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Inadvertent Plagiarism in Everyday Life

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SUMMARY

Inadvertent plagiarism is a source monitoring error described in laboratory studies. In the present study, the existence of this phenomenon in everyday life and the impact of a variable considered in laboratory (i.e. source similarity) were investigated. Two hundred and two participants were asked to remember an episode involving inadvertent plagiarism in the past, and to describe it. Results showed that inadvertent plagiarism occurs in real life conditions with respect to various types of activities. Moreover, source similarity had an impact on inadvertent plagiarism. In particular, same-sex plagiarism occurred more often than opposite-sex plagiarism. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Inadvertent plagiarism, or cryptomnesia, consists of generating a behavioural product with the belief that the response is novel even though it has actually been encountered previously. Brown and Murphy (1989) defined the phenomenon as follows:

> Cryptomnesia refers to generating a word, an idea, a song, or a solution to a problem, with the belief that it is either totally original, or at least original within the present context. In actuality, the item is not original, but one which has been produced by someone else (or even oneself) at some earlier time (p. 432).

Psychological research on this phenomenon has a short history (Carpenter, 2002). With the exception of some isolated pioneering works (e.g. Taylor, 1965), cryptomnesia has drawn the attention of cognitive and social psychologists mainly during the last 15 years.

Procedures used to measure inadvertent plagiarism in the laboratory generally include three phases. In the first phase, participants (tested in pairs or in groups) are asked to generate items while at the same time are instructed not to duplicate their own or another participant's productions (i.e. *generate-item task*). In the second phase, participants are asked to recall their own responses to the item generation task (i.e. *recall-own task*). Finally, in the third phase, participants are instructed to generate items that had not been generated during the previous tasks by themselves or any other participants (i.e. *generate-new task*). Inadvertent plagiarism has been observed in each of these phases. For instance,

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in the generate-item task, participants have been found to repeat own or another participant's responses. In the recall-own task, participants sometimes claim the other participant's responses as his or her own. In the generate-new task, plagiarism also occurs when participants produce a previously generated item.

Such results have been obtained using a wide variety of materials and procedures including the generation of exemplars from various categories (Brédart, Lampinen, & Defeldre, 2003; Brown & Halliday, 1991; Brown & Murphy, 1989; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Calvini, 1999), finding solutions to word puzzles (Landau & Marsh, 1997; Marsh & Bower, 1993; Marsh & Landau, 1995), the generation of creative ideas such as ideas concerning ways to reduce the number of traffic accidents (Bink, Marsh, Hicks, & Howard, 1999; Landau, Marsh, & Parsons, 2000; Marsh, Landau, & Hicks, 1997), and drawing novel space creatures (Marsh, Landau, & Hicks, 1996).

Anecdotal cases of inadvertent plagiarism that occur outside the laboratory are also mentioned in some of these studies (Brown & Halliday, 1991; Brown & Murphy, 1989; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Calvini, 1999), which include cases concerning the professional activities of artists (novelists, musicians, or film makers) or scientists. Macrae et al. (1999) suggest that inadvertent plagiarism may also occur for more mundane activities. However, no studies have investigated characteristics of inadvertent plagiarism in everyday life. Therefore, in the present study, students were asked to describe one episode of inadvertent plagiarism that they had committed in the past.

Although the present study was mainly an exploratory investigation, two main points were addressed. The first point is related to the fact that tends to show that, in everyday life, people attempting to produce truly original material are exposed to inadvertent plagiarism. This point is based on Tenpenny and colleagues' commentary about the low probability of plagiarizing the original idea of someone else (Tenpenny, Keriazakos, Lew, & Phelan, 1999[Q6]). The second point was simply to describe in which kinds of everyday life creative activities the occurrence of unconscious plagiarism was reported and furthermore to examine if the arts and sciences are the sole domains involving inadvertent plagiarisms. Q6

Unconscious plagiarism has been considered as a kind of source monitoring error (Landau & Marsh, 1997; Macrae et al., 1999). Another point I wanted to investigate in the present study was the effect of source similarity. Previous source monitoring studies have shown that one is more likely to confuse sources of information when the perceptual or semantic similarities of these sources are increased (Johnson & Raye, 2000). For instance, source confusions are more frequent when the potential candidates are two women compared to when they are a man and a woman (Johnson, Nolde, & De Leonardis, 1996). Based on these findings, Macrae et al. (1999) studied the influence of perceptual similarity in inadvertent plagiarism. Using the aforementioned generation of category exemplars task, they showed that the incidence of cryptomnesia is much higher in same-sex (high perceptual similarity) compared to opposite-sex dyads (low perceptual similarity). The rate of cryptomnesia in their experiment reached about 24% in the former condition and only 14% in the latter. I wanted to bear out these results in everyday life.

