

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Recycling Research Without (Self-)Plagiarism: The Importance of Context and the Case of Conference Contributions

Gert Helgesson¹  | Jonas Åkerman²  | Sara Belfrage^{1,2} 

¹Stockholm Centre for Healthcare Ethics, Department of Learning, Informatics, Management, and Ethics (LIME), Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden | ²Office for Research, Engagement and Innovation Services, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Correspondence: Gert Helgesson (gert.helgesson@ki.se)

Received: 28 May 2024 | **Revised:** 22 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 19 December 2024

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we clarify the notions of plagiarism and self-plagiarism and show that a rather straightforward observation about these notions has important implications for the admissibility of recycling research outputs. The key point is that contextual variation must be taken into account in normative assessments of recycling research outputs, and we illustrate this with some examples. In particular, we apply the analysis in order to dissolve a disagreement about the proper handling of submissions to conferences. Some researchers are comfortable with sending the same contribution to several conferences, while others find that unacceptable and a clear deviation from good research practise. We take a closer look at the arguments regarding whether it is acceptable or not to make the same conference contribution more than once, including the argument that submitting the same contribution more than once would amount to self-plagiarism. We argue that contextual variation must be taken into account, in accordance with our previous analysis, and conclude that whether or not a duplication of a conference contribution deviates from good research practise depends on what significance is ascribed to it in the specific case. We conclude with some practical recommendations, emphasising for example, the importance of being explicit and clear on this point, and encourage conference organisers to provide opportunities to specify relevant facts in the submission.

1 | Introduction

In the first part of this paper, we discuss the concepts of plagiarism and self-plagiarism and argue that it is crucial to take certain kinds of contextual variations into account when applying these concepts. We illustrate this with a number of practical examples, and in the second part of the paper we provide a more extensive discussion of the case of conference contributions. There is in fact considerable disagreement among researchers regarding the appropriateness of submitting the same piece of work to multiple academic conferences. While some claim it to be unacceptable to submit the same abstract or conference contribution twice, others raise their eyebrows in surprise when hearing such a remark (Cooper 2008; Dometrius 2008; Schneider and Jacoby 2008; Sigelman 2008; Roig 2015). We take a closer

look at this disagreement, focusing on the conditions under which recycling material by submitting it more than once would amount to self-plagiarism. We draw on our previous observations about contextual differences and emphasise the relevance of variation among conferences and conference traditions when it comes to expectations and significance, which in turn depend on such things as the conference's purposes and the merit and prestige of getting one's contribution accepted. In order to illustrate our point, we introduce a distinction between two types of conferences, which is far from exhaustive, but sufficient for our present purposes. Drawing on our discussion, we conclude with some recommendations intended to reduce confusion and mistakes in relation to conference contributions, where we, among other things, highlight the importance of being explicit and clear about the context and the expectations it entails.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Learned Publishing* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of ALPSP.

Summary

- Standard definitions of plagiarism and self-plagiarism must be understood relative to context to generate correct normative conclusions.
- A normatively important example of what may vary with the context is the expectations on contributions.
- Expectations on contributions vary across conference traditions; thus, what counts as self-plagiarism varies as well.
- Conference organisers should be explicit about their requirements on conference contributions when inviting submissions.
- Researchers engaged in interdisciplinary collaborations or who move into new research fields are most likely to benefit from raised awareness of these topics as they are at risk to make mistakes leading to accusations of malpractice.

We limit our analysis to academic conferences. Furthermore, we will not explore ethical issues in relation to conferences more broadly, nor do we aim for an empirical overview of kinds of conferences or of stakeholders involved. Instead, we focus on the analysis of the concepts of plagiarism and self-plagiarism and the ethical status of recycling contributions.

