Iranian Postgraduate Students'
Perception of Plagiarism

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Abstract. The present study was an attempt to explore Iranian post-graduate perception of plagiarism and the difference between males and females in this regard. The required data for the study were collected in two universities which had postgraduate programs. A total number of 102 postgraduate students (47 males and 55 females) took part in the study. The data were collected through a 13-item self-report question-naire developed by Mavrinac, Brumini, Billic, and Petrovecki (2010) aiming to explore the perception of students regarding plagiarism as well as the reasons why students plagiarize. Results indicated that most of the participants work up to the last minute to finish a report. A large number of students also reported that they do not understand what they have to do for their report. Some of the respondents also believed that they do not need to learn the material and that they just need to pass the course. Students also reported a list of reasons including time constraints, lack of ideas, desire to achieve a better grade, lack of understanding the assignment, lack of respect for the course or the instructor, and lack of interest in the topic. The study also aimed to seek the difference between males and females in terms of plagiarism. Results indicated that plagiarism is more common among males than female students.

Keywords: Plagiarism, postgraduate students, perception.

1. Introduction

One of the issues that has concerned many academic institutions across the world is plagiarism. In doing assignments and projects, many students are accused of committing plagiarism. Some may claim ignorance and some could be breaking the rule to meet deadlines (Dawson, 2004; Song-Turner, 2008). Given much exposure and emphasis on plagiarism to many students upon their admission to college or universities, plagiarism still occurs at large (Natheson, 2009).

Western research has implied that Asian students tend to plagiarize more often than their western counterparts (Lahur, 2004; McDonnell, 2003; Introna et al, 2003). Nevertheless, the reasons continue to be obscure. They could be due to inability to adjust to western academic writing conventions or unfamiliarity with the rules and regulations that pertain to plagiarism (Dawson, 2004). Some have claimed that the academic writing standards, in most academic institutions including Malaysia, comes from the west and thus the aspects accompanying it such as plagiarism most probably also originated from the same region (Yusof, 2009).

Interestingly, among many of the cases cited on plagiarism, Asian students have been proved to of the largest number of students resorting to plagiarism (Introna et al, 2003). A lot of reasons have been stated for such tendency, including students' interest in quoting from a well-known authority as a sign of respect and deep reverence for the authority (McDonnell, 2003, Introna et al, 2003). Despite the prevalence of plagiarism in Asian countries, there seems to be dearth of research on the concept of plagiarism in higher education in Iran. Such being the case, the present study attempts to fill in such a gap by exploring Iranian postgraduate students' perception of plagiarism.

A big problem facing most postgraduate students is with the originality of their research papers. A related issue in this regard is plagiarism, which is the act of using another's work without appropriate acknowledgment. Students plagiarize for such reasons as lack of idea to conduct research, increasing their score, time pressure, fear of failure, etc. However, it is not clear if university teachers are aware of their students'

plagiarism, and if they take any preventative measure to avoid it. The present study will, therefore, attempt to shed light into this issue in general, and investigate students' perceptions of plagiarism.

2. Research Questions

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1) What is Iranian postgraduate students' perception of plagiarism?

2) Is there any difference between male and female postgraduate students in terms of their perception of plagiarism?

3. Literature Review

Different researchers have tackled the issue of plagiarism in different ways. For example, Moreove, Delvin and Gray (2007) gathered the views of 56 Australian university students on the possible reasons for plagiarism within their institution. The results indicate a wide and disparate range of possible contributing reasons for plagiarism including: institutional admission criteria; student understanding of plagiarism; poor academic skills; a range of teaching and learning factors; personality factors and external pressures. Other researchers recognize the importance of deeper interrogation of such institutional and individual academic assumptions about plagiarism behavior.

