Christian Culture-Making in American Higher Education: The Case of Plagiarism

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Abstract

"Culture is the realm of human freedom—its constraints and impossibilities are the boundaries within which we can create and innovate" (Crouch 2008:35). How are general American cultural values related to the actual functioning of a particular social system such as a Christian university? More specifically, how is the pervasive problem of plagiarism in American higher education conceptualized by students on a Christian campus? Which values influence the practice or absence of plagiarism? These questions are addressed by surveying 148 students at a university affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The results indicate that Christian college students are very able to define plagiarism accurately. Justifications for plagiarizing among Christian college students center on their own failings rather than faculty or college culture. The overall finding is that Christian students not only know what plagiarism is, but they also know how external cultural values push them into practicing it. As Christian universities increase worldwide, Christian educators and students should not feel pressured by American cultural values to compromise and plagiarize, but rather to feel empowered to be counter-cultural agents of change.

Key Words: plagiarism, Christian college students, American cultural values

Culture, as defined by culture critic Ken Meyers, is what we make of the world (1994). Basically, culture is our persistent, impatient human determination to take the world around us as given to us and make something else of it. Crouch stated that culture "always bears the stamp of our creativity, our God-given desire to make something more than we were given" (2008:23-24), and includes our interpretations of both what we are given and what we create. Thus, meaning and making go together, and culture is "the activity of meaning making" (Crouch 2008:24).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) concluded that society is a part of the human world made by human beings, inhabited by them, and constantly altered by them. Later, Berger expanded on this thesis by stating that "every human society is an enterprise of world building" (1967:3). Culture is not just what human beings make of the world, and it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world, but it is in fact part of the world that humans construct. Culture is central to our lives. Crouch elaborated 'part of the world' by stating that culture has two functions: making things possible that were impossible, and making things impossible that were once possible, which, when combined, add up to 'world-making' (2008). 'The world,' in turn, simply describes all the forces outside ourselves, beyond our control and will, that both constrain us and give us opportunities.

Niebuhr (1951) defined culture as an artificial secondary environment which humans impose on the natural environment, comprised of human achievements that are designed for a single end or multiple ends. Thus, "the world of culture is a world of values" (Niebuhr 1951:38).

Cultural Values in America

Values are ideals held by people of a society about ethical or appropriate behavior, about what is right or wrong, desirable or despicable. In their meta-analysis of previous writings and research on values, Hitlin and Pilliavin (2004) determined five features common to most definitions of values: 1) concepts or beliefs 2) concerning desirable behaviors 3) that surpass specific situations, 4) guide selection of behavior, and 5) are ordered by relative importance. In his extensive study of American society, Williams (1970) delineated what he determined to be important aspects of its national cultural values, and identified fifteen distinct values deemed treasured in American culture. Referencing Williams' original work, Macionis (2009) identified ten current American values (equal opportunity, individualism, material comfort, activity and work, practicality and efficiency, progress, science and technology, democracy, freedom, racism and group superiority), and an eleventh value (leisure, which by definition includes religion) that was currently developing.

Christian Culture-Making

Bellah stated that there is "nothing more important than intellectual history to help us understand how our culture has become so fragmented and dissociated" (1970:246). Although the Christian reflection on culture presented here cannot hypothesize a perfect Christian culture, it can better inform the question of what to do about the sometimes very un-Christian culture in which God has placed us. "Each of us arises every morning with, in the providence of God, a number of duties, dilemmas, opportunities, and confusion that stem from living in this culture at this time" (Meyers 1994). C.S. Lewis (1949) implied that Christianity does not simply

replace our culture and substitute a new one, but is rather a new organization of it. Christians are taught from a young age that they are to be 'in the world but not of the world' (John 17:14-16). Understanding the meaning of this in theory is difficult enough, let alone putting it into practice.

