

What Is Our Ethical Duty? Social Work Education and Plagiarism

Melinda Gushwa
University of Nevada-Las Vegas

Catharine Mennes
Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract

Social work educators play a critical role in student ethical development. Social work programs have plagiarism policies which address academic dishonesty. Additionally, social workers are governed by codes of ethics, which explicate obligations to address unethical behavior. Academic administrators are also called on to ensure compliance with these codes. This article discusses academic dishonesty within the framework of the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (1999) and argues that detecting and responding to plagiarism are professional ethical obligations.

Key words: Social work education, ethics, plagiarism, detection, response

Introduction

The professional education of social workers is guided simultaneously by the policies of institutions of higher learning and by professional social work organizations. While in the United States, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (1999) specifically addresses plagiarism, most national and international organizations' codes of ethics (i.e., the Australian, British, Canadian Associations of Social Workers, and the International Federation of Social Workers) address issues of competence and integrity, which are linked to the issue of plagiarism. For the purpose of this paper, The NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) will be used as a framework for exploring plagiarism, as it spells out standards of conduct for social workers and social work students explicitly regarding plagiarism.

Although previous work has explored academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, through the *Code* (Culpepper, 2008; Riolo, Buryk, & Bromley, 2008), this paper builds on and extends the efforts with an in-depth examination, complete with pragmatic suggestions. Within the context of

the *Code*, educators are expected to teach students the knowledge and skills required to practice the profession, as well as to impart a deep-rooted understanding of professional ethics. One key component of ethical development that is of increasing concern in many educational settings, including schools of social work, is plagiarism (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Evans, 2006; Pickard, 2006; Pittman-Munke & Berghoef, 2008; Saunders, 1993).

As plagiarism becomes more rampant with the proliferation of access to electronic media (Brock, 2008; Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Gibelman, Gelman, & Fast, 1999; McLafferty & Faust, 2004; Riolo, Buryk, & Bromley, 2008; Vernon, Bigna, & Smith, 2001), this ethical issue becomes a crucial topic of examination in social work education, especially in light of the fact that the act of plagiarism is tantamount to compromised critical thinking and assessment skills. Although academic institutions have policies in place to address plagiarism, social work educators are bound by unique ethical obligations to the profession in terms of diligent scrutiny of student work regarding concerns of academic dishonesty. As Pittman-Munke and Berghoef (2008a) emphasize, plagiarism is an intertwined issue for social work educators. The *Code* (NASW, 1999) unequivocally delineates the professional obligation to actively address unethical behavior among fellow social workers, to avoid treachery and duplicity of action, and to uphold the integrity of the profession. Based on these tenets, administrators of social work education programs should be encouraged to establish an ethical working environment that promotes compliance with the *Code*.

Despite the fact that the *Code* (NASW, 1999) is infused across the social work curriculum in the United States, the literature to date has failed to examine plagiarism in relation to these ethical standards. This paper provides an overview of academic dishonesty within the framework of the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) and argues for viewing educator and institutional detection of and response to plagiarism as professional and ethical obligations. The authors, who have experience teaching in both public and private undergraduate and graduate social work education programs, have had multiple experiences in which they have identified and responded to student plagiarism, with differential responses from program administration and colleagues. As a result, the authors have outlined guidelines for detection and models for responses to plagiarism.

For purposes of this discussion, plagiarism will be defined as:

- 1) copying text directly without giving credit to the original source,
- 2) copying text directly from one source while crediting another,
- 3) copying text directly while citing the information as a paraphrase, or

4) presenting a unique idea from another source as original work.

Ethical Framework

Although the issue of academic dishonesty is of concern to all scholars, social work educators have a more imperative responsibility in ensuring the integrity of students because social work is not merely an academic pursuit; it is also an ethically guided profession. Thus, in addition to academic roles and duties that direct social work faculty, such professionals are also compelled to impart to students a distinct understanding of and commitment to the ethical principles of a profession that is grounded in boundaries and that maintains an obligation to society at large. To fulfill this role, social work educators must convey to students an unequivocal understanding of the *Code* (NASW, 1999) and its role in directing social work practice and actions.