In a comparative study, Pritchett (2010) sought to investigate the differences between university faculty and their undergraduate students in terms of their perceptions of plagiarism. An on-line survey questionnaire was administered to college undergraduate students and faculty members in four institutions. Results demonstrated that there were no significant differences in perception of plagiarism between the two groups, i.e. faculty members and students. In terms of the gender of faculty members, it was found that there is a significant difference between males and females in their perception of plagiarism. However, as for students, no difference was detected. With regard to seriousness of plagiarism, faculty perceived plagiarism to be a more serious issue than

students. Based on the findings, the researcher concludes that it is necessary to build students' awareness of plagiarism and advance the use of technology in order to promote academic integrity.

Amiri and Khamesan (2012) have studied the prevalence of academic cheating among male and female students the University of Birjand. Research findings indicate that mean cheating in examinations is below average, but general belief inclines that cheating spread is above average. Cheating rate in boys is higher than girls, and the belief in generality of cheating in girls is significantly higher than boys. The most common method of cheating in exam sessions is peeping at and writing down on a piece of paper, and the most common likelihood of cheating on homework is taking the homework from classmates and the Internet. In relation to cheating, internal factors such as the lack of accountability and the lack of sufficient time are more magnified as the reason for cheating by student than external factors such as difficult assignment and high expectations from students.

Stapleton (2012), in order to evaluate the effect of anti- academic theft software, compared the level of plagiarism by students in two classes; so that one of the classes was aware that the authenticity of their papers will be examined while the other class was not. Results showed that the class that was unaware of anti-scientific theft software dramatically used intentional copying and plagiarism, compared to the class which was aware of anti-scientific theft software (Turntin). These findings indicate that the anti-theft software has a preventive effect in academic theft and plagiarism. As a result, anti-scientific theft service offers a useful deterrent effect, but care must be taken in evaluating the results.

Aghajani, Keyvan Ara, Cheshme Sohrabi and Papi (2012), in a research aimed at understanding the causes and damages affecting the formation of cheating and academic, have investigated experiences of Isfahan Medical University experts in the field. The results of this study were divided into two groups: internal and external factors. Internal factors were related to talents, person's perception and reception from the channels of family and society. External factors also from the surrounding environment have pressure on the performance of the person who

carried out the research. In this case, the person will be affected by the environmental in committing the offense voluntarily and non-voluntarily.

Kaobidian, Zolfi Gol and Haji Azizi (2010) pointed that sticking to ethical principles will result in improvement of internal and external performance of individuals and different communities. Observing ethical principles by educators, researchers and scientists is of additional necessity due to the value and status of knowledge; because scientists, thinkers and scholars are considered as models and their behavior, words and deeds have a key role in building the culture of the community. In this study, some of the indecent and unethical behaviors in scientific atmosphere and Dos and Don'ts are declared so that Iranian scientists and researchers compile and publish their scientific evidence with the knowledge of these issues and observer ethical principles of science for better effects of their scientific and research results. Meanwhile legal rulings (which are available for some items) are also presented.

Darouian and Faghihi (2012) have investigated motives and causes of academic theft in Iran. This study, first, deals with accepted ethical principles of this field and then brings some example of plagiarism and reasons and causes behind it. Lack of development, lack of proper knowledge and education, unevaluated promotion, paying attention to quantity rather than quality of research, degree-oriented approach, lack of clear and preventive regulations and inadequate research funding in Iran are identified as the motives and causes of academic theft and compiling preventive rules, education and culture building activities, and creating comprehensive database for research are mentioned as strategies to reduce the academic theft in Iran.

In a study conducted in Iran, Ghajarzadeh et al. (2012) assess attitude towards plagiarism in faculty members of Medical School at Tehran University of Medical Sciences. One hundred and twenty medical faculty members of Tehran University of Medical Sciences were enrolled in the study. They were asked to answer Persian version of attitude towards plagiarism questionnaire. Attitude toward plagiarism, positive attitude toward self-plagiarism and plagiarism acceptance were assessed. Eighty seven filled-up questionnaires were collected. There was no significant correlation between plagiarism acceptance and self-plagiarism. The au-

thors suggest introducing the aspects of plagiarism and clear warning against it in decreasing plagiarism. Accessibility of plagiarism detecting softwares in all universities and colleges and considering punishment for all levels of plagiarism could also be helpful in diminishing its rate because being unfamiliar with plagiarism concepts and being forced to do a research in a short time would be the most influencing factors. It is essential to provide materials such as workshops, leaflets and mandatory courses to make Iranian medical faculty members familiar with medical research ethical issues such as plagiarism.