There are two extremes to which Christians gravitate in their attempts to reconcile being in the world but not of the world: cultural apathy or religious theonomy (Meyers 1994). Lewis vocalized his disdain for Christian cultural apathy in a sermon where he began by asking what the parishioners were doing sitting around listening to academic lectures when a war was going on. "Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?" (1949:43). Lewis went on to pose the question of the worth of Christians taking an interest in culture, and concluded that Christians cannot afford to be indifferent about culture. "Christians cannot suspend their whole intellectual and aesthetic activity….if you don't read good books you will read bad ones….If you don't go on thinking rationally you will think irrationally….If you reject aesthetic satisfactions you will fall into sensual satisfactions" (1949:46). While some Christians are prone to cultural apathy, others are prone to theonomy. Theonomous Christians contend that in order to follow Paul's direction to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5 NRSV), no cultural activity is neutral. Either it acknowledges Christ as Lord or it is anti-Christian (Meyers 1994). Regardless of where Christians fall on the importance of culture, all desire to bring their lives into conformity with God's will as revealed in Scripture.

Nevertheless, Christian culture-making and personal decision-making are affected by the societal structures and conditions of a non-Christian culture. Callahan (2004) argued that highly competitive social structures located within a milieu of economic inequality produce a society that ignores moral criteria. More specifically, Callahan suggested that the combination of competition and inequality creates a "cheating culture." To explore the effect of cultural forces on personal behavior, this study will examine the views of students in higher education on one form of cheating. Many studies suggest that plagiarism is a substantial problem on college campuses (Milliron and Sandoe 2008). As Christian students are exposed to practices of plagiarism in higher education, will they too choose to cheat? If so, to what extent? How might they justify it? What factors make plagiarism more likely, and how might it be deterred? This study will examine how Christian university students perceive and practice plagiarism in higher education, as a case study of Christian culture-making.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and forty-seven students in a private four-year Christian university in the southern region of the United States enrolled in an undergraduate course in Introduction to Sociology, also known as Principles of Sociology, were invited to participate in a survey over

three semesters. The institution has a total of 4,200 undergraduate and graduate students, is predominantly Caucasian (more than 80%), and characterizes itself as a co-educational liberal arts-based university. The classes were comprised of 16 seniors, 65 juniors, 57 sophomores, 9 freshmen, and 1 graduate student, with 112 being female and 36 male. The students had recently completed a chapter on culture in their Macionis (2009) course textbook that included explication of concepts as well as their applications. Students were assured that the survey would not be graded. One hundred and nine usable questionnaires were returned, constituting a 74% response rate.

Procedure

Students were presented with the opportunity to complete a questionnaire about plagiarism in the last 20 minutes of class. Since credit would not be given, names and demographical information were not obtained.

Instrument

The research instrument was a questionnaire that was designed to elicit students' cultural perspectives and understandings of plagiarism on college campuses. Students were not asked to report on their own potential practice of plagiarism, but were indirectly asked their perceptions of such behavior. Indirect questions are a commonly used method when respondents may be uncomfortable reporting their own incriminating behaviors. The survey included seven open-ended questions based on course textbook material concerning culture.

On Question One, respondents were asked to define traditional and internet plagiarism. Responses were coded as to whether students could define said terms accurately, including elements of the following: reproduction or inclusion of another's creative work into one's own work without proper acknowledgment whether from internet or other sources. Question Two asked if respondents thought plagiarism was widespread on college campuses. The responses were coded as yes or no. Question Three asked if respondents thought plagiarism was a part of the dominant culture, subculture, or popular culture on their campus. Responses were coded as such.

Shifting from the descriptive impressions to the ethical implications of plagiarism, Question Four asked if there was a difference in the degree of right and wrong between internet and traditional plagiarism. Responses were coded as being no different, internet plagiarism as having more ethical implications, or internet plagiarism having less ethical implications. Question Five asked students what justifications they had heard to rationalize plagiarism. Students could include as many justifications as they were aware of.