Core Social Work Values and Ethical Principles

Two core social work values, integrity and competence, as explicated in the *Code* (NASW, 1999), speak directly to plagiarism. To support the core value of integrity, the *Code* establishes the ethical principle that “social workers behave in a trustworthy manner” (p. 6). This ethical principle is further clarified by the call to “act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated” (p. 6). Through this principle, the NASW underscores the critical nature of veracity and honor that must be inherent in the profession.

The second core value, competence, is supported by the ethical principle that “social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise” (p. 6). This principle reflects the essence of the educational process and specifically indicates the need for social workers, including students, to “continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession” (p. 6). Certainly, copying the work of others does little or nothing to either enhance one’s own knowledge or to broaden the overall base of knowledge.

Ethical Standards

In addition to core values and ethical principles, the notion of academic dishonesty is covered by several ethical standards in the *Code* (NASW, 1999). Two standards (2.01 and 4.08) specifically address the role of the student; two standards (2.11 and 3.03) address the role of the educator; one (3.07) speaks to the role of the administrator; and two additional standards (4.04 and 5.01) point

to the roles of all three groups. Taken together, these directives illustrate the professional stance on addressing plagiarism in social work education programs.

Students. Standard 2.01 addresses the issue of respect. A key component of respect, as described in the *Code* (NASW, 1999), is that

- (a) Social workers should treat colleagues with respect and should represent accurately and fairly the qualifications, views, and obligations of colleagues (p. 15).

As noted, the views of others are to be respectfully regarded, which undoubtedly includes the obligation to give truthful, proper, and appropriate credit to original sources of reference materials in an academic setting.

Most obviously, the *Code* (NASW, 1999) pointedly identifies plagiarism as unethical, stating that proper credit must be given for the work of others.

In Standard 4.08, the *Code* states:

- (a) Social workers should take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed and to which they have contributed.
- (b) Social workers should honestly acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others (p. 24).

This standard is explicit and dictates that students, like other social work professionals, expressly provide appropriate citation information regarding the original sources of any and all resources utilized in preparing academic work.

Educators. Educators are in a unique position to implement additional components of the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999). Two standards are applicable if one views interactions between social work students and educators in a collegial light. With this viewpoint, the *Code* (1999) spells out obligations that educators have to respond to incompetence and unethical behavior of colleagues.

Standard 2.11 addresses the issue of plagiarism directly by outlining individual responsibilities related to the unethical behavior of fellow social workers. Specifically, the *Code* (NASW, 1999) asserts,

- (a) Social workers should take adequate measures to discourage, prevent, expose, and correct the unethical conduct of colleagues (p. 18).

The unmistakable message here is that educators have a duty to ensure that students understand and follow the guidelines, and this provision of the *Code* (1999) places the onus on social workers to confront rather than disregard academic dishonesty.

When an educator becomes aware of an incident of academic dishonesty, that individual must discuss the situation with the student involved and ensure that the student is aware of the unethical nature of this action. In fact, this standard of the *Code* gives clear guidance on this issue, stating

- (c) Social workers who believe that a colleague has acted unethically should seek resolution by discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such discussion is likely to be productive (p. 18).

In addition to discussing concerns about academic dishonesty with the student, this standard further obliges educators to be informed about and prepared to carry out established institutional procedures to contend with plagiarism. The *Code* (1999) explicitly states:

- (b) Social workers should be knowledgeable about established policies and procedures for handling concerns about colleagues' unethical behavior. Social workers should be familiar with national, state, and local procedures for handling ethics complaints. These include policies and procedures created by NASW, licensing and regulatory bodies, employers, agencies, and other professional organizations (p. 18).

