

I Just Don't Want to Be Judged: Cultural Capital's Impact on Student Plagiarism

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Abstract

This research explores how college students' broader educational histories affect their decisions to plagiarize. While research typically categorizes plagiarism as intentional or unintentional, explanations revealed in interviews of first-generation, working-class, and/or racial minority students suggests that these typologies inadequately capture the complex reasons some students express for plagiarizing. Specifically, students in this study plagiarize primarily because they are concerned that not only are their vocabulary and writing skills subpar, but that they do not fit into the college student role. Their explanations are situated within Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital, whereby students' decisions to plagiarize are rooted in the outcomes stemming from educational practices that reinforce class hierarchies. Consequently, students' plagiarism experiences are contextualized within their broader educational histories rather than limited to the immediate circumstances surrounding their academic dishonesty.

Keywords

plagiarism, first-generation college students, cultural capital, higher education, writing skills

Research on college student plagiarism suggests that its presence on college campuses is widespread and substantial (Owunwanne, Rustagi, & Dada, 2010; Smedley, Crawford, & Cloete, 2015; Trushell, Byrne, & Simpson, 2012). The explanations students provide for why they plagiarize are typically categorized as intentional or unintentional, though this distinction is generally made only at the research level and not at the policy level (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2010; Park, 2003). Intentional plagiarism refers to a student's deliberate copying or paraphrasing from another source without citation, usually because of issues such as time constraints, perceived value of the assignment, ease of access to reproducible material, competitive pressures, minimal sanctions for getting caught, and/or deficiencies in language skills, particularly for international students or nonnative language speakers (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016; Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Batane, 2010; Isbell, Chaudhuri, & Schaeffer, 2018; Perkins, Gezgin, & Roe, 2018; Sprajc, Urh, Jerebic, Trivan, & Jereb, 2017). Unintentional plagiarism occurs because students lack sufficient knowledge of citation technique, are unsure whether an idea is original to them or drawn from another source, or are unsure if the information they are presenting is "common knowledge" and, thus, without need for citation (Dee & Jacob, 2012; Elander et al., 2010).

While understandings of intentional and unintentional plagiarism explain many aspects of academic dishonesty, this study suggests that these typologies inadequately

capture some of the complex explanations that historically marginalized students offer for their plagiarism. Specifically, their explanations do not always fit clearly into the intentional/unintentional dichotomy and, instead, reflect outcomes of internalized inequalities developed through K-12 educational histories. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital, as discussed in more detail below, demonstrates how normalization of middle-class values, behaviors, and expectations within educational institutions advantages students whose norms align with these institutions, independent of academic ability. These advantages accumulate over time and impact students' academic preparedness and classroom participation levels, not to mention if and where they attend college (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Condrón, 2009; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1999; Kozol, 2005; Orr, 2003; Roscigno, 1998; St. Hilaire, 2002; Storer et al., 2012; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011).

This research suggests that the impact of cultural capital is no less relevant when thinking about plagiarism. Drawing extensively upon the deep and complex discussions students have about their decisions to plagiarize, this research finds

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that plagiarism is a strategy (albeit a problematic one) that emerges at least in part out of social inequalities students faced within the larger educational system. This discussion has been largely missing in analysis of student academic dishonesty. The findings here do not undermine research highlighting the immediate and individualized decisions that lead some students to plagiarize, but it does situate those decisions within a broader context of educational inequality and social justice.

Constructing the Intentional/Unintentional Typologies

To deter acts of plagiarism, many institutions utilize detection software programs such as Turnitin that evaluate students' work for evidence of plagiarism and/or punitive sanctions for students committing academic dishonesty (Batane, 2010; Ewing, Anast, & Roehling, 2016; Heckler, Rice, & Bryan, 2013; Ocholla & Ocholla, 2016). These software programs and punitive institutional policies make sense when plagiarism occurs intentionally because of laziness, procrastination, or other poor behaviors (Heckler & Forde, 2015). In such cases, detection software and punitive sanctions are needed to discourage students from cheating.

In some cases, however, students still plagiarize even if they know their work will be scanned through detection software and that they will be punished for their transgressions (Batane, 2010; Heckler et al., 2013; Youmans, 2011). In such instances, the unintentional typology offers a useful explanation, namely, that students were unaware they were plagiarizing because they lack sufficient knowledge about how to cite academic work (Ashworth et al., 1997; Baird & Dooley, 2014). This explanation is frequently noted in studies of plagiarism among international students, particularly those from non-Western countries. International students may have significantly different understandings of plagiarism as a result of differing cultural norms between their countries of origin and their host countries (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Hu & Lei, 2012; Isbell et al., 2018; Madray, 2013; Pennycook, 1996). Support for this explanation is found in research where incidences of academic dishonesty diminished after students were given specific instructions about what constitutes plagiarism (Dee & Jacob, 2012; Owens & White, 2013).

However, in a study by Youmans (2011), students were given detailed instruction about what constitutes plagiarism, including specific examples of the most common forms. Furthermore, these students signed an honor code pledging not to plagiarize and informed that acts of plagiarism would result in failing the class. In other words, Youmans' approach took account of both the intentional and unintentional models—namely, oriented students about what plagiarism is *and* used punitive sanctions to deter acts of plagiarism. Despite this two-pronged

approach, he found that 31% of students in one study ($n = 90$) and 46% of students in a second study ($n = 35$) showed some evidence of plagiarism in their papers (defined as at least 10% overlap with uncited written sources). In addition, four students total from the two studies submitted assignments in which plagiarism was detectable even without the use of software.

