

# **Plagiarism in Economics: A Problem Needing Attention!?\***

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**Abstract:** This paper reports the results of a survey regarding academic plagiarism in the economics profession. We received 1208 usable responses from a broad cross-section of economists. As in our previous survey of journal editors, there is substantial variance in what is considered plagiarism and in the appropriate response to a clear case of plagiarism. Many of the respondents are not aware of the distinction between copyright infringement and plagiarism. We also find that risk of damage to ones reputation from plagiarizing is minimal since most cases go unreported. Moreover, a substantial portion of the 295 reported cases of plagiarism could be classified as ‘hierarchal.’ Hierarchical plagiarism occurs when a superior, such as a major professor or employer, passes off the subordinate’s words or ideas as her/his own.

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“Everybody whose opinion I solicited told me not to publicize it. They ‘repackaged’ chapter two of my dissertation.”

*Anonymous respondent to our survey.*

In Enders and Hoover (2004), we reported the survey results of 127 journal editors concerning the nature of plagiarism in the economics profession. The results were alarming in that the editors reported very little was done to combat plagiarism. Only 19 percent of the journals had a formal plagiarism policy and almost 50 percent of the editors believed that the unattributed use of another’s idea does not constitute plagiarism. Also alarming is the set of articles appearing in the December 17, 2004 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* documenting the extent of plagiarism in academic journals and books. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a complementary survey of 1208 ‘rank-and-file’ economists. Our new survey has three main goals:

1. To determine what behaviors are deemed to constitute plagiarism and to assess the appropriate responses to a clear case of plagiarism. We also want to compare these responses to those of the journal editors.
2. To find out the types of plagiarism experienced by members of the profession. We wanted to know how plagiarists obtain their material and whether common forms plagiarism usually entail copyright infringement.
3. To find out how those who were plagiarized dealt with the problem. We also wanted to know the outcome of these efforts.

To assess the nature of plagiarism in the economics profession, we sent out an email to over 18,000 economists, around the world, encouraging them to go to the survey which was available online. The survey instrument can be viewed at [www.cba.ua.edu/~ghoover](http://www.cba.ua.edu/~ghoover). Although

we received responses from a broad cross-section of economists (see Table 1), the respondents were definitely not a random sample. In total, 295 respondents (24.4% of the 1208 usable responses) reported that they had been plagiarized. Many of those who felt that they had been plagiarized included a long description of the circumstances surrounding the incident. The large majority of the respondents are employed in an academic institution (80.1%) and almost half of the academics are full professors (42.7%). The typical respondent is a U.S. citizen (60.7%), received a PhD degree in 1989, and has published 15.5 articles in the set of journals covered by the *Journal of Economic Literature* (JEL).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the 1208 Respondents

Characteristic	Number	Percent
Academic	970	80.1
Full Professor	412	42.7
Associate Professor	245	25.4
Assistant Professor	259	26.8
Instructor/Lecturer	49	5.1
Has Been Plagiarized	295	24.4
Non-U.S. Citizen	441	36.5

**Note:** Not all respondents answered all questions so the totals may not add to 1208 (or to 100%).

## 1. The Definition Versus the Perception of Plagiarism

The first order of business is to be clear about the definition of plagiarism. The Modern Language Association’s Style Guide (see Gibaldi, p. 151) defines plagiarism as “Using another person’s ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source constitutes plagiarism.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other sources all include the notion of using another’s words or ideas. For example, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)) uses the phrase: “... to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own.” Black’s Law Dictionary describes plagiarism as “the act of appropriating the literary composition of another, or