As employees of academic institutions, following procedures to address academic dishonesty is not optional for social work educators. Not only is this an obligation of employment, but it is also an ethical duty. In fact, social work educators would be expected to refer incidents of plagiarism to an ethical oversight committee, even if such mechanisms were not inherent in academic institutions. For example, Standard 2.11 (NASW, 1999) indicates that social workers should not attempt to handle their concerns in isolation, but

- (d) When necessary, social workers who believe that a colleague has acted unethically should take action through appropriate formal channels (such as contacting a state licensing board or regulatory body, an NASW committee on inquiry, or other professional ethics committees)" (p. 18).

The second standard of the *Code* (1999) that speaks to the role of the educator is 3.03. This standard attends to evaluating the performance of another social worker and indicates that "Social workers who have responsibility for evaluating the performance of others should fulfill such responsibility in a fair and considerate manner and on the basis of clearly stated criteria" (p. 19). Because evaluation of student work is a primary duty of educators, this standard has clear implications for the need to have established guidelines that are consistently followed. In other words, *not* subjecting all students who plagiarize to the same criteria and procedures is unethical.

Administrators. Standard 3.07 of the *Code* (NASW, 1999) identifies responsibilities of social work administrators, including administrators of social work education programs. The initial provisions of this standard discuss the need for adequate resources and equitable resource allocation, but the key component of this provision that is applicable to academic dishonesty is:

- (d) Social work administrators should take reasonable steps to ensure that the working environment for which they are responsible is consistent with and encourages compliance with the *NASW Code of Ethics*. Social work administrators should take reasonable steps to eliminate any conditions in their organizations that violate, interfere with, or discourage compliance with the *Code*. (p. 21).

With regard to plagiarism, this standard calls for administrators of social work education programs to not only maintain institutional guidelines and procedures, but also to actively support faculty members as they confront the problem of academic dishonesty.

Students, educators, and administrators. All parties concerned with academic dishonesty in social work education programs are guided by two additional standards of the *Code* (NASW, 1999), including 4.04, which discusses dishonest and deceptive behavior, and 5.01, which discusses the need to maintain professional integrity. With regard to dishonest and deceptive behavior, standard 4.04 asserts that “social workers should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty, fraud, or deception” (p. 23). This clearly applies to students, educators, and administrators equally. Simply put, dishonesty has no place in social work education.

Standard 5.01 calls all social workers to make active efforts to sustain the integrity of the social work profession by upholding high personal standards and working to enhance the profession as a whole. This standard of the *Code* (NASW, 1999) states:

- (a) Social workers should work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice.
- (b) Social workers should uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession. Social workers should protect, enhance, and improve the integrity of the profession through appropriate study and research, active discussion, and responsible criticism of the profession.
- (c) Social workers should contribute time and professional expertise to activities that promote respect for the value, integrity, and competence of the social work profession. (p. 24).

Allowing a student, or other social worker, to sidestep the ethical guidelines provided by the *NASW Code of Ethics* is, in and of itself, an unethical act and denigrates the profession.

Ethical Absolutism

When a student who is guided by a professional code of ethics, such as is the case in social work, commits an act of academic dishonesty, more than just scholarly activity is called into question. Because this dishonesty reflects a form of professional judgment, the notion of ethical absolutism comes into play and begs the question of whether or not a plagiarist can be an ethical social worker. If poor decisions, such as choosing to plagiarize, characterize a student's lack of willingness and ability to follow established guidelines and standards, what, then can be expected of this student's performance as a social work practitioner? Might not such a student also be expected to push the boundaries of other ethical principles? Poor judgment in the academic realm, if repeated in a practice setting, could have a devastating impact on assessing and serving clients.

Moreover, when a social work educator, also guided by this same professional code, overlooks plagiarism, the idea of ethical absolutism points to the question of whether or not a social work educator can ethically ignore plagiarism. The *Code* (NASW, 1999) spells out an obligation to hold colleagues accountable to the ethics of the profession by taking steps to address the unethical acts of others, and this obligation can readily be interpreted as faculty having an inherent duty to, not only instruct students in the *Code*, but to also hold students responsible for adhering to the principles therein.