Youmans argued that the type of assignment students completed affected their decisions to plagiarize—namely, students who were required to cite from peer-reviewed sources were more likely to plagiarize than students who did not have to provide peer-reviewed support for their analysis. He wrote,

Summarizing dense scientific work is often difficult, even for advanced writers who are well aware of the rules of citation, and students in this study may have found themselves *unintentionally* borrowing language from those articles when they felt that their own words were somehow insufficient to capture the essence of those works. (Youmans, 2011, p. 758)

Youmans' conclusion was essentially that students felt they lacked the vocabulary to adequately capture the material they were trying to cite and, thus, plagiarized as a strategy to cope with this. While he still couched this in the language of intentional/unintentional typologies, his analysis provokes broader, more structural questions of academic preparedness. As discussed below, research is clear that students' quality of education, and by extension their academic preparedness, is still unequal despite historical changes and still impacted by race and class. Thus, this research identifies these inequities and their impacts on students' self-perceptions as a central framework for examining motives to plagiarize.

Moving Beyond the Intentional/Unintentional Typologies

The notion that educational inequities have visible and lasting impacts on students is well established in educational research. For example, students as young as first grade are placed into reading and math groups based strongly on teacher perceptions of their abilities (Condrón, 2007; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2007). This tracking continues throughout elementary, middle, and high school, where students are placed into Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) or honors-type classes that recreate hierarchies of fast or gifted learners and slow or struggling learners (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1996). While the presumption is that these groupings are based on student achievement levels, research has indicated that race and class play a significant role in how students' abilities are, in fact, judged. For example, teachers in one study predicted Asian students were more likely to succeed academically while Black and

Hispanic students were perceived as more likely to drop out of high school (Decastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011). In addition, students who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and identify as Black or Hispanic are more likely to internalize a social identity of academic inadequacy and deficient intellectual abilities (Ansalone, 2009; Rosenbaum, 1980).

Bourdieu's (1977) conception of cultural capital and class reproduction provides an important framework for understanding how these inequities are perpetuated in educational settings and the consequences for students socialized through these experiences. He argued that language, tastes, and institutional and cultural knowledge reflect class position and are transmitted generationally through family socialization. These norms and forms of knowledge reflective of the middle class are then mirrored in educational standards of evaluation that create advantage for students better able to conform to institutional expectations. Bourdieu (1977) wrote,

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (p. 494)

This normalization of middle-class culture legitimates educational inequalities as an objective outcome of meritocracy and allows the winners and losers of educational tracking to see their placements as both fair and reflective of individual ability (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition, working-class students whose culture is not normalized in educational institutions are less likely to see themselves belonging in higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016).

Research on first-generation students (who are more likely to be working class) reflects Bourdieu's model of cultural capital, suggesting that student success relies on more than just understanding of academic material. For example, research by Collier and Morgan (2008) found that continuing-generation students had a better understanding of the "college student" role. Specifically, they better understood how faculty expected them to behave or how faculty expected them to demonstrate mastery of course material. Thus, they did better academically than first-generation students, even when all students were otherwise equal in their understanding of course material. Similarly, research also shows that middle-class students, and lower income students who have had experience in elite boarding and preparatory schools, are much more comfortable reaching out to and engaging with university faculty compared with their working-class and first-generation peers who have no experience with elite academic institutions (Jack, 2016). Students who struggle to meet faculty expectations or develop relationships with faculty are more likely to doubt their own academic potential, are more worried about their chances of failing, and are less

likely to see they belong in university settings (Hellman, 1996; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

Bourdieu's model of cultural capital in educational institutions and the corresponding internalized perceptions of academic inadequacy and belonging provide a much-needed framework for understanding explanations of student plagiarism. Such a framework has been largely absent or underdeveloped in research on this topic. Consequently, the questions guiding this research are

Research Question 1: How do historically marginalized college students explain their reasons for plagiarizing, and do those reasons fit within the prevailing intentional/unintentional typologies?

Research Question 2: To what extent do students see themselves fitting into the "college student" role, and how does this impact their decisions to plagiarize?

Research Question 3: What role do K-12 educational experiences play in students' understanding of their academic abilities and their decisions to plagiarize?

Method

Interview Protocol

Interview questions were grouped into three main topics, mirroring the research questions guiding the study. The first topic focused on how students' K-12 educational experiences impacted their understanding of their own academic abilities and included questions related to how they constructed their student identities, how they contextualized their performance in relationship to other students, and how they interpreted any feedback from teachers and/or counselors related to decisions to attend college. The second topic focused on the extent to which participants see themselves as "college students" and included questions about what being a college student means and how well participants believed they fit that model. Finally, participants were asked to discuss their reasons for plagiarizing. Approval for this study was granted by the University Institutional Review Board prior to recruitment and data collection.

Participants

I was interested in interviewing undergraduate students who admitted to plagiarizing at least once in a college paper assignment (defined as copying text of at least a paragraph in length from a book, article, webpage, or other published source without citing that text), regardless of whether they had ever been accused of or sanctioned for plagiarizing. An e-mail was sent to a randomly generated sample of 685 full-time undergraduate first-generation, working-class (defined as Pell Grant recipients), and/or students of color enrolled during the 2013-2014 academic year at a midsized California public regional university.

The nature of the study warranted heightened ethical concern for participant confidentiality. Plagiarism is not only highly stigmatized in academic circles but can also warrant significant punitive sanctions. Consequently, in the recruitment e-mail, students were informed that the study was about instances of plagiarism (which was also defined in the e-mail) but assured that they received the e-mail only as part of a randomly generated sample of students. Receipt of the e-mail in no way suggested that they had committed acts of plagiarism. Students were also informed that while they would be sharing their stories with a faculty member, no information would be distributed to other campus personnel and details they provided would have no impact on evaluation of any course work. Furthermore, while interviews were audio-recorded, those recordings were deleted once transcriptions were completed to further protect participant confidentiality.

