory of ethical reasoning students employ is critical, as preemptive steps can be taken by faculty to counteract this reasoning and prevent plagiarism. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that unethical behavior in school can lead to unethical behavior in business; therefore, correcting unethical behavior in school can have a positive impact on organizational ethics.

To meet this objective, a content analysis was conducted on the written records of students formally charged with plagiarizing at a large West Coast university. Each case was classified according to the primary ethical reasoning that the student used to justify plagiarism. Results indicate that students predominately invoke deontology, situational ethics, and Machiavellianism. Based on these findings, specific recommendations are offered to curb plagiarism.

**KEY WORDS:** academic dishonesty, ethical reasoning, history of copyright, historic views of plagiarism, Internet plagiarism, teaching academic integrity, theories of ethics

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*This research is the result of a long-standing interest in new technology and plagiarism. Very early ideas on this subject were presented by the authors at the ABC West Conference in New Orleans in March 2003.*

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## Introduction

While the use of the Internet has led to improved efficiency and effectiveness in teaching, it has also created an explosion in student plagiarism (Fialkoff and St. Lifer, 2002; Groark et al., 2001; Rimer, 2003). Through online term paper mills (<http://www.cheater.com>, <http://www.schoolsucks.com>), Google searches, as well as access to library databases, students literally have a world of information at their fingertips. In a 2001 survey, conducted by McCabe, 41% of undergraduate students admitted that they had engaged in one or more instances of “cut and paste” plagiarism involving the Internet [Center for Academic Integrity (CAI), 2002–2003]. Additionally, non-Internet plagiarism continues to be a problem. While instructors and students have tools such as Turnitin.com at their disposal, a better approach would be to understand student reasoning about Internet plagiarism and to devise methods to stop it before it happens.

Past research has demonstrated that when faced with an ethical dilemma, individuals will form their ethical reasoning and moral intent based upon different theories of ethics (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993; Mengue, 1998). Several researchers have

demonstrated that students engage in varied reasoning based on these different theories: deontology, utilitarianism, rational self-interest, Machiavellianism, etc. (Ashworth and Bannister, 1997; Lewis and Speck, 1990; McLafferty and Foust, 2004; Nickell and Herzog, 1996; Swinyard et al., 1989; Webster and Harmon, 2002). These findings should be tested in the specific context of plagiarism.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the reasoning students use when justifying the act of plagiarism. More specifically, we have identified two objectives:

- (1) To determine which theory of ethical reasoning students invoke when defending the act of plagiarism;
- (2) Based on the theory of ethical reasoning to which perpetrators appeal, to develop instructor recommendations to prevent plagiarism in all student populations.

Additionally, we will explore the data for demographic differences.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, faculty members are looking for guidance in recognizing and dealing with plagiarism. This study will uncover student reasoning justifying plagiarism and lead to specific action-oriented recommendations that faculty members can follow to reduce plagiarism. Second, it has been demonstrated that unethical behavior in school can lead to unethical behavior in business and to financial ruin (Brubaker, 2003; Sims, 1993); hence, understanding and correcting unethical behavior in school can have a positive impact on organizational ethics and corporate profitability. Additionally, ethical learning about copyright infringement may carry over to similar unethical student behaviors such as illegally downloading music or movies from the Internet (Mark, 2004). Third, as the findings of this study are disseminated to universities, academic disciplines, policy makers, and school boards, this research can serve as a platform for designing and allocating funding for programs that encourage originality, instruct in academic honesty, and teach educators how to deal with cheating. Finally, the bulk of past research has focused on understanding the different determinants (age, sex, locus of control, personality type, and religious orientation) of general student cheating (Allmon et al., 2000; Coleman and Mahaffey, 2000;

Crown and Spiller, 1998; Rawwas and Isakson, 2000; West et al., 2004); there is a dearth of empirical research specifically on student plagiarism and the reasoning behind this dishonest behavior.

In the next section, a brief historical overview showing various changing attitudes toward plagiarism will be presented. Then, some of the background literature and statistics on plagiarism will be reviewed. This will be followed by a discourse on the different ethical theories and how they relate to plagiarism. The methodology and results will then be discussed, leading to the findings and recommendations.