Questions Six and Seven focused on what American values students perceived as contributing to or deterring from the practice of plagiarism. Students were asked to list as many values as they deemed appropriate. The eleven American cultural values identified in their

Macionis (2009) course textbook chapter on culture were used to code responses: individualism, activity and work, practicality and efficacy, progress, equal opportunity, material comfort, democracy and free enterprise, freedom, racism and group superiority, science and technology, and leisure.

Data Analysis

Data were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics version 20, and descriptive analysis was conducted using the procedures Frequencies and Multiple Response. Open-ended responses to questions were collapsed into similar categories based on prominent themes of the responses, while direct quotes were used to exemplify each category.

Results

Definition, Extent, and Ethical Implications

The data compiled in Table 1 indicate that 100% of the 109 students who completed the survey could define plagiarism and internet plagiarism accurately. In addition, a clear majority (83%) of respondents perceived plagiarism to be a widespread problem on college campuses. While there were variations in the respondents' perceptions of plagiarism as a part of their college campus culture, 49.5% felt it was not present on their campus. If it was on their campus, it was deemed to be only a part of a subculture (38.3%). In terms of ethical implications, an overwhelming majority (96.3%) felt that there was no difference in the ethical implications of internet or traditional plagiarism.

Justifications for Plagiarism

A wide range of justifications that respondents had heard were given for plagiarism: last minute pressure due to being too busy, if material is on the internet it is for everyone to use, the instructor did not explain the assignment well, the faculty do not care, only a part of the paper was plagiarized, plagiarism is the best way to get a good grade, the words had been changed or paraphrased, they did not know how to cite sources properly, and they could not find enough material otherwise. For clarification, these responses were collapsed into eight categories (see Table 2).

The most common justification stated for plagiarism was basically centered on the students' own failings (33.9%). In the narratives, students gave justifications ranging from lack of *time management skills* (e.g., "I am too busy to write a paper." "I ran out of time because I had so many assignments to do." "I didn't have time to think of something original." "It takes too long to come up with the citation page."), to self-handicapping explanations (e.g., "I had to go home the weekend before the paper was due." "I have ADHD and no one reminded me when it was due").

A significant number of students (29.4%) justified plagiarism as being due to *advancements in technology* that have made the internet an open source forum of information. Commonly stated justifications included: "Authors aren't listed on Internet so they must want everyone to use it." "Once it is on the web it is common knowledge." "Having the web is just like getting study help available all of the time, it basically writes papers for you." "The internet is like in the days of Christ where people told stories from generation to generation with no real author until someone wrote the story down and it was canonized in the Bible."

Many students justified plagiarism as being the *faculty's fault (28.4%)*. In the longer accounts, students stated ideas such as faculty did not explain the assignment well, and faculty expectations are too high. One student went so far as to say "the extensive pressure here dictates students maintain a high GPA which causes plagiarism to happen." "It is an honor to learn from these professors. I don't want to let them down." "If they didn't want us to copy then they wouldn't assign so many assignments." Students stated that faculty would not be able to find the source anyway, because they are not computer savvy. As one student worded it: "The internet is seen as our generation's tool and we do not expect teachers to understand."

Influence of Cultural Values

Table 3 shows an alphabetic list of American cultural values that may contribute to or deter plagiarism. Multiple response data were used to help understand factors that may be related to these cultural values.

Contributing values

More than half of respondents (52.5%) indicated *efficiency/practicality* as a value that contributes to the prevalence of plagiarism. The issue of *speed or fastest way* was addressed in statements coded as efficiency/practically, where students said, "Speed is what I think of. Students want to get assignments done as quickly as possible. It is faster to look things up on the Internet and copy and paste into your paper instead of actually researching and writing your own work." "We think if there is a faster way to achieve the same end product then the old way is obsolete." "People want to be able to do what they want to when they want to, and be efficient with the amount of time they put into things they do not want to be doing."