Interested students were first directed to a short online survey designed in Qualtrics. The primary purpose of the survey was to collect basic demographic information about participants and determine whether their experiences with plagiarism met the definition stated in the e-mail. At the conclusion of the survey, participants could provide contact information if they were willing to participate in a semistructured interview lasting 1 to 2 hr. A total of 43 respondents completed the survey but only 21 indicated that they had ever plagiarized on a college paper. These 21 students were contacted, and 18 responded for an interview. All interviewees were compensated with a US\$20 gift card.

The emphasis on participants' experiences and perceptions supported use of a smaller sample size for this project. Crouch and McKenzie (2006, pp. 491-492) argued that smaller sample sizes (defined as less than 20 cases) are more desirable for "exploratory, concept-generating studies" that "formulate propositions rather than set out to verify them." Interview material must be continually examined and reexamined within the broader social and theoretical contexts that shape participants' experiences and understandings. According to Crouch and McKenzie, this can only be done with a smaller number of cases so that the researcher can maintain a mental file of the totality of participants in the study. This study is, indeed, exploratory in the sense that it seeks to examine rationales for student plagiarism rooted not just in the plagiarism events themselves but in the broader perceptions participants attach to the college student role and identity. The meanings students generated from their experiences become the basis for articulating instances of plagiarism that do not fit neatly into existing typologies.

Among the 18 participants, 13 were women and five were men. In addition, 10 identified as Hispanic/Latino, four as White, and four as Asian/Pacific Islander (which included Korean, Hmong, and Indian students). The participants ranged in age from 19 to 48 years but only six students were over the age of 25. Most of the participants (14) were children of immigrant parents (10 had parents from Mexico, two

had parents from India, one had a parent from Korea, and one was the child of Hmong refugees). Only five participants had at least one parent who had attended school in the United States. The majority of respondents (10) did not have a parent who had completed high school either in the United States or elsewhere. One participant had a parent who earned a college degree before the participant entered college and another had a parent with some community college experience, but all other participants had parents with no college credentials. In total, 17 of the 18 participants in this study were classified as first-generation college students. The participants were about equally split between those who had been accused of or sanctioned for plagiarizing (eight) and those who had not (10). To protect confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms.

Coding

In the first round of data analysis, I classified participants' reasons for plagiarizing using what Saldaña (2013) calls a provisional coding technique. Specifically, respondents' reasons for plagiarizing were coded using the intentional and unintentional typologies outlined in the prevailing literature on this topic. In this initial coding, all but two participants were classified as having committed some level of intentional plagiarism. These intentional explanations ($n = 16$) were then examined again using causal coding to extract participants' more specific explanations for their plagiarism, giving voice to what they construct as true (Saldaña, 2013).

In this second round of coding emerged six explanations for why students plagiarized. These were labeled as follows: limited time, procrastination, not interested in material, vocabulary or language skills, writing skills, and afraid to ask for help. The first three explanations were context-specific rationales, meaning that students were experiencing an issue or problem with a particular class or at a particular time that influenced their decision to plagiarize. For example, an explanation labeled "limited time" was from a participant, Daniel, who said, "There's been a semester here and there where you *just don't have time* to do everything that all the instructors want and I don't want to sacrifice my GPA." Another explanation labeled as both "procrastination" and "not interested in material" was offered by Gun, who said,

If I wasn't interested in the subject, I wouldn't put in the time to it. So, when I don't put in the time to it and you get to that last-minute mode—I wouldn't say you're forced to [plagiarize] but you're more likely to just from a time constraint.

In other words, students who offered context-specific rationales for plagiarism were suggesting that things like a particularly challenging semester or their disinterest in a particular class explained their decisions to plagiarize. Three of the 16 participants who intentionally plagiarized offered explanations that fit into this rationale type.

The remaining explanations ($n = 13$) were categorized as inadequate academic rationales (which included vocabulary and writing skills explanations) and student fit rationales (which included being afraid to ask for help). It is these explanations that are featured in the discussion below. Moreover, as part of this discussion, I wanted to understand *why* students felt inadequate about their broader academic knowledge and skills and *why* exactly they were afraid to ask for help. As a starting point for these questions, I asked participants to discuss their K-12 experiences and the role they played in students' understanding of their academic abilities. Specifically, I asked participants to describe themselves as students at various points in their academic history (e.g., elementary school, middle school, high school, and college). I asked them to tell me first about their typical grades, whether they participated in GATE or Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and how they compared themselves with their peers academically. The purpose was to get a sense of where students placed themselves in the academic hierarchy, because Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital model indicates that educational institutions reproduce systems of inequality while disguising outcomes as meritocratic. As noted in the research discussed above, grades and participation in advanced course work are institutionalized systems of tracking that can disadvantage working-class and students of color even while maintaining a façade of objectivity. Students who rank themselves lower in the academic hierarchy might also see themselves as less academically capable.

In addition, to address the extent to which participants see themselves fitting into the "college student" role, I asked them to describe their participation level in the classroom, their interactions or relationships with teachers, and any discussions they had with high school teachers or counselors about attending college. This line of questioning was less about academic performance and more about behavioral norms in academic settings, elements that Collier and Morgan (2008) and Bourdieu (1977) suggested are important factors in academic success and belonging. Students who have fewer interactions with teachers and faculty and fewer conversations about college should have more limited understanding of faculty expectations, their role as students, and their fit within educational institutions.

In coding students' descriptions of classroom behavior and faculty interactions, I used what Saldaña (2013) refers to as *in vivo* coding. In this process, participants' behavior is coded in the literal words they used to describe their behavior. This not only helps preserve participants' voices but also highlights the frequency and consistency with which they use particular words to describe their experiences over time. For example, as will be discussed below, I was able to see if a participant who used words such as "quiet" or "feeling dumb" to describe themselves at one point in their academic career (e.g., college) used the same or similar terms in discussing themselves at other points in their academic career (e.g., high school). If K-12 experiences and cultural capital

play a role in how students see themselves as college students, then patterns related to students' fit within academic institutions and their ability to meet institutional expectations of behavior should be evident at varying points in their academic careers.