## Background

### *The historical perspective*

In traditional Western academic circles, plagiarism is universally despised. In print and on the Internet, definitions of cheating and instructions on how to avoid it abound (Auer and Krupar, 2001; McKenzie, 1998; McLafferty and Foust, 2004; Ryan, 1998; Sokolik, 2000). Yet rigorous studies of the phenomenon, especially the justification for such behavior, are still far and between (<http://www.academicintegrity.org>). Thomas Mallon's *Stolen Words* (1989) is sometimes called a definitive investigation of intellectual theft, but in the absence of other works about plagiarism this assessment seems premature. As opposed to Mallon's categorical moral stance, Marilyn Randall's *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit and Power* offers this contemporary academic relativism of literary theft as a subversive, almost revolutionary act: "Within the general frame of 'postmodernism,' I posit 'plagiarism' as a mode of guerilla warfare directed against an oppressive hegemony" (Randall, 2001, p. xiii).

Mallon uncompromisingly denounces such apologetic rationalizations of plagiarism. In the afterword to the 2000 edition of *Stolen Words*, he criticizes those contemporary academics who, like Randall, invoke Roland Barthes' philosophy, casting doubt on the preeminence of authorship and originality in traditional Western thought.

Permissive attitudes are nothing new, albeit for different reasons. In Aristotelian poetics, imitation (*mimesis*) is a natural, instinctual quality of humans and is seen in a positive light as a vehicle leading

both to pleasure and learning. Likewise, it is well known that the Romans borrowed from and emulated the Greeks. Moreover, all biblical books, written over a period of approximately 1100–1300 years, have been distorted by translation errors and two or three millennia of manuscript copying by ancient and medieval scribes (Hoberman, 1985).

In antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the Renaissance, ideas of others were used liberally and often without acknowledgment. In Shakespeare's time, theater companies staged plays that usually bore no name of an author and were changed at will by the actors after purchase (Clark, 1996). The Bard himself adapted many a theme from predecessors. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* strongly influenced Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, and other writers, providing them with powerful classical myths. Subsequently, literature featured themes and motifs – for instance, the Faustus myth – that recur throughout the history of letters.

It was not until the late 15th century that the introduction of printing began to transform the idea of authorship and, hence, that piracy emerged as a threat, necessitating protection. Copyright was first established in 1662 by the Licensing Act and by the Statute of Anne in 1709 (UK Patent Office, 2004). Only when ideas become a commodity worth selling and protecting, can they also be stolen. Not coincidentally, the Latin word *plagiarius* means kidnapper. The emergence of copyright and the insistence of the Romantics on originality (inspiration perceived as divine *afflatus*) have shaped our modern perception of plagiarism as morally reprehensible.

To describe the injurious effect of lifting ideas from others, in today's academic arena it is frequently noted that plagiarism tips the scales of fair competition, hampers learning, dilutes individual and class grades, and cheapens the value of honest work, hurting the perpetrator, other students, as well as their professors ("Did You Know?", 2004; Park, 2000; Ryan, 1998). Curiously, more than 30% of instructors did nothing to pursue cheating although they knew it was going on in their classes, as McCabe found in his 1999 study involving more than 1000 instructors at 21 college campuses. The student respondents stated that they were more likely to cheat if a faculty member was known as lenient toward cheaters (CAI, 2002–2003).

Our goal was to view plagiarism historically, briefly tracing changing attitudes toward the phenomenon and the motivations and rationalizations driving these changes. We were also interested in juxtaposing the practice of plagiarism before the advent of the Internet with the emergence of what has been called "new plagiarism" (McKenzie, 1998; Ryan, 1998).

### *Plagiarism – a new epidemic*

The truth is that the available statistics are disturbing indeed. At Virginia Tech, officials stated that cheating involving electronic media rose dramatically within one academic year, from 80 cases in 1995–1996 to 280 incidents in 1997 (Zack, 1998). As reported by *USA Today* on May 21, 2001, at UC Berkeley, academic dishonesty cases doubled between 1995 and 1999 alone (Groark et al., 2001). A large 2000/2001 survey conducted by McCabe indicates that cheating is rampant in high schools as well. More than half of the high-school students have plagiarized writing assignments in some form specifically with the help of the Internet (CAI, 2002–2003).

But problems remain when we try to estimate the true extent of cyber-plagiarism. Faculty members do not always pursue and report dishonest behavior, many cheaters probably get away, and some plagiarists may lie in interviews (Ryan, 1998). Complicating matters further, as Roig (2001) shows, is the fact that not even college professors always agree on what constitutes plagiarism.