In a study conducted in Iran, Zamani et al (2013) compared the factors affecting plagiarism and its committing rate in virtual and on campus students of Isfahan University. The population of the study included all students studying at Isfahan University during academic year of 2012-2013, from which 315 were selected as research. Required data were collected through a questionnaire developed by the researchers. Results indicated that among 11 components, three components: lack of mechanisms for detecting and punishing plagiarists, socio-cultural conditions and religious factors had different impacts on plagiarism in virtual and on campus students and the component of lack of self-efficacy in doing research and writing reports in campus students had the most impact on plagiarism than virtual courses. The findings also indicated that the level of commitment of plagiarism is higher in virtual courses than on campus student courses. Results indicated that there are eleven factors responsible for plagiarism: lack of self-efficacy in research and report writing, the lack of mechanisms for identifying and punishing academic thieves, attitudinal factors, and socio-cultural conditions, lack of previous training on how to reference documents, lack of familiarity with the methods of scientific theft prevention in high school or informal education, lack of scientific theft detection by the teachers and not reacting to it, lack of fear of being punished or reprimanded, electronic and virtual pressures, push factor and degree orientation approach, inadequate training at university to identify and prevent scientific theft, and faith-religious factors in the form of input religion and output religion.

Ison (2012) examined plagiarism at the advanced graduate education level, namely plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. It is claimed that

unintentional plagiarism is common among graduate students, who may not have received explicit instruction in paraphrasing, lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism or are unaware of proper citation methods. Of course it is not always possible to distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism, because students can always claim that they did not plagiarize on purpose. Despite this problem, or maybe because of this problem, Ison (2012) found a prevalence of plagiarism that was within the ranges of previous research. In 14% of the examined dissertations, medium- and high-scale plagiarism was found. Ison (2012) ascribes the increase of plagiarism to the proliferation of the use of the internet. Ison (2012) states that it is very well possible that students unintentionally plagiarize, but draws no conclusions regarding the prevalence of intended versus unintended plagiarism.

4. Method

Two universities in Shiraz were selected for the study. The data were collected among postgraduate students who were doing their master's in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) or English Literature. The reason is that the questionnaire was originally written in English and such students were proficient enough to be able to comprehend the questionnaire items and thus provide the researcher with more accurate results. A total number of 102 postgraduate students took part in the study. Forty- seven male and fifty five female postgraduate students comprised the participants of the study.

The data required for the study were collected through a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by Mavrinac, Brumini, Billic, and Petrovecki (2010) and had 13 items. The questionnaire was comprised of two parts. The first part of the survey required respondents' demographic information such as their age and gender. The second part required students to answer questions concerning their perceptions of plagiarism and the reasons why they plagiarize. Items 1 to 12 of the questionnaire seek students' perception of plagiarism. Item 13, however, seek the reasons why students plagiarize. The questionnaire is on a five-point Likert scale starting from Strongly Agree moving toward Strongly

disagree. The respondents are supposed to state their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements given.

5. Results

In order to answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were run. Table 1 below illustrates the percentages of responses related to each item.