2 | Part One: Analysis of the Concepts of Plagiarism and Self-Plagiarism

2.1 | Plagiarism

Many different definitions of plagiarism have been offered, yet there is a shared understanding between most proposals that plagiarism consists of two main parts, relating to intellectual contributions (Anderson and Steneck 2011; Helgesson and Eriksson 2015; Roig 2015):

1. Using someone else's ideas, research results, images, or text.
2. While presenting them without giving due reference to the original source, thereby using them in a way implying that they are one's own.¹

These two parts are reflected in the definition of plagiarism offered in the influential European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity by the All-European Academies, ALLEA (2023, 10):

Plagiarism is using other people's work or ideas without giving proper credit to the original source

There is also a shared understanding that plagiarism is bad—it is typically considered to constitute research misconduct (e.g., ALLEA 2023). First, plagiarism of results, including images, is harmful to the scientific record since it involves a false claim (implicit if not explicit) to present new results. It is also bad because it unfairly misallocates scientific credit—the plagiarizer gets the credit for the work (be it ideas, results, images, or text)

instead of those deserving it, i.e., those getting their work plagiarised (for more aspects, see Helgesson 2015).

Using someone else's ideas, and so on, may be perfectly legitimate, but one must be transparent about their origin. As all students at some time have been told by their teachers—if content from others is reused but described in one's own words, then one needs to make clear the relation to the original source by providing a reference. In the case of literal reuse of text, one must, in addition to the reference, clearly indicate that it is a quote in order to counter the impression that the phrasing is one's own. It is worth noting that plagiarism does not require that one explicitly claims that the material in question originates with oneself. It is enough that it is implied (cf. Grice 1981; Korta and Perry 2020). It is the default assumption in academic practise that if you present results in a student paper, doctoral thesis, or journal article, at a seminar, or at a conference, you present your own results, in your own words, unless you tell, show, or otherwise clearly indicate that they are someone else's.

2.2 | Self-Plagiarism

What is commonly referred to as self-plagiarism is related to plagiarism but differs in a number of important respects. ALLEA (2023, 11) describes it in this way:

Self-plagiarism: re-publishing substantive parts of one's own earlier publications, including translations, without duly acknowledging or citing the original

Since an implication of self-plagiarism is that something that in fact has already been published is novel and presented for the first time, it provides the self-plagiarizer with undue scientific credit in the context of article publishing. In this respect, it is similar to plagiarism, as it distorts the scientific record. Self-plagiarism can be a very serious issue, for instance if it involves publishing the same data twice as “original data”. The obvious difference is that self-plagiarism does not free-ride on others' work, but on one's own previous work. The problem is thereby not that credit is misallocated, but that it is allocated more than once for the same work.

Free riding on one's own work may of course be perfectly fine and need not even constitute self-plagiarism even if references to this previous work are missing. For instance, it is ethically unproblematic to reuse text from one's lecture notes or one's old draughts in a new research article intended for submission to a journal without providing a reference. This points to another important difference between plagiarism and self-plagiarism, namely that while anything produced by others—be it ideas, draughts, funding applications, and so on—may be plagiarised regardless of whether or not it has been published or presented, one can only self-plagiarise work that one has already published (or otherwise presented in a context with corresponding implications and expectations).

2.3 | The Relevance of Context

To fully understand the concepts of plagiarism and self-plagiarism and to be able to implement the above definitions

in practise, we also need to understand their normative implications in different contexts. What is acceptable varies across different situations, and one of the key variables is expectations.

First, consider plagiarism. If references are not properly provided in an ongoing manuscript, that need not be any cause for concern, but if references are not properly provided in a submitted manuscript, that is an instance of plagiarism. Another illustration of this variability in normative implications is the difference between conference presentations and university lectures: If you present empirical findings at a conference, the audience will by default assume that what you present is your own (or your group's) work since that is what you are typically expected to do at a conference.² If some part of what you present is not your own work, and you do not inform the audience about this, then you may correctly be accused of plagiarism.³ However, there are normally no corresponding expectations regarding the content of a typical university lecture.⁴ Attending students do generally not expect that what is presented is the outcome of the lecturer's own research, unless this has been stated or suggested beforehand. It is typically not implied in the situation, so there are no such implications to counter. Rather, students expect the lecturer to provide the relevant content, preferably in an interesting and mind-provoking way. Therefore, those teaching at universities are not plagiarising whenever they do not provide references in their presentations when they describe present knowledge in some area. Even borrowing a colleague's PowerPoint slides to make the presentation need not involve plagiarism, even if students are not informed, although one is of course expected to have permission to use them. Again, expectations are key.⁵