Based on Brown and Murphy's (1989) definition of cryptomnesia, I distinguished between two types of inadvertent plagiarism: one related to the generation of totally original products (thereafter *creation-related plagiarism*) and another type related to the generation of a product which is original in the current context (*context-related plagiarism*). In creation-related plagiarism, the participant generates a behavioural product with the belief that it was totally original, i.e. independent of the context, even though the

product has been produced earlier by someone else (other-plagiarism) or by the participant her/himself (self-plagiarism). For example, a participant, who is an amateur pianist, reported that one day he composed what he believed to be a truly new song that was in reality based on a melody by Serge Gainsbourg (a famous French song-writer). In context-related plagiarism, the participant generates a piece of information with the belief that it was new for her/his interlocutor even though she/he already provided this piece of information to the interlocutor (self-plagiarism), or received it from the interlocutor her/herself (other-plagiarism). For example, a participant reported that one day he announced good news to his best friend: Their Mathematical Analysis teacher had decided to give the exam questions to the students. In fact, this piece of information was not new for the friend as he had previously told it himself to our participant. In such cases, plagiarism bears upon information that the participant believed to be novel in a given social interaction. This type of cryptomnesia does not concern the generation of a creative product that is novel independent of that context.

To summarize, the following points were examined:

— Does cryptomnesia take place in real life conditions?
— Do we inadvertently plagiarize other people more often than ourselves?
— Do we plagiarize same-sex persons more frequently than opposite-sex persons?

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and two undergraduate students (101 women and 101 men) participated. Their ages were between 18 and 25 (mean age = 20.9 years).

Materials and procedure

A definition of inadvertent plagiarism, based on Brown and Murphy's definition (1989; see above[Q2]) was provided. In addition, two examples of inadvertent plagiarism involving respectively Freud and Nietzsche were given. It was also specified that inadvertent plagiarism may occur in domains such as science, music or literature but also in everyday life. Participants were then instructed to retrieve an episode of their life during which they inadvertently plagiarized another person or themselves, and to describe this episode as precisely as possible. They were asked not to request an external help to recall the episode or to fill in the questionnaire. Below these written instructions, 20 lines were provided for the participant's description of the episode (the questionnaire presented to the participants is presented in the Appendix). Q2

The questionnaire was presented individually to each participant in order to be sure that the participants had understood how to use it and had the possibility to ask for complementary information. They were also orally instructed not to guess or invent and were clearly told that they could bring back an empty questionnaire empty if they had no recollection of inadvertent plagiarism. Finally, the participants were allowed to keep the questionnaire for a maximum of 3 days.

Every participant was contacted by the end of the 3-day period. They were asked to bring the questionnaire back either full or empty. Participants who informed the experimenter that they were not able to remember any case of inadvertent plagiarism (without

physically bringing the questionnaire back) were not excluded from the sample. Under such conditions, the response rate reached 100%.

RESULTS

Out of the 202 questionnaires that were initially distributed, 109 were correctly filled in according to the instructions, 64 were left empty, and 29 were rejected because participants did not describe an actual episode of plagiarism or because the inadvertence of the plagiarism was doubtful. Each questionnaire was checked by two independent judges. After discussion, there was total agreement between the two judges concerning which questionnaires had to be discarded.

Out of the 109 remaining protocols, 54 had been filled in by women and 55 by men (overall mean age = 20.8).

These results showed that about the half of the participants remembered an episode involving personal inadvertent plagiarism. There still remains the question of material originality as pointed out by Tenpenny et al. (1998). This question was examined by comparing the occurrence of creation-related plagiarism and context-related plagiarism.

Two independent coders categorized participants' descriptions based upon two criteria: 1) did the described episode involve creation-related plagiarism or context-related plagiarism, and 2) did this episode include self-plagiarism or other plagiarism? A Cohen's Kappa was calculated for inter-coder agreement (K = 0.95). The distribution of the plagiarisms is given in Table 1.