In the cases of both students and educators, the simple fact is that the principle of ethical absolutism dictates that one cannot behave unethically in one realm and still be considered ethical in other realms. Either one maintains an ethical standard, or one does not. Are academic integrity and clinical/professional integrity mutually exclusive? The simple answer is "no."

Social work educators are guided by multiple forces as they seek to teach practitioners. The NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) provides guidance for educators' own practice and for their roles as instructors. Not only are such educators obligated to maintain academic integrity as members of the academy, they are also responsible for leading students along an ethical pathway into the profession. Students look to faculty as role models for appropriate judgment and standards. A key consideration in addressing plagiarism is to maintain an opposite role as an educator rather than as a therapist. Just as scholars in other professions have a primary responsibility to instruct students rather than to provide professional services to students, social work educators need not approach

academic dishonesty as a clinical concern. Rather, plagiarism should be addressed in a consistent and formalized manner that reflects its status as an academic concern.

Barriers

Certainly, many social work educators face barriers to addressing plagiarism. Some barriers may be personal, while others reflect an institutional view. Among reasons that faculty do not address academic dishonesty are:

- ⇒ Lack of detection, in which educators do not review student work with plagiarism in mind and assume that all students are engaging in academically honest practices
- ⇒ Ambivalence, in which educators identify plagiarism but do not respond to it
- ⇒ Minimization, in which educators identify plagiarism but see the issue as minor or not important enough to address
- ⇒ Rationalization, in which educators identify plagiarism, but do not pursue this with the student because the educator believes that reasons exist which excuse the behavior (i.e., lack of knowledge on the student's part)
- ⇒ Lack of time, in which educators identify plagiarism, but do not pursue a course of action because the act of doing so is time consuming
- ⇒ Lack of familiarity with the rules of citation, in which educators themselves are not fully aware of the particulars of a social work program's preferred citation format
- ⇒ Lack of administrative and institutional support, in which educators believe that there is no point in initiating a course of action regarding student plagiarism because colleagues or the program minimizes plagiarism
- ⇒ Lack of awareness about existing procedures, in which educators do not respond because they are unaware of program or institutional guidelines regarding plagiarism
- ⇒ Lack of comfort with consequences, in which educators do not respond because they do not want to be responsible for giving a student a failing grade or dismissing a student from the program
- ⇒ Lack of clear guidelines from the institution, in which the institution itself does not provide clear guidelines on how to respond to plagiarism

Oftentimes, faculty members overlook academic dishonesty in ways that appear rather innocuous. However, the *NASW Code* (1999) is unambiguous about the obligatory nature of addressing such concerns and points to the clear need for both individual educators, as well as administrators in social work education programs, to make detection of and routine response to plagiarism priorities.

As social workers themselves, some faculty members may believe that social work students always behave ethically and hesitate to believe that students would take credit for the work of others. Beyond this belief in the best intentions of students, some educators may simply not have the time to devote to adequate evaluation of student work. While this ambivalence can be

understandable at some level, even the ambivalent social worker must comply with the standards set forth in the *Code*. Just as the student excuses are ethically unacceptable, it is equally unacceptable for an educator to consciously fail to evaluate every aspect of a student's work.

Some faculty members may choose to minimize acts of student plagiarism, perhaps because the act of minimizing requires no further action on the part of the educator. Additionally, faculty members may not want to be "too hard" on students or may take the stand that students have been inadequately prepared by previous educational programs, such that students should not be held responsible for their behavior. With regard to the lack of awareness of citation guidelines, all academic programs generally follow a standard citation format, and, in order to accurately assess student work, educators have a responsibility to become familiar with the guidelines used by their institutions. Once an educator identifies student plagiarism, he or she may be unclear as to the institution's existing procedures to address the problem.