Second, consider self-plagiarism. To recycle one's own texts or ideas may be adequate, efficient, and uncontroversial in many standard situations within academia (Moskovitz, Hall, and Pemberton 2022) and, thus, need not by itself constitute a deviation from good research practise. However, it needs to be done in a transparent manner in relation to the expectations in the relevant context. What is important here is to avoid implicating that something is novel and presented for the first time, when this is in fact not the case. In some cases, such an implication is generated by default through expectations tied to the context, and then it is important to clearly counter this implication. How this may vary across contexts will be illustrated in the next section.

3 | Part Two: The Case of Conference Contributions

3.1 | Two Types of Conferences

One particularly important contextual variation in the area of conference contributions can be illustrated by making a broad distinction between two general types of academic conferences. These two conference types are idealizations. Reality is more complex and multifaceted, but that does not need to concern us here, since our purpose is merely to illustrate the practical relevance of context for normative conclusions regarding plagiarism and self-plagiarism.

TYPE 1 conferences are common in many research areas (e.g., chemistry, economics, material physics, medicine, philosophy, and political science). In general, researchers submit their abstracts to such conferences in the hope of being selected for an oral or poster presentation. The direct merit value lies in being accepted and then actually making the presentation, while the main benefits (usually) come from meeting other researchers and getting useful input regarding one's work (Dometrius 2008; Roig 2015). Abstracts may be printed in an abstract book in order to guide conference participants, but there is no direct link between getting accepted to the conference and having one's full paper accepted for publication—or at least there is no such commitment on either side. Instead, it will be up to the individual researcher to submit the paper to a journal after the conference, if it was not already published beforehand. Nor are the printed abstracts in themselves perceived as publications with merit value. In this kind of conference, it is common to present work in progress, with the hope that feedback from attending researchers will help improve the paper (Cooper 2008; Roig 2015). Often nothing is said, or implied, about whether the material is presented for the first time, nor is it necessarily part of the presentation to state whether it is work in progress, accepted, or already published (although this is often signalled by the presenter in some way). Presenting at Type 1 conferences is similar to, although more prestigious than, presenting work at a seminar. Just as you may present the same work at several seminars, you may present it at several conferences without that being a cause for concern.

Type 2 conferences share many features of TYPE 1 conferences—people attend to meet researchers in their field to socialise and establish collaboration and in the hope of getting some attention for their work. But there is one very important difference: in Type 2 conferences, getting one's contribution accepted entails getting a paper accepted for publication, for example in the conference proceedings, a special issue, or an anthology. In some fields, such as computer science, publications in conference proceedings are more prestigious than regular journal publications (Meyer et al. 2009). The fact that acceptance to a conference involves acceptance for publication means that the same procedures and values apply as regarding submissions to academic journals: you are expected to submit to only one journal at the time, and you are expected to publish your paper no more than once (see, e.g., the IEEE guidelines, which treat contributions to journals and conference proceedings the same (IEEE 2023)).⁶

We argue that a crucial difference between contributions to the two different types of conferences has to do with expectation or claim to first and exclusive occurrence in the sense of presenting an end product of the research process involved. In Type 1 there is no expectation or claim to first and exclusive occurrence, while this is clearly so in Type 2, where the conference contribution can be seen as a first and exclusive formal presentation of novel research⁷ (formal in the sense of occurring at a special occasion with special expectations)—conditions expected to be fulfilled also for journal articles in the standard case. This difference is critical to how multiple conference submissions should be evaluated ethically, as will be further explained in the next section.