However, evidence of a rise in Internet-facilitated plagiarism is the growth and apparent profitability of electronic paper-mills that thrive on selling prefabricated as well as custom-written assignments online ("Plagiarism and the Internet," 2004). Kenneth Sahr, one of the co-owners of schoolsucks.com, a website that features advertising and about 5000 free downloadable documents, claims two million hits every month (Flynn, 2001).

### *Speculation about why Internet plagiarism is growing*

Most sources (McKenzie, 1998; McLafferty and Foust, 2004; "Plagiarism and the Internet," 2004;

Ryan, 1998) argue that old-style plagiarism was arduous, required some degree of skill, and was relatively easy to spot by knowledgeable faculty. As opposed to that, the Internet has made cyber-cheating as simple as a mouse click and has raised the bar for instructors who may be struggling to keep up with tech-savvy perpetrators. The Internet is seductive with its ease and speed of access and sheer bounty. To a student under pressure to produce an assignment it may seem just too tempting: "Stealing or copying someone's work has become so effortless [...] that students may be inured to the ethical or legal consequences, much like drivers exceeding the speed limit" (Zack, 1998).

Berkeley professor Alex Aiken, creator of an anti-plagiarism software package, cites the anonymity of the electronic medium, the growing capacity and speed of computers, and the vast supply on the Internet as factors contributing to the lowering of inhibitions and acting on impulse (Zack, 1998).

Many professors are not as technologically savvy as their students, so the plagiarists may not fear detection. Transgression may present an "irresistible challenge" (Ryan, 1998) to vulnerable students, or cheaters may experience a certain thrill when they get by without the professor noticing ("Preventing Plagiarism," 2004).

Deadline pressure, difficulty keeping up, and lack of preparation for college may play a role, too, in motivating cheating: "Plagiarism is almost always a symptom of other educational problems" ("Did You Know?" 2004).

### *Reasoning and cheating*

While several researchers have focused on classifying the reasoning used by students to justify general cheating behaviors, no work has been conducted specifically focusing on plagiarism. The predominant categorization scheme employed for general cheating has been Sykes's and Matza's Neutralization Techniques (Sykes and Matza, 1957). It is maintained that delinquent behavior is based on justifications that are valid to the delinquent – but not the legal system, and that these justifications can precede the act. Thus, potential violators are tempted to perform the unethical act, recognize that the act is wrong, use one of the techniques to justify the act

and then perform the act. It is the enticement of gain or pleasure that instigates the neutralization technique (Vitell and Grove, 1987). For example, one technique of neutralization is Denial of Victim, wherein the delinquent behavior is justified, as the perpetrator believes that the victim deserved it (rightful retaliation). Both LaBeff et al. (1990) and McCabe (1992) classified students' reasoning on cheating according to the different neutralization techniques. While some similarities between the theories of ethical reasoning and neutralization techniques exist, theories of ethical reasoning are broader and, therefore, more useful for analysis. For example, among the neutralization techniques, deontology has no equivalent.

### *Ethical philosophies and plagiarism*

After reviewing several key ethics journals and texts (Loe et al., 2000), as well as examining past research on the types of ethical reasoning students had used in different ethical contexts (Ashworth and Banister, 1997; McLafferty and Foust, 2004; Nickell and Herzog, 1996; Swinyard et al., 1989; Webster and Harmon, 2002), we decided to include six ethical theories. Below, each of the different theories will be discussed in detail, along with examples of how plagiarism would be considered wrong under each theory. Then we will suggest what type of reasoning students would use to justify plagiarism (if they subscribed to that theory) and present extant research pertaining to each theory.

### *Deontology*

Deontologists subscribe to the belief that "human beings have certain fundamental rights and that should be respected in all decisions" (Cavanagh et al., 1981, p. 366). Duty is the basis of morality, and the locus of right and wrong is in self-directed adherence to one's moral duty by helping others without regard for personal consequences (Ashmore, 1987; De George, 1990; Kant, 1959; Laczniaik and Murphy, 1991).

Deontology extends to an individual's personal rules (what he or she thinks is right), rules of an organization (i.e., corporate codes of ethics), or to religious deontology (one's moral duty is to follow g-d).

Under deontology, plagiarism is a morally wrong; perpetrators are stealing and presenting someone else's work as their own. If students subscribe to this theory, they can only plagiarize if they misunderstand or are unaware of the theory (e.g., "I didn't know what plagiarism was"/"I didn't know that plagiarism was wrong").