A common mistake is to confuse plagiarism with copyright infringement since the two behaviors often overlap. The United States Copyright Act of 1976 provides copyright protection at the *creation* of an original work. On March 1, 1989, the United States adopted the standard of the Berne Convention of International Copyright so that there is no need to display a copyright notice. The point is that the author of an unpublished article has complete copyright protection for that article. Although copyright registration with the Library of Congress is unnecessary, it is an efficient way of verifying ownership and is required in an infringement suit. However, ideas, principles, concepts and discoveries have no copyright protection. As such, neither plagiarism nor copyright violation is a proper subset of the other. Since you cannot plagiarize yourself, there are important instances of copyright infringement without plagiarism. Publishers usually require authors to sign an agreement transferring the copyright to the publisher. Hence, authors who ‘publish the same paper twice’ or who incorporate extensive sections of a previous work into a new manuscript might be guilty of copyright violation.<sup>2</sup> Plagiarism, but not copyright violation, occurs if individual A uses an unacknowledged idea, principle, concept or discovery by individual B. In academic circles, plagiarism, but not copyright violation, also occurs if individual A pays B to produce a manuscript indicating that A is the author. In this circumstance, B turns over the copyright to A for a fee.

From the definition, rephrasing another’s idea without attribution is clearly plagiarism. Nevertheless, more than 35% of all respondents believe that the use of an unattributed idea is not, or is not likely to be, plagiarism. One full professor with 70 published journal articles stated “We should treat longish quotations without attribution as wrong, and let all the rest slide.” This

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parts or passages of his writings, or the ideas or language of the same, and passing them off as the product of one's own mind.”

<sup>2</sup> Of course, many cases of plagiarism involve copyright violation. Another example of copyright violation without plagiarism involves the reproduction a substantial portion of another’s work without permission, even though attribution is given to the original work.

view seems to characterize the profession since Enders and Hoover (2004) report that 47.6% of journal editors or co-editors believe that the unacknowledged use of another’s idea is not, or is not likely to be, plagiarism.

A number of respondents expressed the sentiment that “... foreign students and faculty [do not] understand what constitutes plagiarism in the same way that American students and faculty do.” However, when we used only the responses of non-U.S. citizens, the proportion holding the view that the unattributed use of an idea is not, or is not likely to be, plagiarism dropped to 28.6%.

As summarized in Table 2, about 24% believe that the use of privately collected data is not plagiarism and almost 20% of the respondents believe that the use of several unattributed sentences is not, or is not likely to be, plagiarism. Respondents seemed most concerned about the use of an unattributed proof. More than 90% of the respondents believe that an unattributed proof, either from a working paper or published paper, is likely to be plagiarism.

**Table 2:** Which of the Following Constitute Plagiarism?

	Not at all	Not Likely	Likely	Definitely	Total
Unattributed sentences (Several)	34 (2.8%)	200 (16.6%)	504 (41.7%)	470 (38.9%)	1208
Unattributed proof from working paper	30 (2.5%)	80 (6.6%)	428 (35.5%)	668 (55.3%)	1207
Unattributed proof from published paper	26 (2.2%)	58 (4.8%)	330 (27.5%)	785 (65.5%)	1199
Unattributed idea	36 (3.0%)	387 (32.3%)	552 (46.1%)	223 (18.6%)	1198
Use of privately collected data	92 (7.7%)	201 (16.8%)	375 (31.4%)	525 (44.0%)	1193

We also wanted to know what economists felt was a proper response to a *clear* case of plagiarism. As summarized in Table 3, almost all respondents thought that the original author of

the paper should receive some form of notification that her/his work was plagiarized. Although, not directly included in our survey, a number of people expressed the sentiment: “Notify the infractor, first of all, to find out what happened...” Similarly, another stated “It is important to sort this out before punishing the person. Plagiarism, especially of ideas and even of outlines of proofs or designs, is frequently and even mostly unintentional and unconscious. (Source memory is the first to go.)”

In terms of remedies, notification of the plagiarist’s supervisor/employer was virtually tied for first place with the choice of banning the plagiarizer from future submissions to the journal. About half of the respondents think that some form of public notification about the plagiarism is appropriate.<sup>3</sup> Some expressed concern that the punishment be commensurate with the degree of plagiarism; the issue is that overly harsh punishments can serve as a deterrent to reporting plagiarism and “If people get a slap on the wrist, they will plagiarize.”