The two types of conferences outlined here are only meant to highlight certain features that may be present to various degrees in different conferences. For instance, conferences may require that presentations are novel even if they do not have conference proceedings publishing full-length papers. An example of something “in between” from economics is conferences publishing a version of the paper in conference proceedings, awaiting the publication of a developed version in a peer-reviewed journal. The journal version is then the final and official version of the paper. In chemistry, to give a similar example, you may encounter the variety that you publish a shorter, more limited paper as a conference proceeding and go on to finalise a more comprehensive paper for a journal; however, this does not necessarily entail that the conference proceeding is no longer seen as an independent paper. There are also conferences where there is a chance but no promise of being selected for publication in conference proceedings or a special issue of a journal.^{8,9}

3.2 | The Disagreement Explained

As discussed in the previous section, whether what is presented at a conference is understood as a first and exclusive presentation of (one’s own) novel research varies with the implications and expectations of the conference contribution, which in turn varies with the type of conference. For TYPE 2 conferences, the expectation on contributions is similar to that on a paper published in a proper peer-reviewed journal, while for TYPE 1 conferences the expectation is more similar to that on a presentation of work in progress at a seminar or the provision of a university lecture.

This has implications for the acceptability of multiple conference contributions as well as the duty to inform the audience. If the kind of conference attended is of TYPE 1, where you present work in progress and already published work, you have not unduly failed to acknowledge that you made the same presentation at an earlier conference if the audience is not informed of this. For Type 2 conferences—that is, conferences where proceedings play an important role and the first and exclusive presentations of novel research are expected—it is proper to describe such a non-disclosed double use of a conference contribution as self-plagiarism, as described by ALLEA.¹⁰ Double use of a conference contribution without acknowledgement of the original would in this case be similar or equivalent to publishing the same paper in more than one academic journal, which is normally not an accepted publication practise.¹¹

In the light of this and the preceding discussion, it is easy to see that the disagreement regarding the acceptability of multiple conference submissions presented in the introduction is not genuine. It dissolves as soon as the contextual variation in expectations is taken into account, and we realise that the different opinions pertain to different types of conferences. There is in fact nothing counterintuitive or surprising about the claim that submitting identical contributions to two conferences may involve unacceptable redundancy and self-plagiarism in some cases but not in others. What counts as redundancy, plagiarism, and self-plagiarism—and hence what is acceptable—depends on expectations, which in turn vary across different contexts.

4 | Recommendations

Drawing from our discussion, we provide some recommendations intended to reduce confusion and mistakes regarding expectations and requirements in relation to conference contributions. This is particularly important when engaging in collaborations with colleagues from other research fields or when entering a new research field. Hereby we hope to help readers avoid deviations from good research practise as well as conflicts among collaborators:

General

- Whenever research recycling is considered, be fully transparent and take into account the relevant contextual parameters (expectations on the contribution in that context) in order to determine whether it is in line with good research practise.

Conference organisers

- Conference organisers should explicitly and clearly state their expectations and requirements on abstract submissions and conference contributions in their call for submissions. This statement should include any applicable restrictions for the particular conference on how participants may use and reuse their submissions or presentations. This is particularly important for conferences where participants are expected from different disciplinary backgrounds where conference traditions may vary.
- Conference organisers should provide formats for submission and presentation that allow for appropriate references to be provided when that is needed to avoid misunderstandings about origin already at the abstract stage.
- Conference organisers should ensure it is clear beforehand if selected contributions will be published in conference proceedings, with a status equivalent to journal publications.

Researchers submitting to conferences

- Researchers planning to attend a conference should familiarise themselves with the conditions and restrictions applying to the conference in question. In particular, this is good advice for researchers collaborating across academic disciplines, or who change or move between disciplines themselves.
- Researchers should be aware that there may develop practises—additional expectations—at recurring conferences apart from formal conditions provided by the conference organisers and, as far as possible, get acquainted with these as well.
- Researchers should be transparent concerning the originality of their conference contributions and take measures to prevent the audience and others from getting a misleading impression.
- Researchers listing conference contributions in their CV should take care not to give a misleading impression in cases where the same work has been presented more than once.