Findings

As noted above, in the initial coding, only two students offered explanations for their plagiarism that were categorized as exclusively unintentional. In both instances, the students indicated that they did not understand how to properly cite work and/or were not clear on exactly what needed to be cited. An additional four students could not be identified as exclusively intentional or unintentional because they argued simultaneously that they did not know what needed to be cited (unintentional) while also claiming that they purposefully inserted uncited material into their papers (intentional). A typical example of this is demonstrated in the explanation offered by Ryan, a first-generation college student who immigrated to the United States from India at the age of 7 years. He argued,

They tried to teach us what plagiarism is but I've always still kind of, you know, wondered okay, where do I draw the line, you know? To what extent has the idea become part of me? . . . Let's say like a data table, and the description of it. I would never copy paste that and not cite that part because that one's like, clearly, okay that's not my work . . . But whenever it came to things like maybe having an opinion about something and I've read the opinion of certain topics and it was such a good opinion, there's no other way of describing it so I would have to write the sentence the same way. My English isn't very good so writing that sentence the same way, or at least a piece of it, I don't know, I just chose not to cite it.

Ryan indicated that he was confused about what needs to be cited (unintentional plagiarism) but also believes that he struggles with English-language skills and made a conscious decision to not cite the sentences he copied (intentional plagiarism). Given that these explanations included at least some element of intentional plagiarism, they are included with the remaining nine explanations that were identified as intentional plagiarism in the analysis below.

In total, 16 students offered explanations that included at least some level of intentional plagiarism. Of these, three responses fit well with the rationales frequently articulated in the literature, namely, procrastination, other time management issues, and little interest in the course material. In the remaining 13 explanations, students discussed their plagiarism as stemming from weak vocabulary and language skills, poor writing skills, and fear of asking for help. Each of these explanations is discussed separately below, though these themes can and do overlap to a certain extent. For example, a student struggling with language skills might also struggle with writing skills and asking for help.

However, the distinction is nonetheless made here to highlight the prominent themes that students felt best explained their reasons for plagiarizing. The findings reveal that students saw their weaknesses with vocabulary, language, and writing as evidence of their academic inadequacy and poor fit with what they believed a college student should be. They also feared asking for help because they believed their lack of knowledge would confirm that they did not belong at the university. The findings further demonstrate that these feelings did not just suddenly emerge in college, but rather were present in earlier academic histories.

Inadequate Vocabulary and Language Skills

When explaining why they plagiarized, several students contended that they lacked a broad enough vocabulary to reword what they had read or felt that their language skills were inadequate in expressing important or complex ideas. This is consistent with findings from Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 439) who argued that “For many first-generation students, problems at level of vocabulary and style of speaking were just the most obvious indicators of how different college was for them.” Youmans (2011) also recognized that students’ perceptions of insufficient vocabulary played a role in decisions to plagiarize. However, it was not just about the words themselves, but what participants believed their language and vocabulary skills demonstrated about their qualifications to be college students at all. There is an important distinction between language as an issue of cultural capital and the kinds of language issues raised in research on plagiarism among nonnative speakers. For many first-generation students, what they define as difficulties with English are what Bourdieu refers to as linguistic capital (an element of cultural capital), rather than fluency or comprehension issues. Linguistic capital refers to the ability to appropriately use the vocabulary and grammar of the dominant culture in settings where that language is used to establish hierarchy and authority, such as in educational settings. He writes,

The influence of linguistic capital, particularly manifest in the first years of schooling when the understanding and use of language are the major points of leverage for teachers’ assessments, never ceases to be felt; style is always taken into account, implicitly and explicitly, at every level of the educational system . . . (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 73)

In the broader sense, students in this study have command of the English language but struggle with the language norms and expectations of universities.

An example of this is evident with Marisol, a 21-year-old Latina and first-generation college student. She is the daughter of immigrant farmworkers who have little to no formal education. In her explanation of why she plagiarized, she argued,

I feel like I did it that way [plagiarized] because I think that I understand what they’re saying but I don’t really know how to put it in my own words. Like, I feel like saying it how they said it makes sense. I think it doesn’t sound as good [when I say it] because I really don’t know this type of vocabulary or these terms that they use . . . I feel like it makes me seem that I’m not the level that I should be, being in college.

Marisol’s concern with language is a concern with “this type of vocabulary or these terms that they use.” In other words, her concern is one of linguistic capital, and she believes this marks her as someone who does not actually belong in college—she is “not at the level” that she should be.

Monica, who like Marisol is a first-generation Latina college student, echoed a similar sentiment. She started her education in Tijuana before moving to various cities in California. She attended a community college out of high school before transferring to the university. When asked why she plagiarized, she responded,

I think it has more to do with my grammar, with my vocabulary. I don’t have a very, like, extensive vocabulary so I want to sound like a college student and I think maybe that’s what I’m always trying to do with my papers—sound like educators sound like.

Similar to Marisol, Monica struggled with vocabulary and, more specifically, the vocabulary she believed college students used. Her decision to plagiarize reflected her concern about the speaking style that defines linguistic capital.