**Table 3: Which are Appropriate Responses In a Clear Case Of Plagiarism?**

	Not at all	Not Likely	Likely	Definitely	Total
Notify the original author (if possible)	21 (1.7%)	49 (4.1%)	300 (24.9%)	833 (69.2%)	1203
Notify plagiarist's department chair, dean, provost, etc.	48 (4.0%)	260 (21.8%)	515 (43.3%)	367 (30.8%)	1190
Ban future submissions to journal from plagiarist	58 (4.9%)	274 (23.0%)	474 (39.9%)	383 (32.2%)	1189
Public notice of plagiarism	109 (9.3%)	482 (41.0%)	376 (32.0%)	209 (17.8%)	1176

The journal editors surveyed in Enders and Hoover (2004) are far more cautious than the responses reported in Table 3. Less than 50 percent of the editors deem it appropriate to notify a plagiarist’s superiors and less than 31 percent favor a public notice of plagiarism.

<sup>3</sup> See Kyklos “A Case of Plagiarism” (1999) and Quarterly Journal of Economics “Notice to our readers” (1984).

## 2. Types of Plagiarism

We were surprised that almost half of the 295 reported cases of plagiarism did not involve copyright violation. Eighty-seven people reported that their original idea or methodology was used by another without any form of acknowledgement. Forty-two reported that their model, proof or derivation was plagiarized. Fifteen people reported that their privately collected data set was used without attribution. These types of plagiarism are the most difficult to identify since there is no ‘smoking gun’ and the nature of the scientific process is such that many researchers explore the same idea simultaneously.

Since there is no copyright violation, the remedies for this type of plagiarism must come from the economics journals, the economics profession itself, or from the plagiarizer’s employer. The other cases of plagiarism do involve copyright violation. The degree of severity ranges from copying a few unattributed sentences to “An entire 90 page published article was plagiarized word-for-word and presented as the author's own.” Twenty of these respondents reported word-for-word copying of all, or nearly all, of their original work.

The survey also contained the question “What type of plagiarism did you encounter?” The responses to this question fell into three main categories. In the first, the plagiarism was direct and intentional. In many of these instances, even though the plagiarism was clear-cut, the plagiarizer did not believe he/she had done anything wrong. One such example is:

“My coauthor and I distributed a draft to colleagues at the same research institution. Saw a published article containing unattributed material derived from a working paper the author had access to ... Only later did he admit that he had been a reviewer of my earlier paper. Why he admitted this, I cannot imagine, other than that he couldn't see anything wrong with what he had done.”

Twelve of the respondents indicated that the plagiarizer learned (or probably learned) of the idea through the refereeing process. In the few instances when the plagiarized work appeared in the same journal, the editors were able to make some sort of retribution.

“He was a referee for a paper (and rejected it). The journal published the plagiarist's paper, my paper and a reply from the plagiarist.”

“At [journal], the editor confirmed that the individual had been the reviewer. Allowed me to publish a different piece on the topic.”

The review process can lead to the intentional or unintentional use of another's idea without proper attribution. Table 4 shows the average level of referee reports written by the respondents sorted by the date at which their highest degree was received. To the extent that these averages are representative of the profession as a whole, many people have access a large number of unpublished manuscripts.

**Table 4:** Referee Activities by Date of Degree

<b>Degree Received</b>	1960 – 1969	1970 – 1979	1980 – 1989	1990 – 1999	2000 – 2004
<b>Reviews per year</b>	8.4	10.1	9.5	7.0	3.8

One of the most egregious forms of plagiarism is what we term ‘hierarchal’ plagiarism in that a supervisor (or employer) uses the work of their supervisee without adequate attribution. The introductory quotation “They repackaged Chapter Two of my dissertation” is one of many such complaints against major professors, bosses, dissertation committee members, and tenured colleagues. Similarly:

“He revised his paper using my approach, without attribution. He published the paper. Mine is in a file drawer. ... Mine was under review at another journal at the time. Mine was never published. I was a new faculty member; he was senior, well established.”