In a study focused on ethics towards animals, Nickell and Herzog (1996) found that whether students followed deontology accounted for variation in their reasoning. Bugeja (2001) reports a rise in ignorance pleas and defenses invoking a lack of intent among journalism students who thus imply innocence when they are caught cheating. Altschuler (2001) cites a Rutgers University focus group that noted that many students seemed to be "blasé" about plagiarism – not seeing it as a true transgression (p. 15). Faculty members does not seem to offer clear guidelines to help struggling students figure out how to use the Internet in an acceptable fashion. At least this is McCabe's conclusion from two studies of "cut and paste" plagiarism (CAI, 1999, 2005). In the former study, 77% of the students did not consider such behavior a serious problem at all. In other words, they did not understand what plagiarism was, what the deontology was.

#### *Utilitarianism*

Utilitarianism holds that an individual should weigh the costs versus the benefits and act to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. A moral decision is one that creates the greatest total utility (De George, 1990; Frankena, 1973; Mill, 1861/1957). Individuals who follow a utilitarian philosophy could only justify plagiarism if the outcomes were good (e.g., "Plagiarism leads to better learning or higher grades"/"Nobody gets hurt").

Utilitarian philosophies used by students were also identified by several researchers in a business context (Swinyard et al., 1989). A transgression may present an "irresistible challenge" (Ryan, 1998) to vulnerable students, or cheaters may experience a certain thrill when they get by without the professor noticing ("Preventing Plagiarism," 2004). In a class exercise where students had to decide what to do with critical information about a coming earthquake, Mallinger (1997) found that American MBAs were most likely to appeal to utilitarianism.

#### *Rational self-interest (social contract theory)*

One acts to benefit oneself; however, no sacrifice is involved – people should relate to one another strictly on a trading basis, exchanging value for value in all endeavors (Rand, 1964). From a capitalistic perspective, an implicit agreement exists between a society and corporations that society will allow the corporations to exist and profit as long as they satisfy consumers, employees, etc. (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994; Hasnas, 1998; Rawls, 1971). Under this theory, plagiarism could be justified only if the plagiarists felt they were engaging in a fair exchange (e.g., "I'm publicizing the author's work"/"The teacher doesn't put much effort into this, so why should I?").

Rational self-interest is discussed in a study by Ashworth and Bannister (1997). Taking a transactional view, students believe that plagiarism is justified if the assignment is boring and irrelevant.

#### *Machiavellianism (ethical egoism)*

Individuals embracing this philosophy have no qualms about sacrificing others for their own benefit. They are always motivated to act in their own perceived self-interest. Therefore, for students subscribing to Machiavellianism, plagiarism could be justified if they managed to get away with it and did not get blamed or caught (e.g., "Look how clever I am... I can plagiarize, do well, and not get caught"). If caught, they'll blame others (e.g., "It's the teacher's fault").

In a longitudinal study, Webster and Harmon (2002) discovered that college-age students had become more Machiavellian over a 30-year period. In studying student attitudes regarding plagiarism, Ryan found denial, lack of remorse and shame, even defiance (1998).

#### *Cultural relativism*

Words such as *right*, *wrong*, *justice*, and *injustice* derive their meaning from attributes of a culture (Donaldson, 1989, p. 14). Ethical standards are different across cultures and an act that is ethical in one culture may be considered unethical in another culture (Robertson and Fadill, 1999; Vitell et al., 1993). Students justifying plagiarism with the help of this theory would focus on how plagiarism is acceptable in their culture (e.g., "It's allowable in the country where I come from").

Demonstrating a relativistic approach, McLafferty and Foust (2004) recount anecdotal information about students who admit that they have never had problems in other classes when cheating this way. With regard to computer issues, Hay et al. (2001) found that cultural background was an important determinant of ethical behavior among undergraduate business students.

#### *Situational or contingent ethics*

Ferrell and Gresham (1985) introduced a “contingency” framework of ethics specifying that individual (knowledge, values), social (significant others), and organizational (opportunity, rewards, punishment) situational elements could affect an individual’s response to an ethical dilemma. Pratt (1993) established that the most important variable was the specific scenario related to the dilemma. To avoid overlap with other categories, situational ethics has been restricted to instances when students justify an act due to circumstances beyond their control (i.e., external locus of control); as in Pratt (1993), the focus is on specific scenarios surrounding the ethical dilemma. Students who plagiarize using this theory of ethics would cite a situational element as a justification (e.g., “My kid was sick”/“My boyfriend just dumped me”).