The struggle to understand and demonstrate appropriate student-role expectations predated these participants’ enrollment in the university. For example, Marisol self-reported earning A’s and B’s in high school but did not take any AP classes. She also was part of her school’s Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which assists first-generation college students in applying for college. Through that program, she received encouragement from teachers and counselors to attend the university. Nonetheless, Marisol described herself as first a “weak” student who improved to “average” by her senior year. When asked why she described herself as weak, she responded, “Just me not knowing the school, not knowing no one and just trying to figure my spot, like trying to find friends and fit in. I think that’s what kind of like made me a weak student.” Marisol’s discussion is very much rooted in a cultural capital argument—what made her a “weak” student was her inability to navigate the social and cultural expectations of high school. This finding is reinforced further when Marisol is asked to describe who the high-achieving students were. She responded,

Wealthy families or the white ones. They’re more out there, they have experienced more so they’re more likely to be the ones who lead. They’re more involved with school. I think it’s because they have support. They know they could do good, like they don’t really have to worry about any other things. They

know they're going to graduate high school and go to college. Like, they have that, what's it called, confidence.

Marisol saw high-achieving students as the ones who had successfully navigated the high school experience to the point that they were the “leaders” and had “confidence.” She believed that they just “know” things that she did not know and they “have” things that she did not have (e.g., cultural capital).

Monica also articulated a similar high school experience. Her high school years involved moving from a school where she had bilingual friends and instructors that allowed her to communicate in both English and Spanish, to a different school where English was the only language spoken in the classroom. In describing the move, she said,

It was hard for me because I was so used to just talking Spanish back there to all my friends and then I wouldn't even force myself [to speak English] with the instructors because I knew that they know Spanish. So, when I moved here it was difficult because . . . I would forget a word in English and I couldn't be like oh just say it in Spanish and they'll [the instructor] know what I'm saying. So, it was hard for me.

Monica's change in high schools corresponded with a self-described shift in her level of classroom participation. She claims she changed from an outspoken student to a quiet, “lower performing” (her words) student. In addition, she saw a decline in her grades and failed her first class. When asked to explain why this happened, she said, “I think it was language, and maybe grades with language affecting my grades. Seeing my grades maybe I felt less assured of my capacity, of my intelligence.”

Monica moved to a high school where the strategies she had previously relied upon to do well and participate in class (namely, communicating in both English and Spanish) could no longer be used to meet faculty expectations. Her bilingualism provided no linguistic capital for her in her new school. As her grades declined, she internalized this to mean a decline in her intelligence. Importantly, while English-language fluency may have initially been a factor, at some point, Monica translated this into an issue of ability. The linguistic capital model recognizes how language plays a role in assessment and how the impact of that assessment continually shapes students' identities. By the time Monica enrolled in college, she plagiarized as a strategy to “sound like a college student” and to compensate for her real or perceived inabilities beyond just language fluency.

Not surprisingly, students concerned about their language and vocabulary skills frequently described themselves as “quiet” in class—contributing little if anything to classroom discussion and opting not to ask questions. Furthermore, for the most part, they correlated silence in the classroom with

the behavior of weaker students. For example, Eve, a 28-year-old Hmong refugee, stated,

[In elementary school] I was a weak student at that time because I was really quiet and I didn't know what was going on. But because I'm quiet and I don't act up, I guess teachers just think that you're, you know, smart which I wasn't.

In this case, even though Eve speculated that her teachers interpreted her silence as being “smart,” she attributed her silence to lack of understanding. She was initially placed in English learner classes from elementary school through her first year in high school. By then, she said, her mastery of English had improved as did her grades and she even enrolled in AP classes. Nonetheless, she still did not participate or ask questions in class because she feared both teachers and peers would think her questions were “dumb.” This very same pattern was evident in the way she discussed her plagiarism. By her admission, she plagiarized in college classes that directly pertained to her career interests because she felt particular pressure to “sound professional” in those classes. She believed that her use of incorrect language could easily cost her credibility as a capable student in her field of study and, thus, replaced her own words with those of others.

Poor Academic Writing Skills

Turner (2011) introduces what she terms “writtenness” to describe the constructed norms of what defines “good” academic writing. As she points out, these norms are dependent upon often-hidden, middle-class assumptions about how to convey information using particular linguistic styles. Consequently, writtenness acts as a form of cultural capital that privileges middle-class students while simultaneously stigmatizing those who are not. Several students explained their plagiarism as rooted in their struggles to demonstrate the grammatical and sentence structure indicative of “good” writing. This explanation is well articulated by Lupe. She is a first-generation college student who was born in Mexico but immigrated to California during her elementary school years. Her parents are farmworkers with no more than elementary school education. In her explanation of why she plagiarized, she said,

[When I] start writing, I have a hard time like just putting my thoughts onto paper, like maybe, say, I know what to say but I just don't know how to write it. Like, I don't know, I just don't seem to get it right on the papers . . . I just lack confidence and I'm just afraid not to be able to get my point across and I just don't want to be judged.

In Lupe's explanation, she knew what she wanted to say, but she did not “know how to write it.” However, her concern about being judged suggests that her deeper concern was not knowing how to write in a way that meets the style expected of students at the university (an issue of cultural capital).

Lupe's fears of being judged, and more specifically being judged as inadequate, were also evident in her recollections of her educational history. As a new immigrant with no English-language skills, she described her earliest elementary years as a "terrible experience" because she struggled with language barriers. As her language skills improved and she did well in classes, she claims that other students accused her of cheating. By the time she reached high school, she was a quiet student afraid to participate in class. She described herself as a "good" student because she earned A's and B's but she, like Eve, felt that her struggles with language skills would call that status into question and reinforce cheating rumors. In describing her behavior in high school, she stated,

I was shy. I'm like so scared to, like, I know the answer but I'm just so afraid to raise my hand up and say it, maybe because of some of my past experiences. Like I said, I feel like people would just stare at me like "Oh just speak correctly," you know, so that's why I was always afraid to raise my hand and be wrong or not being able to get my point across.

In speaking about her classroom participation and her writing skills, Lupe commented both times about concern she had in getting her point across. But, perhaps more important, these concerns are tied in to fears about how her knowledge and abilities would be judged. In her mind, she knew the answer and "what to say" but she believed she lacked the linguistic capital and "writtenness" necessary to convey that.