Seventy-two plagiarisms were found to be related to creation and 37 plagiarisms were related to context. This result showed that unconscious plagiarism for novel material may occur in everyday life.

Globally, 16 self-plagiarisms and 93 other-plagiarisms were reported. This difference is statistically significant [$\chi^2(1) = 54.39$, $p < 0.0001$; $\phi^2 = 0.27$]. The results also showed that when creation-related plagiarism occurred, people more often plagiarized another person than themselves [$\chi^2(1) = 68,06,$ Q3 $p < 0.0001$; $\phi^2 = 0.34$]. In fact, only one out of the 72 episodes of creation-related plagiarism involved self-plagiarism. In contrast, as far as context-related plagiarism is concerned, other-plagiarism was not significantly more frequent than self-plagiarism [$\chi^2(1) = 1.32$, $p = 0.25$]. In fact, it is much more likely for the occurrence of a plagiarism to concern the self if it is context-related than if it were creation-related, and to concern another person if it is creation-related than if it were context related. The odds ratio is 48.41 [CI Q4 $_{95\%} = (16.78, 139.77)$]. Q4

Seventy-three episodes of same-sex plagiarism and only 12 episodes of opposite-sex plagiarism were reported. In six other cases, groups rather than single individuals were plagiarized, and in the remaining 18 cases the sex of the plagiarized person could not be specified.

Table 1. Occurrence of self- and other-plagiarism

	Creation-related	Context-related
Self	1	15
Other	71	22

Same-sex plagiarism occurred significantly more frequently than opposite-sex plagiarism [$\chi^2(1) = 43.78$, $p < 0.0001$; $\phi^2 = 0.22$]. Therefore, as observed in laboratory studies, source similarity seems to have an impact on unconscious plagiarism occurrence in everyday[Q5] as well.

As expected from anecdotal cases described in previous papers, plagiarism related to art was relatively frequent: 27 cases were related to literary activities (writing poems, prose or cartoon scenarios, finding the title of an essay, etc.), 15 with music (lyrics and/or tunes), three with the plastic arts, and three with choreography. Interestingly, cases of plagiarism related to various other kinds of creative activities occurred. For instance, inventing a new cocktail ($N = 1$), new games for scouts ($N = 3$), an exercise for basketball training ($N = 1$), a joke ($N = 2$), a piece of decoration ($N = 3$), a new way to display cans in a supermarket ($N = 1$), choosing a present ($N = 2$), finding a nickname ($N = 1$), arguing in a situation of persuasion ($N = 4$), setting plans for professional or spare-time activities ($N = 5$) and finding a good example to illustrate a concept ($N = 1$) were reported.

CONCLUSIONS

Tenpenny et al. (1998) doubted the possibility that plagiarism concerning truly new material exists in real life settings. Therefore, the main goal of this study was to show that the phenomenon is present in everyday life beyond the anecdotic cases usually provided in the literature. In this survey, 54% of the participants remembered an episode of inadvertent plagiarism (72 creation-related plagiarisms vs. 37 context-related ones). Therefore, inadvertent plagiarism occurs in real life conditions even if it does not seem to be widespread.

Participants did not only comply with our definition and suggestions of inadvertent plagiarism. They retrieved original, personal cases of the phenomenon. Inadvertent plagiarism is a diversified phenomenon that may occur in a wide range of creative activities in everyday life such as inventing a cocktail for a party or finding a present for your best friend's birthday.

Globally, results showed that it is easier to inadvertently plagiarize another person than oneself, as Macrae et al. (1999) observed. Cryptomnesia is related to item generation: an item is generated at one point in time and is generated again later with the belief that it is first time it is generated. The fact that more plagiarisms concern another person than ourselves may be due to a better memory for words we generated and possible links we made with personal thoughts. The generation effect is a phenomenon that is frequently encountered in situations of item-generation (e.g. a song, a text, a joke, an idea). This concept was first introduced by Slamecka and Graf (1978): when a word is generated (produced) by the participant, it is later better remembered than when the same word is heard (read by an experimenter) or read by the participant.