Material comfort garnered the second largest number or responses (45.5%). Two themes around material comfort appeared: lack of material comfort or family, and good grades as a form of material comfort. In longer narratives, students said things such as, "Some people plagiarize because they weren't taught right from wrong at home", "…their families didn't teach them morals", "not coming from a good home, or being from a poor school, or where they are from makes them want material wealth but they do not understand how to obtain it." The other theme of good grades being a form of material comfort was expressed in statements like: "The fact that they find an easy way to get good grades without working for it and then get

rewarded by teachers and parents gives them the idea that they will do good and get rewarded in life without working hard," "Having good grades is a status symbol that people wear on their sleeve," "Parents pay for good grades, not bad ones!"

More than a third of respondents (40.4%) indicated *individualism* as a contributing factor. Not only did students say, "it is all about me in this culture," "we love immediate gratification," "people don't have a moral compass and they don't feel remorse for doing what is wrong anymore," but they also stated that personal success was of utmost importance in American culture. "We are told in this culture that it doesn't matter how you get to the top, just get there." "Our culture doesn't value people or if they are a good person. All it values is fame, success, and money. Just look at the Karadashians or any celebrity." "Personal wealth at all costs is pushed down our throats in America." "Cheating and lying are okay in American culture as long as it helps you to be wealthy and successful, which trickles down to students cheating to be successful in school."

Science was identified by 36.4% of respondents to be a contributing factor in plagiarism. Reasons cited included American society's fascination with science and technology and "how it is there to better our lives." "Technology is viewed as superior over all human beings." "If a computer has the answer, it must be right." "We (Americans) only value what science tells us is the best, not what the Bible or people know to be true. Computers don't teach morals but we place them above everything and everyone else."

Deterring Values

The data compiled in Table 3 reports on American cultural values that may deter the practice of plagiarism. Very clearly, the most common response (44.9%) expressed by students was a *Freedom* theme, i.e., making morally responsible choice to "do the right thing." The general feeling was that not plagiarizing is a moral choice that "anyone with morals" would make. "If a culture has values against lying and stealing, then students would not plagiarize. But since that isn't valued in America, at least we value personal freedom to do what is right."

In conjunction with freedom, students acknowledged *Leisure* (33.7%), which includes religion, as the second leading deterring value. The primary notion here was that of sin: "Plagiarizing is stealing, which is a sin." "Stealing and lying are a sin." "Taking something or someone's words and saying they are yours is sinful because it is stealing and then lying about it." More specifically, some students acknowledged their particular faith as a deterring value: "If you are a Christian, you know better than to steal." "Christians are taught in the Bible not to steal." And "everything Christ taught goes against plagiarizing."

Individualism as a deterrent value was the next most commonly cited (29.6%), with students expressing the value of individual merit and work. Narratives included reasoning such as: "Having integrity prevents you from plagiarizing." "Respect for oneself is key." "You don't learn if you cheat." "Plagiarizing is a sign of laziness." The value of hard work (*activity /work*) as

a deterrent followed individualism closely (23.5%), with narratives such as: "valuing an honest day's work," and 'if you value hard work you wouldn't want to steal someone else's."

Discussion

Students at this small university affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) were unanimously able to define plagiarism accurately. All indicated that they knew what it was and were able to discern the difference between "old fashioned plagiarism" and the internet variety. Most researchers contend that poor understanding of what constitutes plagiarism causes its practice (Dee and Jacob 2010; Devlin 2007; Sutherland-Smith 2008), but the results of this study suggest otherwise. A number of variables may be in play here. There are obvious cultural differences by country, and perhaps by region of this country, in terms of both instilling and having awareness about what plagiarism is and its extent as an issue.