- Researchers collaborating with colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds should raise awareness in their group about these issues.

Organisations assessing suspicions of deviations from good research practise

- Agencies investigating suspected deviations from good research practise should be aware of the differences in conference types, in order to avoid incorrect conclusions.

5 | Conclusions

We have analysed the concepts of plagiarism and self-plagiarism, and have argued that contextual variation is relevant for their application. We have further argued that conferences may differ profoundly regarding expectations on contributions. These differences have direct implications for what constitutes plagiarism and self-plagiarism in various cases, since this depends on the type of conference and the expectations and implications that go with it. In some conferences, the typical presentation concerns work in progress or an already accepted paper. In other conferences, conference contributions are treated like manuscripts submitted to a journal, which involves the expectation of a first and exclusive formal presentation of novel research. These differences in expectations are decisive regarding what is to be treated as self-plagiarism. They also help us understand what it amounts to in practise to respect fundamental research integrity and ethics principles such as transparency and respect (cf. ALLEA 2023).

Our discussion of plagiarism and self-plagiarism at conferences shows that standard definitions must be understood relative to context in order to generate appropriate normative implications in many real-life cases. Different contexts provide different sets of expectations, which decide what is typically taken to be implied by, for instance, presenting a text in a peer-reviewed journal or giving a lecture to university students.

By shedding light to the fact that there are different kinds of conferences, with different expectations on contributions, and highlighting the importance of these expectations, we have aimed to help researchers navigate among conference requirements and act in accordance with good research practise. Our discussion also underlines the importance of transparency on the part of conference organisers: they need to be clear about what they expect, and they need to create conditions for researchers to be transparent about their contributions.

Author Contributions

All three authors contributed with ideas to the paper. G.H. wrote the first version of the manuscript, which was then discussed - and revised, in turn, by the three authors several times. All authors approved the final version of the paper and agree to be accountable for its content.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

- ¹ There are many possible variations when it comes to the exact phrasing of this point, and there are arguments to be made for specific choices. However, we avoid such detailed discussion here. For a closer discussion, see for example, Helgesson and Eriksson (2015).
- ² There may certainly be exceptions. For instance, in a special session, someone may have been asked to provide a more general overview, thus introducing the area to the audience. But if that is the purpose of a specific presentation, the audience is typically informed, either by the presenter or in the programme, thus countering the impression that the presenter is presenting their own work.
- ³ An example of this happening is the decision 3.1-20/0020 by the Swedish National Board for Assessment of Research Misconduct (Npof). The board found the accused guilty of plagiarising conference contributions (<https://npof.se/beslut/beslut-i-arende-3-1-20-0020>; only available in Swedish).
- ⁴ There are also other kinds of lectures, for example, prestigious lectures given by especially invited speakers. With the invitation, special expectations might follow. If not abided by, the lecturer may get undeserved credit.
- ⁵ To further clarify: The point of stressing the normative relevance of context is not to recognise that people in different situations may have different understandings of the concept and normativity of plagiarism. Instead it is that established expectations of presentations of work, which may vary with the context, determine whether or not something is a case of plagiarism/self-plagiarism. In other words, whether something is plagiarism/self-plagiarism does not vary with different understandings of plagiarism, but with different expectations on presentations.
- ⁶ There are variations, at least regarding the views journals may have on publishing papers that build on and share considerable content with publications in conference proceedings. Some journals are open to such follow-up papers if sufficiently new content is added, compared with the conference proceedings (de Vasconcelos and Roig 2015; Carney and Thurman 2018).
- ⁷ For conferences with publications of proceedings accepting full papers, it is worth distinguishing between the oral presentation of the work and the published paper. The former may arguably be seen as the public announcement of what is to come and perhaps a sales pitch.
- ⁸ Some further nuances are identified in COPE (2022).
- ⁹ There is of course a large variety of reasons why researchers attend conferences. Conference presentations serve to communicate research and to generate feedback and discussion with peers. Some conference attendees participate mainly for the pleasure of meeting colleagues or with the considered intent to enlarge their network, others for the merit of being selected for presentation, while yet others focus on how their paper-in-progress can get improved by constructive input from other conference participants (Cooper 2008; Sigelman 2008; Roig 2015). In many cases the reasons for contributing to a conference are a mix of these things.
- ¹⁰ To be more precise, there is a difference between the oral presentation and the publication of a paper in the conference proceedings. In circumstances where the written version of the presentation is published only once and an oral presentation is given a second time, that second oral presentation would not constitute self-plagiarism unless it were made with the pretence of presenting novel research for the first time.
- ¹¹ We say “normally” since some journals, like British Medical Journal, make well-specified exceptions. Most common is to accept a second publication if it is published in another language, attached to