### 3. Reporting Plagiarism

Fifty-seven people, representing 19.3% of the reported cases, did not report the plagiarism. Some of these respondents indicated that only a few sentences or paragraphs had been copied. However, many involved a type of hierarchical plagiarism such that costs associated with any potential remedy exceeded the potential benefit. Even more distressing were the thirty-one instances in which the plagiarism was reported but others were not willing to pursue the matter. Three poignant examples are:

- “I complained to my colleagues and to members of my committee but nothing was done. I since found out that this reputed academic is an habitual offender”
- “I contacted the journal, sending along copies of the sections of my dissertation that closely mirrored text from the article. I received no response. The editor I contacted claimed later that he had never received this material.”
- “[The] Dean said to ‘Let it go.’”

The good news is that fifty-eight victims of plagiarism were able to correct or to partially remedy the problem. When there were several copied sentences or paragraphs, directly notifying the plagiarizer or a superior was often sufficient to eliminate the problem. One respondent reported: “We notified the author and his Department Chair via a letter. The author initially claimed nothing was wrong but ultimately revised the paper to address our concerns.” Another similar example is: “The editors were made aware of the plagiarism by me and forced the author to remove the offending passages.” In these two instances, the plagiarism was treated as a mistake and no sanctions were imposed. In twelve similar cases, a journal editor rejected the plagiarizer’s work and in seven others, the plagiarizer withdrew his/her work.

Very severe penalties often resulted if the plagiarizer appropriated large sections of another paper. We received three reports of students who were refused or stripped of a PhD.

One department head was fired and one respondent indicated: “I documented it and sent it to the journal editor, the dean of the school, and the guilty party. The plagiarist was stripped of his endowed chair, demoted from full to assistant professor, and suspended for a semester without pay.” We are not able to document one instance of a similarly harsh penalty for plagiarism involving the theft of an idea or method.

#### **4. Countering Plagiarism**

Given that plagiarizers come in many guises and that there are only weak enforcement mechanisms, it is an open question as to how researchers should protect themselves. We asked respondents to indicate how they tried to protect themselves from plagiarism and what measures, if any, the economics profession should institute.

##### *To Publicize or Not to Publicize*

More than a one-third of the respondents indicated that they take no steps to protect themselves from plagiarism. Typical responses from this group included “None. I believe the free exchange of ideas is the holy grail” and “...not communicating ideas is a cure worse than the disease.” The remainder were about evenly split on the most appropriate method to employ. Some respondents stated that the best way to avoid being plagiarized is to “... place the paper in front of as many eyes as possible.” In this view, posting a paper on the internet, presenting it at a seminar or conference, and sending it out for review helps to establish a claim of ownership on the basic idea, theory, or methodology employed in the paper. One respondent stated “I make my work as public as possible in order to increase the number of witnesses knowing that my paper was the first to appear with this specific idea.” Another stated, “Not releasing, posting, giving seminars, or going to conferences would cut your own throat.”

The other third takes the opposing view that publicizing an idea increases the likelihood that it will be plagiarized. People falling into this group do not post their work on the internet, release working papers, and/or do not hand out extra copies of a their paper at a conference.

A reasonable number of respondents, even those who had been plagiarized, use strategies that are unlikely to deter plagiarism. Examples include: “I generally write ‘draft’ on all manuscripts I circulate;” “Copyright unpublished manuscripts;” and “Sending papers out in pdf form only.”