Another student, Sylvia, also reported plagiarizing the first time she had to write what she called a "scholarly" or research paper for a composition class. In her explanation of why she plagiarized, she drew a comparison between her writing skills and "college work" whereby her writing skills fell short. She said,

I think that maybe I was just so nervous about getting my first research paper on paper that I kind of disregarded most of the things [about proper citation] that should have been obvious. Because, I mean my high school, they didn't do a lot of research papers. I wrote maybe one in the [last] two years that I finished out there. So, I kind of was just going back to my old style of writing very simply, not college level at all, just putting thoughts on paper and then turning it in. So, I felt very stupid, I was like, oh god this isn't high school anymore, this is college work. You have to actually be college about it.

Sylvia recognized that her high school played a role in her lack of preparation, but nonetheless she "felt very stupid" about her poor writing skills and described her writing as "not college level at all." In other words, she felt she lacked the cultural capital necessary to fit faculty expectations for college student performance. Thus, she plagiarized as a strategy to "be college about it," to write in a way that met a standard she felt unprepared to achieve using her own words.

Both Lupe and Sylvia did not necessarily question their ability to understand the material they were expected to

learn. Rather, they struggled with how to adequately convey their understanding in writing. This distinction is important because it suggests that their plagiarism is done primarily to compensate for lack of knowledge of a particular skill set (in this case, academic writing). In addition, this struggle with writing was part of a longer educational history that persisted, rather than originated, in the university classroom. Over time, it becomes deeply connected to a sense of inadequacy because academic writing skills are an integral part of the cultural capital of middle-class professional and educational institutions.

Another student, Esmeralda, was accused of plagiarism after she turned in an assignment that was basically just a series of quotes from the assigned readings. In her initial explanation of this, she stated, "I really wanted him [the instructor] to see that I did read the book—the chapter—and I wanted to show him that I did read it. I just didn't understand it in any way." In other words, Esmeralda seemed to initially advance an explanation indicating lack of understanding about the material. However, she also acknowledged that part of the reason she did not understand it was because of how she was engaging with it. Black and Rechter (2013) argued that cultural capital is reflected in conceptions of academic literacy—knowledge of academic practices such as critical reading, reflection, and writing conventions and how those vary across disciplines. Students struggling with academic literacy generally fail to understand this variation in knowledge and meaning and, thus, often feel confused about what is expected of them and how they should engage with material (Hicks, 2016; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Sheridan, 2011). For Esmeralda, further discussion about her plagiarism revealed that her problems with writing were connected to her problems with academic literacy and understanding meaning in particular disciplinary contexts. For instance, in comparing her approach to the initial assignment with that of subsequent assignments, Esmeralda noted,

Before, I would just read it [the assigned text] and not take notes and so to trace back what I had read it was like I had to read it again. And so the second [writing assignment], I took notes, I highlighted things and like, I tried to understand it more, like the meaning. I would read a sentence and think about it—what is it trying to say and write it down like instead of writing the quote like the exact wording of the book. I would think about it and then write what I thought and then that's how I would write my papers, like all my thoughts and my notes and that's how I'd write the next paper.

For both assignments, Esmeralda read the material that was assigned to her. But, in the first instance, she failed to understand that reading in this context also required her to engage in reflective thinking. She figures this out for the second writing assignment and adopts new reading and writing strategies. This suggests that her problem is less about the material and more about development of specific knowledge and skill sets.

Fear of Asking Questions

The fear of asking faculty for help is both an underlying as well as explicit explanation respondents offer for why they commit plagiarism. Students are reluctant to ask faculty for help for a variety of reasons, including intimidation, fear of asking “stupid” or “dumb” questions, and even not really knowing how to ask. In fact, one respondent just sat in silence for a moment when I asked her if she had ever considered going to a faculty member for help; it was as if the thought had truly never occurred to her. While this may be the extreme example, it is not too far removed from many of the other responses participants gave. For example, Ynez is a 38-year-old first-generation college student who is also a nontraditional student (she was over the age of 24 when she first enrolled in college) and child immigrant. Her parents have no more than a middle-school education and speak little to no English. She reflected on her college plagiarism experience in the following way,

I didn't understand the paper, honestly I didn't. That material, I didn't understand the material. That's no excuse because I should have told her [the professor] that I didn't understand it and again I think it has to do with me being shy about asking questions and just feeling like oh my god I'm stupid.

Ynez understood that asking for help was the logical response when she did not understand the course material. However, she saw her confusion as evidence of stupidity and did not want to reveal that by asking questions. She exhibited a similar pattern of behavior and assessment in high school. For example, she said that in high school, she was not a good student because she frequently turned in incomplete homework and, thus, had low grades. She would not ask her teachers for help because she was afraid that they or her peers would belittle her for not understanding material that had already been covered.

What is even more striking is that Ynez believes that in the case of the particular class in which she plagiarized, the professor would have helped her if she had asked. She said,

I think I was just shy in talking to her about it because she's a really good professor. She could explain to me—if I would have just went and said, “You know what, I didn't understand the material. Can you help me?” I think that she would have helped me. I just kind of felt like—during class though when she goes over her lecture, nobody asks questions. So then here I am again thinking oh I'll wait for that person to ask or say “Oh I don't understand this.” But nobody did so I kind of feel like I'm the one that doesn't get it.

The fact that Ynez did not ask for help even though she was sure that she would have received it makes sense if her response is understood as more than just being “shy”; it is about the fear of being the only one who does not “get it” and, thus, the only one who does not belong.