It should be noted that under deontology and cultural relativism there is not necessarily an awareness of a transgression. In other words, perpetrators may not realize that they are doing anything wrong. For utilitarianism, rational self-interest, Machiavellianism and situational ethics, an awareness of wrongdoing exists; however, it is rationalized away by the circumstances of the situation.

In general research that focused on the ethics of business students, Galbraith and Stephenson (1993) and Grover and Hui (1994) found that situational influences affected the type of reasoning students used. When studying general cheating behavior, McCabe (1992) and Labeff et al. (1990) arrived at similar findings.

Finally, in one of the few studies contrasting several types of ethical theories in a general ethical context, Brinkmann (2002) found that 51% of the students used deontological arguments, 42% resorted to utilitarian arguments, and 7% of the students advanced Machiavellian reasoning.

## **Methodology**

As our research focuses on ethics, it is necessary to choose a realistic methodology (Aronson et al., 1985; Mathison, 1988). Therefore, to identify and understand the different types of reasoning that students use to justify plagiarism, we conducted a content analysis of past plagiarism cases at a large West Coast university. Well suited for this study, content analysis is, “an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication” (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991, p. 243).

With the help of our university’s dean of students, this analysis was conducted examining the rationales offered by students caught plagiarizing. Once faculty members discover that their students have plagiarized, they bring these individuals before the dean of students where the offenders are formally charged with plagiarism, given the chance to explain their behavior, and then may receive a punishment, such as writing an essay on plagiarism, suspension, course failure, etc. All of this information is recorded in a confidential file.

These files were categorized using the ethical reasoning philosophies described above. One limitation of this study is that students may not be revealing their true justifications for plagiarizing since they have been caught. In most cases, it does appear as if the students are just coming clean and telling the truth; however, even if some students are not revealing the actual reasoning that they used to justify the act of plagiarism, they are still exposing the logic that they use to defend plagiarism – and being able to understand and counter that logic is valuable for faculty.

To avoid researcher bias, two judges were recruited to independently evaluate and categorize the reasoning of students (e.g., Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). For each case, the primary reasoning used by the student was classified under one of the ethical theories. Coders were given strict guidelines and trained on how to classify reasoning. Before evaluating the cases used in this study, each judge classified 20 identical ads. Their ratings were compared and reasons for any disagreement were discussed and resolved among the judges and the authors to help to ensure a sufficient level of inter-rater reliability. After the data collection was complete, the authors

independently evaluated a random sample of the ads (10% of the total). The independent judges' ratings were compared with the authors' ratings (e.g., Dilevko and Harris, 1997), and using Holsti's (1969) formula, the inter-rater agreement was 83.6%, indicating a high degree of reliability (Kassarjian, 1977).

## Results

Students invoked all six ethical theories (Table I). The most commonly followed ethical theory was deontology; 41.8% of respondents referred to deontological reasoning. Students acknowledged their adherence to the code by clearly apologizing for violating it or by providing statements revealing that they did not realize they were breaking it. Some typical justifications include: "Yes, I did plagiarize and I'm sorry;" "I accidentally left out some citations;" and "I didn't know this was plagiarizing." Not knowing falls under deontology because it suggests that they were following the rules; they just did not know that this was one of them.

The second most frequently invoked theory of ethical reasoning was situational ethics (19.9%). Individuals subscribing to this theory believe that different conditions warrant different treatment. Some typical quotations focused on extenuating circumstances, such as, "I came to the U. S. with nothing and I don't know anybody;" and "I have to support my brother."

The third most likely type of reasoning used was Machiavellian, as 18.4% of students used it as a rationale. Machiavellians are opportunists, lacking concern for others (Christie and Geiss, 1970). When

caught, they blame others or deny the charge. Some typical claims such students made were: "It was the professor's fault because he/she didn't talk about it in class;" "I accidentally handed in the wrong version of my paper;" or "the other person had plagiarized them." Finally, they denied that they had plagiarized, even in the presence of incontrovertible evidence.

Bound by the level of multiculturalism in the sample, cultural relativism was used by 8.5% of students to justify their behavior. Some characteristic statements included: "I did it in community college and it was OK;" "Everybody does it in Asia;" and "Everybody does it where I come from."