Even with some knowledge about institutional procedures, the educator may face institutional barriers, such as a non-supportive administration or unclear policies that prevent a uniform response. Additionally, some educators may simply choose not to pursue a course of action for student plagiarism out of fear that they may face some sort of repercussions, either from angry students or from unsupportive administrative structures.

Detection (Indicators)

Inconsistency.

Inconsistency is fairly straightforward to detect. Educators are expected to be prolific readers of both professional and student writing. As such, skills at distinguishing between the two should be easily honed. One tell-tale sign of professional writing is a more advanced vocabulary. This is not to say that students are incapable of advanced verbiage, but this may indicate a need to examine the piece more extensively. Potential signs of this indicator include inconsistency between written and verbal skills; inconsistency between written assignments (i.e., the difference between writing for an in class exam versus a "take home" paper), and inconsistent writing within a single assignment (this can be particularly noticeable when students switch between first and third person in various sections of their papers).

Thesaurusization.

At times, overly sophisticated or slightly imprecise wording may be an indication of what we have termed “thesaurusization.” This occurs when a passage is copied directly from another source with synonyms used to replace a few select words in the sentence. For example, if the original source stated:

The program was designed to assist families with financial burdens, physical health concerns, and relational challenges. Participants were provided with cash stipends, medical care, and individual and family therapy.

A “thesaurusized” version of this passage would be:

The program was created to help families with economic troubles, health problems, and relationship difficulties. Participants were given money, health care, and therapy.

This second passage is a thoughtless attempt at paraphrasing that falls far short of the goal. The original sentence structure and flow has been maintained, while only a few words have been replaced with synonymous verbiage. When not cited, this would be plagiarism.

Source usage and non-topical writing.

Other potential indicators that further exploration may be in order are also fairly easy to spot. Most students utilize a single source to support arguments, whereas professionals frequently cite multiple sources. Because educators keep abreast of the literature in their areas of expertise, some passages may simply sound familiar because the educator has read them in the course of previous research. Also, writing that dances around but does not actually address the assignment and assignments that rely primarily on one reference may not be original work.

8. Further exploration

Even when an educator recognizes one or more of these potential indicators, many may believe they are ill-equipped to investigate further in an effort to confirm or refute such concerns. Software programs have been developed for this specific purpose, and many schools utilize this approach or, at least, make such options available to faculty (see Pittman-Munke & Berghoef, 2008b for a list of resources). However, while software programs may be a good starting point, they may not fully substitute for other available tools. One simple solution that requires no technological skills is having students submit copies of all sources used. The educator then has the reference material readily available, rather than having to spend a countless amount of time seeking

out these documents. Nonetheless, this approach still requires a substantial time commitment, as all sources must be visually scoured to locate a questionable passage.

In order to accomplish the task in a less time-consuming way, current technology provides a few excellent options. The easiest is the use of internet search engines. McCullough and Holmberg (2005) used this method to examine potential plagiarism in master's theses and found he could implement his methodology in 3.8 minutes on average. Questionable passages can be entered directly into a search engine, and the subsequent search can uncover the original source. Additionally, PDF documents can be searched with the same computer program (Adobe) that allows for them to be read on any computer. Because "thesaurization" may have occurred, multiple portions of a passage may need to be searched in order to locate an original source. These searching tasks can be made even easier by having students submit papers electronically, so that cut and paste features can be utilized, rather than having to type long passages in for a computerized search.

Finally, an often ignored resource for detecting plagiarism is colleagues. If writing seems to be potentially problematic, a colleague may be able to provide insight and assistance in determining whether or not academic dishonesty has occurred.

Responding

Individual level.

Once an incident of academic dishonesty has been detected, the next step involves determining how to address the problem. At this stage, social work educators must be mindful of ethical obligations, which do not enable them to ignore the problem. If unfamiliar with existing procedures, educators must seek assistance and consult school policies regarding the handling of student plagiarism. The specific acts of academic dishonesty must be carefully and thoroughly documented, and the student must be made aware of the problem. Ultimately, academic integrity proceedings must be initiated per institutional policy.