A similar scenario characterized the experience of Helen, a White student who grew up very poor and did not earn a high school diploma. She, like Ynez, is a first-generation and nontraditional student. Throughout her K-12 education, she avoided teachers out of fear that they would notice the dysfunction of her home life. Helen argued that, in some ways, her college plagiarism experience was unintentional because she did not know how to properly cite the work she was using. However, she was aware that she was at least doing something wrong and, thus, solicited help from people she trusted. She said,

I had taken passages out of books without referencing them and I did not have a works cited page. I would not have known how to do a works cited page if somebody had paid me. At that point I did meet with a guy a couple of times at my work to try and help me get through it but I was honestly so clueless as to what I needed to learn that it was just overwhelming. It was just overwhelming what I didn't know and I remember sitting there with this guy and he's reading through this paper and he's finding all of these problems, and looking back I understand what he was talking about now in the sense that it was very grammatically incorrect and it was flipping from these really great passages that I'd copied out of a book to my own. I remember thinking wow I really did plagiarize there [laughing] but I didn't do it to try to cheat, I was trying to do the best that I knew how. I really just did not understand how to write a paper. So I had like five books that I had read and I was taking parts of each of those and trying to make a paper but I did not know how.

When asked why she did not go to her instructor for help, Helen responded, “I was still shy and I was not good at talking to authority,” which in this case included her instructor. She knew that her paper had “all these problems” and that she needed help with her writing and citations but her previous habit of avoiding teachers to hide a problem resurfaced in this context. Helen understood how to express ideas in written form—she described herself as an avid creative writer. However, she lacked the cultural capital needed to write an academic paper or to know how to get the assistance that she needed.

Students' fears about asking for help are consistent with research by Lareau (2014), who argued that one manifestation of cultural capital is that middle-class students are much more likely to ask teachers and faculty for help. This stems from a greater sense of entitlement that comes with greater familiarity with and comfort in academic institutions. This pattern is evident even in early childhood education where middle-class children are more persistent with teachers in seeking help than their working-class peers (Calarco, 2011). In interviews with the 18 participants in this study, only one spoke about a specific, negative experience with an instructor. For the others, fears they had about faculty were ungrounded in actual experience. In other words, students often perceived faculty to be unapproachable or uninterested in their questions even though they could not point to

specific instances that warranted these conclusions. For example, Siana, a Sikh immigrant woman from India, used an online source to plagiarize a paper about a prominent philosopher because she did not understand the material she was reading. When asked why she did not ask her instructor for help, she argued,

I have this feeling set that no professors are worth going and talking to . . . I know once I go to her office, she'll just make me feel like crap. "Oh you're the dumbest person here, you don't know, it's an easy philosopher to understand and you don't understand" kind of a thing. I could see that she was like really a mean person.

While Siana's perception of her instructor as a "mean person" may, in fact, have been correct, it is notable that she could not point to a specific experience that led her to this conclusion. In addition, Siana's belief that the instructor would judge her as "the dumbest person here" indicated that her concern was not about whether the instructor would help her, but how she thought the need to ask for help would reflect upon her. Siena, Helen, and Ynez expressed no sense of entitlement to faculty's time even when, as the case of Ynez, they believed they would receive help if they asked.

Discussion

In a broad sense, this research study focuses on the explanations first-generation college students offer for their decisions to plagiarize, illuminating how those decisions are impacted by students' struggles to understand and meet the behavioral norms and values of academic institutions. In addition, this study highlights links between plagiarism and struggles that persist from students' earlier socialization experiences in K-12 academic institutions. The focus is on first-generation college students because these students are less likely to have inherited the cultural capital that enhances student success in academic institutions typically reflecting the norms and values of the White middle class (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). While there are many reasons why students plagiarize, the explanations presented by the majority of students in this study are not adequately explained by the intentional or unintentional rationales typically discussed in research on undergraduate academic dishonesty. This is because the intentional and unintentional typologies focus on the immediate and individual-level circumstances that precede students' decisions to plagiarize (Ashworth et al., 1997; Dee & Jacob, 2012; Sprajc et al., 2017). Despite the usefulness of these explanations, most of the students in this study discussed their plagiarism as coming from broader and historical educational inequalities rooted in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Research Question 1: Explanations for Plagiarism

The students argued that their language and vocabulary skills, writing skills, and inability to communicate with faculty played prominent roles in their decisions to plagiarize. Specifically, students such as Monica, Marisol, Lupe, Eve, and Sylvia worried that their vocabulary and writing skills were not "college-level." For the most part, they understood the material they were being asked to learn but worried that the manner in which they conveyed that understanding would be judged inadequate. They clearly understood that academic institutions valued a particular type or style of communication but lacked the cultural and linguistic capital to meet those expectations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Turner, 2011). For students such as Eve and Lupe (both of whom are immigrants) and perhaps even Monica (who communicated in a combination of English and Spanish), research on nonnative English speakers might point more simply to struggles with language acquisition skills to explain plagiarism (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016; Isbell et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2018). However, a key difference in the explanations offered by the students in this study is that their concerns about language skills are less about speaking English per se and more about speaking the language of academia.

In addition, other students such as Ynez, Helen, and Siana plagiarized because they did not understand the material or the assignment and yet did not want to ask faculty for help. Specifically, students feared that faculty would see them as "dumb" or "stupid" or that faculty should not be bothered with questions even though these students had no evidence to suggest either outcome. Again, these findings are consistent with understandings of cultural capital whereby students whose socialization matches the values and norms of academic institutions are more likely to feel entitled and empowered to ask questions and ask for help (Lareau, 2014).