Finally, 5.7% of students called upon utilitarian reasoning. Some representative rationales were, "I didn't think there was any harm being done;" and "I was falling behind and doing poorly, so I thought this would help."

The theory used the least was rational self-interest. This is a position that takes the form of equal exchange. Some of the typical justifications included, "My friend gave it to me so that I could learn;" "The instructor doesn't use original materials – why should I?" and "I got help online."

To determine potential differences across demographic variables, we ran several chi-square tests on the demographic variables (Table II). No differences emerged across sex ( $p = 0.123$ ), ethnicity ( $p = 0.173$ ), GPA ( $p = 0.667$ ), school or division ( $p = 0.319$ ), class status ( $p = 0.454$ ) or repeated offenses ( $p = 0.520$ ). However, for the type of plagiarism (plagiarism from the Internet as opposed to other types of plagiarism), a  $p$ -value of 0.008 was found. Internet plagiarists were more likely to rely

TABLE I

Theory of ethical reasoning used

Theory used	Percentage
Deontology	41.8
Utilitarianism	5.7
Rational self-interest	5.7
Machiavellianism	18.4
Cultural relativism	8.5
Situational ethics	19.9

TABLE II

Chi-square test of theory used versus demographic and behavioral variables

Cross tab of theory used and ...	$p$ -value
Sex	0.123
Ethnicity	0.173
GPA	0.667
School	0.319
Class status	0.454
Repeat offense	0.520
Type of plagiarism	0.008*

\*Significant at 0.05 level.



on situational ethics and utilitarianism. They were less likely to call upon cultural relativism and Machiavellianism (Table III).

### Discussion and recommendations

The findings of this study strongly correlate with past research. The most prevalent theory of ethics used by students to justify plagiarism was deontology. In accordance to Bugeja's findings (2001), the key plea students entered was that they were uninformed and lacked intent to plagiarize. This recalls the observations of Altschuler (2001), who documented that students appeared confused about the meaning of plagiarism and were lacking in malice, as well as McCabe's conclusions (CAI, 2005) that faculty may not be providing clear guidelines to students.

The second largest category was situational ethics, under which many of the students cited situations beyond their control (i.e., need to support brother; having been adopted; coming home to house on fire; grandmother died). This corresponds to McCabe's research (1992) that found that the most prevalent technique used (68% of the time) to justify general cheating was Denial of Responsibility. This technique refers to cases when the individual cites circumstance beyond his or her control. Additionally, this is consistent with the observations of Zack (1998), who found that a student under pressure may be tempted by the effortless supply of information. Given that Internet plagiarists were more likely to call upon situational ethics, the ease of retrieval from the Internet may be triggered by the slightest

external pressure. Relativism emerged at several levels; consistent with McLafferty and Foust (2004), students admitted that they had plagiarized in other classes of the same institution, and parallel to Hay et al. (2001), students from different nations and cultures claimed that copying was acceptable in their countries of origin. It is unclear whether they knew that their transgression was wrong.

Machiavellianism was the third highest category at 18.4% of offenders. As expected, students who were caught were quick to blame others, such as their peers or the professor and often simply denied the transgression. This was similar to McCabe's research (1992), where the second largest neutralization strategy found was Condemning the Condemner (28%). Skeptics may believe that many Machiavellians are simply hiding behind deontological ignorance pleas. In any case, the recommendations will address both of these areas.

Utilitarianism was low at 5.7%. However, unlike the thrill or lack of fear of detection proposed by several researchers (Ryan, 1988; Swinyard et al., 1989), justifications appear innocent ("I didn't think it would hurt anyone"). Internet plagiarists were more likely to resort to utilitarianism and situational ethics. Higher rates of utilitarianism may lend credence to the beliefs of Zack (1998) and Turnitin, who have stressed that the negative consequences to others are minimized. Finally, offenders who subscribe to rational self-interest indirectly or directly balance the transgression with the actions of the professor.

Below are several recommendations that respond directly to each of the different ethical philosophies. Before implementing any of these solutions, faculty and administrators must resolve several issues.

First, from this and previous research, evidence exists that professors do not always agree on their definition of plagiarism and that different professors are allowing different practices in their classes (Roig, 2001). Therefore, common ground must be established at the institution.