The Source Monitoring Framework, proposed by Marcia Johnson and colleagues (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993), is an important theoretical account in the context of the false-memory issue. In particular, it hypothesizes that the correct attribution of the source of a memory is due to two factors. One is the decision processes involved in the source attribution (heuristic vs. systematic). The second is the qualitative characteristics of the memory, namely the memory features (e.g. a prominent visual defect or an astonishing sound, etc.) or circumstances surrounding the core memory (e.g. people implied) that make the source of a memory more distinguishable for the aforementioned decision

processes. The more distinctive the memory characteristics of two facts, the easier it is to make a correct attribution. One dimension of similarity is the person's sex. Two men or women are more similar than a man and a woman in terms of, for example, the face or voice characteristics. Source misattributions have been found to be more frequent with same-sex pairs of participants than with opposite-sex pairs in laboratory studies (Johnson et al., 1996; Macrae et al., 1999). In real life situations, inadvertent plagiarism seems also to be influenced by source similarity. In this study, if one plagiarizes another, the odds are six times greater that one plagiarizes a same-sex person than an opposite-sex person (73 same-sex plagiarisms vs. 12 opposite-sex plagiarisms). Our survey provides evidence of the validity of the Source Monitoring Framework in real life conditions by showing the same predicted consequences of source similarity as in laboratory settings.

The present study has limitations that are inherent to the retrospective diary study method in general. The data may include a volunteer bias (Reason & Lucas, 1984), i.e. the participants who accept to participate in the survey may not be representative of the entire population. Two selection biases are also possible. First, participants might prefer to ignore certain episodes that may bring to light a negative side of their cognitive functioning. On the other hand, participants might select or retrieve the more memorable or more accessible cases of inadvertent plagiarism. Therefore, the possibility of a selection bias cannot be ruled out.

However, the methodological limitations do not alter the main result of the present research: cryptomnesia occurs in real life and is not an artificial behavioural effect that can only be observed in the laboratory.

It should be noted that the study's goal was not to examine the frequency of inadvertent plagiarism in everyday life. Despite these limitations, the present data have value in opening up an area of study and offering a preliminary characterization for further investigation.

In summary, this survey showed that inadvertent plagiarism is a phenomenon that occurs not only in experimental conditions and in the particular world of scientific or artistic creation but also exists in real life condition. Its manifestations are diverse and may concern original material.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Q6

APPENDIX

The questionnaire presented to the participants.

Forename: _____ Sex: M – F Age: _____

Thank you for participating to this survey. It concerns a memory error called the 'author attribution error', a rather widespread phenomenon. We will define and illustrate this concept by a couple of examples.

The **author attribution error** is the generation of something (an idea, a song, a story, . . .), with the belief that this production is novel (at least in the current context), while it had in fact already been generated by another person or by the person themselves. There are some rather famous examples of this phenomenon. Freud, for instance, confessed that his theory according to which everyone is at first bisexual was in fact an idea first proposed by one of his friends. They had discussed this topic several years before and when his friend had proposed the theory of initial bisexuality, Freud had rejected it. Later on, when this idea came back in his mind, he found it adequate and forgot that this idea was not new and was the work of another person. It is also known that, in his 'Thus spake Zarathoustra', Nietzsche plagiarized, albeit inadvertently a passage of a Swabian ghost story written by Kerner. More generally, it happens that writers or musicians to write

a melody, prose or poem passage that they judge exceptional only to discover later on that they have repeated, inadvertently, one of their or colleague's prior work.

These examples concern the scientific, musical and literary domain, but this type of error could of course happen in everyday life.

In a first step, we ask you to recall a moment of your life where an error of this type has happened to you and to describe it in a few lines, as accurately as possible. Moreover, we ask you to complete this survey alone without asking an external help to recall this occurrence of plagiarism.

In other words, we ask you to recall an instance of inadvertent plagiarism that you have done, disregarding whether you plagiarized another person or yourself.

Author Query Form (ACP/1129)

Special Instructions: Author please write responses to queries directly on Galley proofs and then fax back. Alternatively please list responses in an e-mail.

Q1: Author: FNRS—in full.

Q2: Author: OK on proofs?

Q3: Author: '68,06'—OK, or as you mean '68.06'? please clarify.

Q4: Author: CI—in full.

Q5: Author: 'in every day' or 'in everyday life'—please clarify.

Q6: Author: '1998' or '1999'—please clearify?