Table 1. Percentage of the students' perceptions of plagiarism

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I sometimes have to work up to the last minute to finish a report before the deadline.	2.5	3.6	14.5	40.1	39.3
2. When I look back at my notes they do not always make sense.	22.8	48.5	8.6	12.2	7.9
3. My tutors contradict each other when giving me advice about writing reports.	34.7	40.7	11.1	7.7	5.8
4. I understand how to avoid committing plagiarism.	4.1	4.5	15.5	51.4	24.5
5. Tutors should expect students to take shortcuts when we have so much work to do.	29.7	49.5	14.3	5.3	1.2
6. Sometimes, I don't need to learn the material, I just need to pass the course.	1.9	14.8	2.8	60.9	19.6
7. I sometimes have difficulty finding the right words when using somebody else's ideas.	2.5	6.3	12.8	50.7	27.7
8. I sometimes do not understand what I have to do for my report.	4.4	6.7	6.8	58.6	23.5
9. I have deliberately committed plagiarism in the past.	8.4	17.1	8.7	37.6	28.2
10. I know people on the course who have committed plagiarism.	4.9	9.1	9.4	51.2	25.4
11. Some tutors don't care if I commit plagiarism or not.	27.8	44.2	10.2	10.5	7.3
12. Sometimes I include references in my work which I do not really understand.	11.3	19.1	9.6	34.6	25.4

As can be seen in the table, in Item 1, most of the participants (79.1%) reported that they work up to the last minute to finish a report. Items 8 revealed that 82% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they do not understand what they have to do for their report. This means they do not the capability required to do a piece of research.

Mainstream of the participants (60.9%) believed that they don't need to learn the material and that they just need to pass the course. This is mainly one of the reasons they tend to plagiarize. More than 48% of the students disagreed with item 2 (When I look back at my notes they do

not always make sense). More than 46% of the respondents reported that sometimes they include references in their work which they do not really understand. This shows that they plagiarize the references and put them in their own work. The results show that 50.7% of the participants have difficulty finding the right words when using somebody else's ideas. This shows their inability to paraphrase a certain paragraph or idea in their own words.

The pattern of responses shows that the participants (51.4%) believed that they understand how to avoid committing plagiarism but 37.6% of them have deliberately committed plagiarism in the past. Majority of the participants (61.2%) revealed that they know people on the course who have committed plagiarism. Concerning the role of tutors, most of the students disagreed with the following statements:

Item 3. My tutors contradict each other when giving me advice about writing reports. Results indicate that tutors agree with each other in terms of giving advice and instructions regarding writing reports and assignments.

Item 5. Tutors should expect students to take shortcuts when we have so much work to do.

Item 11. Some tutors don't care if I commit plagiarism or not. This shows that tutors are worried about their students' committing plagiarism.

In Item 13, the participants were asked to choose the reasons of committing plagiarism. Table 2 shows the percentage of the responses.

Table 2. Percentage of the responses to item 13

Reasons	Percentage
a. Time constraints/deadlines	31.8
b. Lack of ideas	21.0
c. Lack of understanding of the assignment	15.8
d. Lack of interest in the topic	4.4
e. Desire for a better grade than you felt you could achieve	19.4
f. Lack of respect for the course or the instructor	7.5

Among those suggested reasons in item13, the time constraints seem to be an important one that explains for the incidence of plagiarism among the participants (31.8%). Lack of ideas is the second most common reasons for committing plagiarism among students (21%). Another noteworthy reason for committing plagiarism is the respondents' desire to achieve a better grade (s)he could achieve (19.4%). Lack of understanding the assignment is another reason the respondents referred to (15.8%). Other reasons mentioned by the participants include lack of respect for the course or the instructor (7.5%) and lack of interest in the topic (4.4%).

The respondents were also asked to add any other reasons applicable. Some of the participants considered the lack of previous training on how to reference documents, lack of knowledge of paraphrasing and citing correctly and the importance of the quantity of the research as the other reasons of committing plagiarism.

The second objective of this study was to determine if there is any difference between male and female postgraduate students in terms of their perception of plagiarism. To investigate the difference between male and female students in terms of their perception of plagiarism, the independent samples t-test was run. As mentioned before, 47 male and 55 female postgraduate students participated in the study. The results of the analysis are given in the following tables (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the males and females' perception of plagiarism

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Perception	Female	55	2.5939	.40858	.05509
	Male	47	2.8245	.61070	.08908

Table 4. Independent sample t-test to compare males and females'
perception

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Perception	Equal variances assumed	.461	.499	-2.269	100	.025	-.23053	.10162	-.43214	-.02892
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.201	78.177	.031	-.23053	.10474	-.43904	-.02201

As Table 4 indicates, there is a significant difference between males and
females in terms of their perception of plagiarism ($sig. = .025, p <$
$.05$). Based on the mean scores presented in Table 4.3, it can be inferred
that the plagiarism tends to be more common among males ($M = 2.82$)
than among female students ($M = 2.59$).