#### *A Code of Ethics for Individuals and Journals*

More than two-thirds (67.1%) of the respondents believe that a code of ethics regarding plagiarism would benefit the economics profession. Enders and Hoover (2004) report that 65% of journal editors hold this same view. One benefit of such a code would be to inform students and professional economists about appropriate behavior regarding attribution. For example, the following two sections of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy’s (AAMFT) Code of Ethics provides guidance concerning hierarchal plagiarism:<sup>4</sup>

“6.3 Marriage and family therapists do not accept or require authorship credit for a publication based on research from a student’s program, unless the therapist made a substantial contribution beyond being a faculty advisor or research committee member. Coauthorship on a student thesis, dissertation, or project should be determined in accordance with principles of fairness and justice.”

Since the economics profession does not involve licensure, the code would not be directly enforceable. Moreover, the American Economic Association would not have the resources to investigate and pursue all cases of alleged plagiarism. Nevertheless, in addition to its informational role, an established code can provide a standard of behavior in the event of litigation.

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.aamft.org/resources/LRMPlan/Ethics/ethicscode2001.asp](http://www.aamft.org/resources/LRMPlan/Ethics/ethicscode2001.asp)

Almost two-thirds (63.7%) of the respondents believe that the types of long submission-to-publication lags discussed in Ellison (2000a, 2000b) facilitate plagiarism. Since a paper may circulate for several years before a definitive editorial decision is reached, the probability that its words, idea or methodology appears in another's paper is increased. Some journals report the percentage of articles they accept along with the average time needed to reach an editorial decision. A code of ethics could help to institutionalize this process. For example, the American Mathematical Society Ethical Guidelines (AMSEG) states: "... At the time a manuscript is submitted, editors should notify authors whenever a large backlog of accepted papers may produce inordinate delay in publication." The AMSEG also includes the following information regarding the refereeing process: "The contents of an unpublished and uncirculated paper should be regarded by a journal as privileged information."<sup>5</sup>

## **5. Comments and Testimonials**

Since our respondents do not constitute a representative sample, we cannot estimate the extent of plagiarism in the economics profession. Many cases go unreported, and some reported cases are not pursued for a variety of reasons. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2004) documents how chronic plagiarizers can thrive in academia without suffering a loss of reputation. According to David Glenn (2004), part of the problem with academic plagiarism is that there are no clear guidelines indicating whether the plagiarized party, the academic institutions involved, the publisher of the original work, the publisher receiving the offending work, or a scholarly association (such as the American Economic Association) has the responsibility for pursuing a plagiarism investigation. In a litigious society, none of the players wants to initiate a costly legal battle.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at [www.onlineethics.org/codes/AMScore.html](http://www.onlineethics.org/codes/AMScore.html)

Many people spent large amounts of their valuable time in answering our survey. The comments ranged from comic to tragic and from interesting to disturbing. We also received a number of statements from people wanting to express how they were affected by plagiarism. Instead of using the concluding section to rehash our previous discussion, we would like to devote the space to those willing to share their ideas with us. The following comments have not been modified (except for the spelling of the word ‘plagiarism’):

#### *Contrary Ideas on Plagiarism*

“It seems like the ‘market’ would self-police plagiarism.”

“It is hard for me to imagine that genuine, intentional plagiarism is common.”

“Moreover, the profession and the world as a whole do not really care where the ideas come from, only that they are productive.”

“Plagiarism may be socially productive, or at least have very low social costs. Those who plagiarize are probably of higher average quality than those they plagiarize from. When a lesser-known person comes up with a new idea, there is uncertainty about how valuable it is. A higher quality individual can help resolve this uncertainty.”

#### *Hierarchical Plagiarism*

“I co-authored a paper with four other authors, ... Then 3 out of the 5 authors (my superiors) issued another version of the paper, quite similar to the first one and clearly containing my contributions ... but without mentioning my name ... and sent this out for publication to a journal. Before doing this, they did send the paper to me and the fifth co-author and asked us whether we had any comments. Since the 3 authors were my superiors, I did not have the guts to say that I wanted my name to be included.”

“None, as the culprit is an established economist whom I do not dare confront.”

“... senior members of the profession who engage in plagiarism often get away with it, because no one believes that they would do such a thing.”