Second, whose responsibility is dealing with plagiarism, the faculty's or the administration's? Evidence suggests that instructors are overloaded with higher priority issues and often unsupported by administration (Boyer, 1990; Eble and McKeachie, 1985), particularly when it comes to writing instruction (Plutsky and Wilson, 2001). Since faculty members are the principal agents in detecting plagiarism, faculty

TABLE III

Cross-tab percentages of theory used versus type of plagiarism

Theory	Type of plagiarism	
	Internet	Other
Deontology	40.8	42.1
Utilitarianism	9.9	1.4
Rational self-interest	4.2	7.2
Machiavellianism	12.7	24.5
Cultural relativism	4.2	13.2
Situational ethics	28.2	11.6

incentives and instructional materials are needed to explicitly address integrity at the class and university levels (Hair, 1991; Ives and Jarvenpaa, 1996; Mason, 1991; Padgett and Conceicao-Runlee, 2000).

The recommendations below are essential to creating an ethical culture at our schools and to instilling ethical values in our students; however, there are also positive implications for the ethics of organizations. Researchers have documented the association between cheating in college and cheating in business (Sims, 1993; Smith et al., 2002). Several researchers studying student cheating or the link between ethics education and business ethics have called upon business schools to teach students what is ethical behavior and what are its consequences for the organization and society (Crane, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Lawson, 2004; Luthar and Karri, 2005; Smyth and Davis, 2004).

The recommendations to answer each type of reasoning follow (Table IV). As some philosophies justifying plagiarism require similar steps, the action is only explained the first time it is presented. Subsequently it is just listed.

### *Deontology*

Our recommendations focus on ensuring that students understand what plagiarism is and that it is wrong.

#### *Contract honor*

Most universities have honor codes, which cover plagiarism. If they do not, the professor can easily develop one for the department or class (for examples please go to <http://www.academicintegrity.org>). Much like organizations that protect themselves from rogue employees with written ethical codes (Stevens, 1996), academics should attach the honor code to the syllabus and have students read and sign it (Cole and Kiss, 2000). Research by McCabe involving 12,000 students on 48 campuses indicates that educational institutions with honor codes face significantly fewer breaches of academic integrity. On campuses without honor codes, 1 in 5 students self-reported more than three incidents of cheating. On campuses with honor codes, only 1 in 16 students reported such levels (CAI, 2005).

TABLE IV  
Recommendations for each ethical theory

Theory	Recommendation
Deontology	Contract honor Teach proper citation and documentation techniques Act as a role model Avoid standardized general assignments Use anti-plagiarism software
Utilitarianism	Explain and emphasize surveillance Institute clear, severe penalties Enforce penalties Emphasize learning impairment and other negative consequences
Rational self-interest	Highlight inequitable exchange for the original author Highlight inequitable exchange for the plagiarist Stress professor's effort
Machiavellianism	Explain and emphasize surveillance Institute clear, severe penalties Enforce penalties Contract honor Teach proper citation and documentation techniques
Cultural relativism	Define plagiarism as wrong Contract honor Teach proper citation and documentation techniques Use anti-plagiarism software
Situational ethics	Adopt zero tolerance approach Institute clear, severe penalties Enforce penalties

#### *Teach proper citation and documentation techniques*

Rather than merely insisting that students cite materials properly, instructors must concretely teach them how to do it. This includes practicing paraphrasing and assimilating sources into one's text. Additionally, faculty can distribute examples from previous classes as well as materials on the correct use of sources.

#### *Act as a role model*

One of the strongest determinants of ethics is peers and superiors (Granitz, 2003). As role models to students, professors should properly document all course materials they develop, including presenta-

tion slides, handouts, and exercises (Kienzler, 2004).

#### *Avoid standardized, general assignments*

Faculty need to design assignments that are challenging and difficult to plagiarize (Sokolik, 2000). Many faculty members give rather broad research topics to students, for example, a situational analysis of Wal-Mart. Assignments can and should be made more specific. For instance, if the class has focused on strategic competitive responses, instructors may have the students list and evaluate how Wal-Mart has responded to competitive actions from K-Mart and Target. Hence, students will need to synthesize several sources. Under no circumstances should instructors give the same assignment semester after semester.

#### *Use anti-plagiarism software*

Rather than employing it as a fear-inducing deterrent, faculty should put anti-plagiarism software like turnitin.com to better use. The software can be used as a pedagogic tool, allowing students to submit a draft version of their final project before submitting it to faculty.

#### *Utilitarianism*

The recommendations focus on making the negative consequences of plagiarism clear and significant.