6. Discussion

This section discusses the results gained from data analysis. The study
aimed at determining Iranian postgraduate students' perception of pla-
giarism. Results indicated students' perception of plagiarism in several
cases. Results indicated that most of the participants work up to the last
minute to finish a report. This shows that one of the major reasons stu-
dents plagiarize is either lack of time to finish a certain project or their
inability to budget their time. The first reason should be taken care of
by teachers by giving their students ample time needed to accomplish
a certain report. The second reasons, however, concerns students who
postpone their work to the last few days before reaching the deadline and
do a piece of work hurriedly and will thus have to resort to plagiarism
to be able to reach the deadline.

A large number of students also agreed or strongly agreed that they
do not understand what they have to do for their report. This means it
is not clear enough to them what exactly they are supposed to do. This

can be attributed to their poor linguistic ability or their poor academic or research competence. More than 60% of the respondents also believed that they don't need to learn the material and that they just need to pass the course. This is mainly one of the reasons they tend to plagiarize. This can be attributed to their poor motivation to learn the material and that they are only after receiving grades and passing their course.

More than 46% of the respondents reported that sometimes they include references in their work which they do not really understand. This shows that they plagiarize the references and put them in their own work. Results also demonstrate that the participants believed that they understand how to avoid committing plagiarism they have committed plagiarism in the past. Majority of the participants reported that they know people on the course who have committed plagiarism. This means plagiarism is not seen as crime by most students and that it is very common and convenient to do.

As for the reasons why students plagiarized, students reported a list of reasons including time constraints, lack of ideas, desire to achieve a better grade, lack of understanding the assignment, lack of respect for the course or the instructor, and lack of interest in the topic. Some of these reasons are also reported by previous studies (e.g. Park, 2003; Yusof, 2009; Dawson, 2004). Previous studies also reported that students resort to plagiarism for a number of reasons some of which can be controlled and removed by instructors by adopting some certain policies.

The second objective of the study was to determine the difference between males and females in terms of plagiarism. Results indicated that plagiarism is more common among males than female students. The reasons could be the fact that men are by nature more risk-takers than females and they do not pay due attention to ethics in research.

Pedagogical Implications

Results obtained can bring about several pedagogical implications for instructors and administrators. Time pressure was also identified as a factor causing plagiarism. Students noted that they have to resort to plagiarism as a result of time pressure imposed on them by their instructors. When faced with rapidly closing deadlines, even honest stu-

dents prefer to plagiarize to meet the deadline. Interestingly, Auer and Krupar (2001) reported that in one year, over half the undergraduate plagiarism cases at their institution took place during exam time. By employing some time management techniques, instructors can help students avoid plagiarism. One approach is to give students ample time to manage an assignment and give them the right amount of pressure.

Moreover, instructors are recommended to divide large assignments into pairs or groups, so that the burden can be shared among individuals. This will help the students avoid the last minute pressure of an end-of-the-term assignment which is caused by being unable to find a suitable topic or not knowing how to conduct the research and thus asking somebody to do a piece of research for them.

Lack of ideas and lack of interest were also among the reasons why students plagiarize. Such being the case, instructors and educators need to take these two important factors into account when asking students to carry out a piece of work. Students need to be given enough ideas and information or sources to consult with in order to gather as ample ideas as required. Second, the topic chosen needs to be interesting enough for the students so that they do not tend to plagiarize only because the topic does not appeal to them.

Administrators and instructors are also recommended to make students familiar with the notion of plagiarism and that it is considered as an academic dishonesty which can lead to serious troubles in some cases. They need to find ways to battle plagiarism and adopt some certain strategies and policies to punish those students who opt to plagiarize.

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