Research Question 2: Fitting the "College Student" Role

Participants in this study also fear that their vocabulary and writing skills mark them as unfit to meet college student expectations. Consequently, their plagiarism is a (misguided) strategy for sounding like "college students" in their written work. This is evident when Marisol said, "I'm not the level that I should be, being in college" or when Siana imagined her instructor telling her, "Oh you're the dumbest person here, you don't know, it's an easy philosopher to understand and you don't understand" or when Lupe said, "I just don't want to be judged." The students are not expressing anxiety about a particular class or a particular circumstance (e.g., finals week, workload). Rather, they express concern about their abilities in general. They worry more about failing at being a college student than they worry about failing a class (a potential penalty for plagiarism). It is for this same reason

that they do not ask for help from the very people who can give it—even when they know that help is freely available. Affirmation of their struggles or weaknesses could further prove that they are not legitimate college student material.

This analysis also offers potential insight into why the students, such as those in Youmans' (2011) study, continue to plagiarize even when they are informed about what plagiarism is and what the sanctions for it will be. Youmans' participants attended a Hispanic Serving Institution that attracts a high percentage of first-generation college students. These are the kinds of students interviewed for this project and the kinds of students who generally have less cultural capital. Bourdieu (1977) explains that cultural capital is something that is passed down generationally through socialization and, thus, it is something learned and embedded over time. Consequently, it is not something that can easily be addressed through a lecture on plagiarism or the signing of honor codes. Even though these strategies may be important steps to take, they seem to be inadequate in and of themselves for students struggling with how they fit culturally and behaviorally with academic institutions.

Research Question 3: Role of K-12 Experiences

The fears and struggles that influence most of these students' decisions to plagiarize did not originate in college. Instead, they are the product of years spent embedded in an educational system that replicates the social inequities that plague the larger society. While many students may struggle with fitting into college life, what is different for these students is that they have been struggling to fit in for much of their educational careers. Monica, for example, recognized that her Spanish-language skills had little place in the classroom; she could not substitute a Spanish word for an English one to convey her point. Helen was an avid creative writer but this did not help her with citing academic work. Moreover, her experience with poverty and social services discouraged her from approaching educators for help. Sylvia, too, felt that peers and teachers made fun of her in high school classes, and few expected much of her in the way of a college degree.

Bourdieu (1990) argues that cultural capital facilitates a sense among working-class students throughout their K-12 education that they do not belong in systems of higher education. In many cases, they will self-select out of college by failing to even apply (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). Tracking systems have similar means of demonstrating to students where they rank academically (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Dauber et al., 1996; Entwisle et al., 2007). The students in this study defy these forces in the sense that they all chose to enroll in a university. However, they nonetheless continue to carry that sense of poor fit that Bourdieu describes even while navigating through their college experience.

It is worth reiterating that this research in no way suggests that first-generation college students are more likely to

plagiarize. Rather, their explanations for why they plagiarize do not necessarily fit into the pervasive typologies. Not only do their explanations sometimes blur the line between intentional and unintentional plagiarism (e.g., they did not really know how to cite but also did not want to ask to find out), but their explanations for their intentional plagiarism are much more deeply personal and conflicting than moral compass, time management, or workload explanations imply. Understanding their reasons for plagiarizing requires looking beyond the intentional/unintentional dichotomy to include the historical impacts of systemic inequities and cultural capital. This does not negate the other more individualistic reasons students plagiarize, rather, it provides a new frame in which to examine plagiarism and the policies and approaches implemented to address it.

Conclusion

Policies designed to deter plagiarism with threats and punish students who violate these standards make more sense if the reasons students plagiarize are rooted in immediate pressures that emerge in typical college settings (e.g., time management, workload) or because they lack a strong moral compass (e.g., laziness, "don't care" about assignment). However, the reasons most students in this study gave for why they plagiarized reflected the outcomes of deeply imbedded, institutionalized inequities rooted in cultural capital. For students struggling to fit the college student role or overcome long-held feelings of inadequacy, detection software and even F's in courses that can later be repeated may be ineffective deterrents. Expanding our understanding of students' plagiarism puts educators in a better position to assist students and provides an opportunity to rethink our common institutional approaches to plagiarism.

Importantly, this research study is not suggesting that incidences of plagiarism should go without penalty. Rather, it is to acknowledge that if plagiarism is sometimes about inadequate knowledge and skill, then simply failing a student on an assignment or in a class without further guidance does not really address the problem. Two students in the study, Sylvia and Esmeralda, both talked about instructors giving them a chance to resubmit their work. They both saw this as an opportunity to "prove" that they could be good students and submit quality work. A follow-up study can consider whether such second-chance approaches would result in better outcomes than punitive sanctions. Certainly, every case is different but this is, in many ways, the point. Policies often assume a specific set of explanations for plagiarism when, in fact, students' reasons may be quite different. Failing students outright and excluding them from classrooms may reinforce the problems of academic fit that many of these students already feel.

Research suggests that institutions can enhance orientation and outreach programs to openly discuss cultural capital and concerns with academic fit that some first-generation students

face. In an experiment conducted by Stephens et al. (2012), universities sent welcome letters to first-generation students reflecting either a culture of individualism prominent in dominant middle-class norms or a culture of interdependence more common to first-generation students' experiences. The students were then presented with a specific academic task. Those that received a letter reflecting individualism viewed the task as more challenging and performed worse than those who received a letter reflecting support for interdependence. In other words, first-generation students who feel universities reflect their cultural norms are less intimidated by academic demands and experience more success. While Stephens et al. do not specifically address plagiarism, their findings offer insight into how universities can more effectively reflect a broader range of cultural norms and facilitate development of students' sense of belonging, both of which can play a role in student plagiarism. Models of academic literacy also suggest that students' understandings of faculty expectations are not easily achieved through single lectures or workshops. Rather, developing academic literacy is a complex and sometimes lengthy process for students and, thus, must be embedded within course and university curriculum (Lea, 2004; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). These findings, along with those presented here in this study, suggest an opportunity to examine how plagiarism can be addressed through institutional culture and not just individual punishment.

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