#### *Explain and emphasize surveillance*

Students may evaluate the chances of getting caught as very low and, hence, the consequences as very low risk. Therefore, the professor must ensure that students understand that they can be easily caught. First, professors using anti-plagiarism software should ensure that students know that the software is used in their course. Second, if applicable, professors can give examples of the different ways that students were caught. For instance, in our study, instructors had caught students by recognizing that the quality of the paper was different from the students' previous work. Third, faculty must keep abreast of new technological trends and resources to combat academic dishonesty effectively.

#### *Institute clear, severe penalties*

Punishment must be strict (for example, failing the class, suspension, or dismissal from the school), and clear (Harris, 2002). To ensure that the negative consequences are clear, the "contract honor" recommendation can apply.

#### *Enforce penalties*

If students only receive a slap on the wrist and the promised penalty is waived, the offenders are receiving a misleading message about cheating that they will take with them to their next classes and then into the working world.

#### *Emphasize learning impairment and other negative consequences*

While it did not appear in this study, it is conceivable that students subscribing to utilitarianism may believe that their learning is maximized through plagiarism (Harris, 2002). In that case, the professor can demonstrate to them that learning is lost by testing students on the plagiarized material.

#### *Rational self-interest*

In this case, responses must address how plagiarism is not a fair trade for the authors of the original material:

#### *Highlight inequitable exchange for the original author*

This recommendation focuses on accentuating negative consequences to others. Since much of the plagiarism is Internet-related, the professor can cover the developing Internet copyright laws. For example, researching the Napster case could be an assignment.

#### *Highlight inequitable exchange for the plagiarist*

To prevent students from buying work from an online term-paper mill, such as <http://www.cheater.com>, <http://www.schoolsucks.com>, instructors should explain to them that identical essays are sold to thousands of their peers and are easily identifiable. Hence, offenders are receiving an unfair exchange. For the price, they obtain a document that will be easily identifiable as a plagiarized text.

*Stress professor's effort*

For the students who contend that their instructor is not putting much effort into the class (So why should they?), the efforts of this faculty member, if indeed found to be questionable – which may not be easy – must be investigated. At the same time, professors must do a better job in communicating their efforts to the class. Additionally, accentuating the plight of other stakeholders (see *Highlight inequitable exchange for the original author* above) may balance the scales against plagiarism. The trickiest area here is the implicit understanding of hierarchies. Ideally, the students should grasp that even professors who may seem uninvolved in their teaching have significantly greater institutional authority than their pupils do and that assuming equal right to dereliction of duty will put the students at a disadvantage.

*Machiavellianism*

The faculty's response must focus on making students aware of how they can be caught and ensuring these students learn and acknowledge what plagiarism is, so they cannot blame others for a "misunderstanding." The following recommendations apply:

- (1) *Explain and emphasize surveillance.*
- (2) *Institute clear, severe penalties.*
- (3) *Enforce penalties.*
- (4) *Contract honor.*
- (5) *Teach proper citation and documentation.*

*Cultural relativism*

Since these individuals think that plagiarism is permissible, the professor should concentrate on explaining why it is wrong and what exactly it is and then teach proper behavior. The following recommendations are offered:

- (1) *Define plagiarism as wrong.* Explain why plagiarism, defined both as lying and stealing, is wrong in the mainstream culture in the U.S.
- (2) *Contract honor.*

- (3) *Teach proper citation and documentation techniques.*
- (4) *Use anti-plagiarism software.*

*Situational ethics*

Professors must communicate to their classes that no leeway will be granted for situational excuses for any course requirement. For example, does the instructor allow students to hand in papers late? And if yes, does he or she impose a penalty? It is up to the professors to maintain an atmosphere that will allow the student to approach them if they have a genuine situational problem, hopefully *before* the offense is committed. In the context of these views, the following recommendations can be followed:

- (1) *Adopt zero tolerance approach.* Ensure that students know what plagiarism is. Assure students that they will be "prosecuted" after one infraction and that everyone will be treated identically with regards to plagiarism – regardless of the circumstances.
- (2) *Institute clear, severe penalties.*
- (3) *Enforce penalties.*

**Conclusion**

This study examined how students justify plagiarism once they are caught. The recommendations tendered can be employed to preempt any justification of plagiarism. Future research can focus on the changes that may have been wrought on the ethical perceptions of the users of the new media. Likewise, it would be difficult, yet intriguing to examine systematically whether the underlying reasons why students plagiarize have changed as well.

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