conditions of how to refer to the original publication. Publishing in another language increases availability of the research but does not provide double scientific credit for the work.

References

- All European Academies, ALLEA. 2023. "The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity." <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/>.
- Anderson, M. S., and N. H. Steneck. 2011. "The Problem of Plagiarism." *Urologic Oncology: Seminars and Original Investigations* 29: 90–94.
- Carney, P. S., and S. T. Thurman. 2018. "Self-Plagiarism and Conference Papers: Editorial." *Journal of the Optical Society of America A* 35, no. 10: ED4. <https://doi.org/10.1364/JOSAA.35.000ED4>.
- Cooper, C. A. 2008. "Reassessing Conference Goals and Outcomes: A Defense of Presenting Similar Papers at Multiple Conferences. PS." *Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 2: 293–296.
- COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics). 2022. "Ethical Aspects of Conference Proceedings (COPE FORUM Discussion)." <https://publicationethics.org/resources/forum-discussions/ethical-aspects-conference-proceedings>.
- de Vasconcelos, S. M. R., and M. Roig. 2015. "Prior Publication and Redundancy in Contemporary Science: Are Authors and Editors at the Crossroads?" *Science and Engineering Ethics* 21: 1367–1378.
- Dometrius, N. C. 2008. "Academic Double-Dipping: Professional Profit or Loss?" *Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 2: 289–292.
- Grice, P. 1981. "Presupposition and Conversational Implicature." In *Radical Pragmatics*, edited by P. Cole. New York: Academic Press Inc.
- Helgesson, G. 2015. "Plagiarism." In *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, edited by H. ten Have. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05544-2_340-1.
- Helgesson, G., and S. Eriksson. 2015. "Plagiarism in Research." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 18, no. 1: 91–101.
- IEEE Communications Society. 2023. "Conference Plagiarism Policy." <https://www.comsoc.org/conferences-events/conference-plagiarism-policy>.
- Korta, K., and J. Perry. 2020. "Pragmatics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/pragmatics/>.
- Meyer, B., C. Choppy, J. Staunstrup, and J. van Leeuwen. 2009. "Research Evaluation for Computer Science. Reassessing the Assessment Criteria and Techniques Traditionally Used in Evaluating Computer Science Research Effectiveness." *Communications of the ACM* 52, no. 4: 31–34.
- Moskovitz, C. A., S. Hall, and M. Pemberton. 2022. "Common Misconceptions About Text Recycling in Scientific Writing." *Bioscience* 73, no. 1: 6–8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biac090>.
- Roig, M. 2015. "Avoiding Plagiarism, Self-Plagiarism, and Other Questionable Writing Practices: A Guide to Ethical Writing." <https://ori.hhs.gov/avoiding-plagiarism-self-plagiarism-and-other-questionable-writing-practices-guide-ethical-writing>.
- Schneider, S. K., and W. G. Jacoby. 2008. "Are Repeated Conference Papers Really a Problem?" *Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 2: 307–308.
- Sigelman, L. 2008. "Multiple Presentations of the Same Paper: A Skeptical View." *Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 2: 305–306.