However, the university from which the data for this research are drawn has an intentional attitude and culture of taking every thought and action captive to obey Christ. Students are encouraged through instructors and weekly chapel hours to focus continually on how Christ would handle a particular situation, which would include reporting behaviors that are unacceptable (I Cor. 5:12). This prevailing attitude appears to have a significant impact on how widespread students perceived plagiarism to be on their campus in contrast to most college campuses. Nearly half (49.5%) stated that plagiarism was not a part of the culture at this college, but they believed it to be a widespread problem (83%) on other college campuses. The fact that these students think the practice is widespread on other campuses supports Callaghan's assumption that America has a collegiate "culture of cheating" (2004). In 2008 and 2015, researchers found that even though students thought the practice was wrong, almost half of them still felt it was socially acceptable (Bernardi et al. 2008; Heckler and Forde 2015). An overwhelming majority (96.3%) of students in this study believed plagiarism of any kind held the same ethical implications, was morally wrong, and therefore unacceptable. This supports Lewis' position that Christians cannot afford to be indifferent to current culture, but rather must be aware of it and reorganize it when possible.

Justifications for Plagiarism: Implications for Christian Higher Education

Justifications for plagiarism are revealing in understanding college culture. Of particular interest in this study is that students' justifications centered on their 'own failings' (33.9%). This is directly in opposition to what Heckler and Forde (2015) found at a large state university where 43.7% of students justified plagiarizing because of the faculty or of college culture. When faculty fault (28.4%) was given in this present study, it was more in line with the 'expectations of the faculty are too high' instead of that faculty 'did not care,' as found in the 2015 study (Heckler and Forde). It is interesting to note that in this population, students cited science or

technology (29.4%) as a justification to plagiarize because it provides a different medium for open source information, similar to oral transmission without authorship. This is contrary to other studies where society was blamed for creating the internet and its readily available volume of resources which was said to have *caused* the increase of plagiarism (Heckler and Forde 2015; Kuntz and Butler 2014; Milliron and Sandoe 2008). Several students (16%) in this study had not heard of any rationalizations for plagiarizing. Although this number is not significant on its own, it does show a marked difference from other research at secularized schools where less than half of that (7%) reported not hearing any justifications for the practice (Heckler and Forde 2015). Thus, one can infer that treating plagiarism as a moral issue instead of a type of punishable crime, as suggested by East (2010), could in fact decrease the practice across Christian college campuses.

Influence of Cultural Values on Christian Students

When students were asked if any cultural values could contribute to plagiarism, more than a half (52.5%) stated the value of efficiency. Although this contributing value was found in the 2015 study by Heckler and Forde, it was only 10%, whereas individualism and personal success rated the highest contributing value. Since the biblical text repeatedly emphasizes that loving each other and not oneself is the primary focus of Christian life on earth, it would stand to reason that individualism is not as strong of a contributing value for students at a Christian university. Yet from a Christian student perspective, efficiency could also be directly tied to the biblical text. Genesis 6:3 states that our days will be numbered, while Luke 12:48 tells Christians to use the resources they are given well. America's deep preoccupation with attaining efficiency in almost all areas of daily life has fundamentally underwritten its value of convenience as material comfort (45.5%). Interestingly, while most students thought of material comfort as good grades without the hard work necessary to obtain them, some referenced good parents or a good moral foundation as an element of material comfort.

Although students thought that American cultural values tend to contribute toward more than deter away from plagiarism, it is valuable to look at the deterring values stated. Even though the top three are independent of each other, the narratives and underlying messages are similar. Freedom (44.9%) 'to do what is right' was significantly higher than leisure (which includes religion) at 33.7%, flowed closely by individualism (29.6%). When referencing freedom, students repeatedly stated that having morals or being of sound moral character should prevent students from plagiarizing. For leisure, the focus was on the fact that plagiarizing was stealing, and stealing is a sin. To these students, individualism was about personal integrity and respect for oneself, not individual achievement or personal success. These three deterring values and student attitudes towards them were quite similar to what Keller (2014) found when he examined people taking credit for individual achievement instead of giving credit to God for what He has done in their lives. Keller states that "plagiarism is claiming that you came up with

an idea yourself when you did not. Plagiarism is refusal to give thanks and credit and is therefore a form of theft. It not only wrongs the author of the idea—it also puts you in a vulnerable position, because you are not capable of producing such an idea on your own" (2014:196).