Students will likely have strong reactions to being confronted with evidence of academic dishonesty. Typically, students will report that they have always written papers like this and have not had problems before, or they will say that the guidelines are unfair or too confusing or difficult.

Other common responses include “I’ve never done this before,” and “You’re the only professor who pays attention to this.” Such reactions should not deter appropriate response from the faculty member.

Institutional level.

At this point, educators must trust the institutional system to fairly, accurately, and adequately address the problem. Detection and reporting are the responsibilities of individual faculty members, but responding to such reports is the purview of the institution, just as individual social workers are obligated to refer incidents of ethical malfeasance to their accrediting bodies and must then allow the organization to proceed with determining the level of sanctioning that will take place. To ensure that educators are willing to participate in this way and to place this level of trust in the system, institutions must have procedures in place that are clear, equitable, flexible, and ethical.

All colleges and universities have guidelines regarding academic integrity in place, but the structure and application of these existing policies and procedures vary widely. Although there are no clear categorizations, in general, institutional responses can be classified into two strategies: intervention and procedural.

Intervention.

The intervention response is consistent with a social work practice approach in which the student is viewed in a client role rather than a student role. This system discourages faculty members from making formal reports of academic dishonesty and places the primary burden on individual faculty to “fix the problem.” Students who are subjected to this type of response realize no consequences for dishonesty and are not held accountable for their decisions. In the end, the intervention response solidifies the notion that plagiarism is acceptable and ethical for social workers. For faculty members who attempt to address academic dishonesty in a systematic manner that is in keeping with the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999), the intervention response can be demoralizing because the institution effectively dismisses the concerns of the educator.

Procedural.

Conversely, some schools utilize a procedural response that is consistent with an academic approach in which the student’s role is clearly defined as a student. Faculty members are supported and encouraged to detect and report incidents of plagiarism, and an oversight committee structure

is in place to examine such reports. Of particular significance, the procedural response ensures that each reported incident will be treated equivalently and that the consequences will be consistent with the level of the offense because a range of potential options are available. This response solidifies the notion that plagiarism is unacceptable and unethical for social workers. Faculty members who are a part of this procedural response may feel emboldened and empowered in their commitment to the ethical guidelines of the profession.

Recommendations

The serious nature of and potential professional repercussions for academic dishonesty point to a need for a robust and systematic response from individual educators and institutions alike. This issue is further complicated with the inconsistencies between staff and students concerning the nature of plagiarism (Pickard, 2006). Similar to what others have proposed (e.g., Macdonald & Carroll, 2006), this response must reflect the complexity of the issue and address the problem on multiple levels.

Further, professional social work education is distinct from many academic disciplines in that students, faculty, and administrators are compelled to follow ethical codes, in addition to institutional policies regarding plagiarism. This ethical imperative points to several recommendations to ensure that students have a clear understanding about expectations and consequences and suggestions for faculty, as well as administrators, to maintain a consistent response.

First and foremost, as others have suggested (e.g., Pittman-Munke & Berghoef, 2008), the definition of and procedures for addressing plagiarism should be specified in established institutional policies that are made readily available to students, and these guidelines should be replicated on course syllabi to ensure that all students are exposed to this information up front.

Furthermore, the issue of academic dishonesty should be discussed forthrightly at the outset of all classes. Educators must communicate to students the ethical concerns related to plagiarism. When an incident of plagiarism is detected, the response must be consistent and in keeping with established procedures.

Educators should advocate for a unified procedural response to plagiarism, and administrators should consider the appropriateness of current institutional practices. Those institutional systems that are not in keeping with a procedural response should be altered to

encompass the notion that plagiarism is unethical and that failure on the part of educators and administrators to confront plagiarism is equally unethical. The practice of social work is based upon strong professional codes that recognize the need to hold individuals and the profession accountable for ethical conduct, and compliance begins with social work education.

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