“I wrote an empirical paper applying a methodology to a dataset to test an idea. I presented this work as a graduate student. The offender repeated the exact same methodology even using the same greek letters, to a different dataset. A few bells and whistles were added.”

#### *Plagiarism in the Refereeing Process*

“Referee report stated that one part of my paper was interesting and the other part was not and suggested deleting the uninteresting part. Instead, I did the opposite. At the next round, referee referenced a recent paper of his that worked out in greater detail the part in my paper that was judged uninteresting in his report and asked the editor to request that I delete that part from my paper. Editor did not comply with that request but did nothing to admonish the referee, who was a departmental colleague of his.”

“Publish names of referees at beginning or end of published articles: this would give stronger incentives to referees to do their job appropriately.”

#### *Positive Retribution Occurred*

“I was contacted by a law student who had found the plagiarism in an overseas document and contacted me with an offer to sue on my behalf! ... I was paid in a settlement.”

“Person was forced out of academic position, but not made public.”

“Circulation of the book was halted, and an erratum sheet indicating that pages x-y had been reproduced without attribution was inserted into the book.”

#### *Questionable Retribution Occurred*

“The journal listed a correction in the next issue noting that the article drew (very) extensively from the unattributed publication. ... the plagiarist faced no sanctions and went on to use the underlying co-authored publication as one of three essays in his dissertation from a highly ranked university ...”

“The editor responded that he was willing to run a statement of ours claiming precedence but would also allow the plagiarist to write a rejoinder. My advisor/coauthor decided that this would be entering a pissing match with a skunk and that we could come out looking just as guilty as he, so my advisor/coauthor insisted that we drop the matter.”

#### *Lack of Retribution*

“Journal rejected paper, but did not notify offenders institution.”

“Was forced to cite offending paper to get mine published.”

“The editors of the journal accepted the revised version of the plagiarizer's paper and found nothing wrong with his unattributed use of my work. I was also blackballed at the journal because I indicated to them that I was not happy with this.”

“We wrote to them to ask why our work was not appropriately cited in their paper. After some back and forth, they revised their paper in a way that satisfied us. However, they also have refereed and rejected our paper for at least one journal (they told us!). To my knowledge, neither paper has been published.”

“I informed the editor of the AER who informed the senior professor who was listed as a coauthor. He called me and asked me to go through the paper noting all plagiarism. It was then discovered that the former student who had been given a Ph.D. had plagiarized substantial parts of his dissertation and material in several of his articles/working papers. However, the institution chose not to withdraw the Ph.D.”

### *Code of Ethics*

“Clear statement regarding what does and what does not constitute plagiarism; consistent standards across journals/institutions for dealing with plagiarism so that individuals know a) what the consequences are, and b) how to deal with the situation.”

“Professional code of ethics is a statement of the rules of the game. These are rarely formally instructed in a economics program.”

“Yes, establishing clear guidelines for students at all levels in universities undergraduate through Ph.D. programs. It's a real testament to the decline in American culture that so many do not understand what plagiarism is and why is it wrong. An understanding of different cultural viewpoints on plagiarism needs to be included, too.”

### *Steps to Guard Against Plagiarism and Against Being Accused of Plagiarism*

“In my data sets I usually change a few numbers to be able to identify "my" data in the future. I am more likely to broadcast the paper everywhere so readers know my work.”

“I think posting on a web site is one very public way to assert ‘ownership’ of one's work.”

“Universities need to respond more decisively to plagiarism. We had a scandal in our department where a grad student TWICE was guilty of plagiarism, but the university-level board was staffed with weak-kneed faculty and militant students and the grad student was found not guilty!”

“I was also once accused of plagiarism, but fortunately I had kept notes that preceded any contact with the accuser, and made it clear that the idea and methodology in question were mine. The editor dropped the matter and published my paper.”

“Sloppy attention to sources more generally breeds plagiarism. Economists cite articles they haven't read, misattribute quotes and ideas, and generally fail to maintain high scientific standards.”

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