Limitations

Although the findings of this study have potential implications for changing college cultures concerning plagiarism, they must be viewed in light of some limitations. The sample size is small and is from a small conservative Baptist college in the southern region of the US, where scripture and faith are integrated into everyday living and education. The survey administered asked about students' perceptions of plagiarism and not directly about their own actual behaviors. Surveys of students from differently affiliated Christian universities as well as secular universities may very well yield alternative results.

Conclusion

Since perceptions of plagiarism are culturally defined, a strong case can be made that institutions of higher education should reconsider the value of culture-making on campuses. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students have a responsibility to define the campus culture intentionally and actively, instead of letting it happen unintentionally and passively. Overall, these findings suggest that students know what plagiarism is and know its ethical implications, but they also feel induced and perhaps even coerced by external cultural values to participate in the practice. Although many researchers have discussed issues of personal moral development and its effects on cheating and plagiarism, few have focused on the campus culture and its moral compass.

As Christian universities increase in number worldwide (Glanzer, Carpenter and Lantinga 2010), it is important that the campus culture resembles what is being preached and studied in Scripture to not just deter plagiarism but to "make culture by recovering their creative calling" (Crouch 2014). Glanzer (2003) concluded that moral education is threatened when character is separated from its social and cultural moorings. In lieu of listing all of the relevant scriptures, Proverbs 12:3 teaches that real success is unwilling to compromise integrity. Unfortunately, many Christians have been led to believe that there is a dichotomy between faith and reason (Colson 1999). "Today we must break down this false dichotomy between the spiritual and the intellectual and recover the calling to save minds" (Colson 1999:34). It is essential to cultivate the mind in order to avoid the pitfalls of the false values presented to students in this modern culture. Therefore, Christian educators, administrators, and students should not feel pressured by American cultural values to compromise on their beliefs, convictions, or integrity. They should instead be empowered to be change agents and be His light in a dark and fallen world.

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Table 1

Students' Perceptions Regarding Plagiarism

Variable	*n* (%)
Define *plagiarism*	109 (100.0%)
Believe widespread problem	108 (83.2%)
Part of college culture	
None	53 (50.0%)
Subculture	41 (29.0%)
Popular Culture	8 (7.5%)
Dominant Culture	4 (3.8%)
Ethical implications: Internet vs. traditional	
Same	103 (96.3%)
Internet more	0 (0.0%)
Internet less	4 (3.7%)

Table 2

Rationales Students Have Heard for Justifying Plagiarism

Rationale	*n* (%)
Time management	37 (33.9%)
Internet is public	32 (29.4%)
Faculty's fault	31 (28.4%)
Means to an end	24 (22.0%)
Same idea	21 (19.3%)
Not whole paper	16 (14.7%)
Have not heard any	13 (11.9%)
Everyone does it	11 (10.1%)
Did not know	18 (16.5%)

Table 3

American Cultural Values That Contribute To or Deter Plagiarism

Value	Contribute *n* (%)	Deter *n* (%)
Activity / Work	4 (4.0%)	23 (23.5%)
Democracy	2 (2.0%)	3 (3.1%)
Efficiency / Practicality	52 (52.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Equal opportunity	2 (2.0%)	6 (6.1%)
Freedom	5 (5.1%)	44 (44.9%)
Individualism	40 (40.4%)	29 (29.6%)
Leisure	1 (1.0%)	33 (33.7%)
Material comfort	45 (45.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Progress	10 (10.1%)	6 (6.1%)
Racism / Group superiority	3 (3.0%)	20 (20.4%)
Science	36 (36.4%)	0 (0.0%)
None	4 (4.0%)	22 (22.4%)