

Dear Aleksandra,

Several women friends and I have experienced theft of our academic work by other women. In my own case, the author of a peer-reviewed academic journal article used my unpublished research, which I presented at a conference panel she attended, as if it were her own, without attribution. In another case, the author of a peer-reviewed academic journal article copied without attribution many portions of a friend's published review essay including her original analysis of the works. In the third case, the author of a book review used text from the book under review without quotation, as if it were being paraphrased or as if it expressed the book review author's own analysis of the topic. Could you recommend how we should respond to these situations and would you please also offer some thoughts about how feminist theory addresses the dynamics of women stealing other women's intellectual property?

*Respectfully,
Victims of Intellectual Theft*

Dear Vic,

Yours is a serious question that contains two enmeshed, but distinct concerns: (1) the theft of intellectual property and (2) the feeling that this unethical act is a particularly egregious betrayal when it is perpetrated by a woman against a woman.

Irrespective of the particulars, all the examples you give are of plagiarism. The American Historical Association, for example, defines plagiarism in its [Statement on the Standards of Professional Conduct](#) as the “expropriation of another author’s work, and the presentation of it as one’s own ... Plagiarism can also include the limited borrowing, without sufficient attribution, another person’s distinctive and significant research findings or interpretations.” (I was tempted to leave the attribution and the quotation marks out in order to plagiarize the definition of plagiarism, but this is no laughing matter). Other professional academic bodies offer similar statements to make perfectly clear both the broad scope of plagiarism’s parameters and the absolute intolerance for it in all forms.

Like manipulating data, fabricating evidence, and engaging in sexual misconduct, this kind of unethical academic behavior must be exposed if scholars as individuals and as a collective are to thrive. If unmasked, unethical practices can do damage to one’s professional reputation ([Cough!](#) Figs) and have possible legal ramifications if the plagiarism constituted copyright infringement ([Achoo!](#) Figs). Plagiarism also undermines the public trust in the academy as a whole. In the current doublespeak climate of fake news and alternative facts, scholarly ethical conduct is perhaps more than ever a matter of grave concern.

Even if plagiarism goes unexposed and unpunished, it is still wrong. But the degree of ethical transgression sits on a sliding moral scale. Some instances are worse than others. The act itself can be compounded by additional offenses, such as when a senior scholar plagiarizes from a junior scholar. Little sticks in my craw as much as when those with more established careers use

their position not to lift others up, but to exploit them. Worse still is the mentor peddling a student's work as her or his own.

That the plagiarists you and your colleagues have encountered were women rankles because it violates an aspiration for solidarity. Feminists in the academy seek to cultivate a sense of sisterhood, but some of the ladies seem to have missed that memo. Many of us have stories of more senior female scholars being as tough or tougher than their male peers on junior women, in what appears to be a kind of hazing ritual for nerds. That's bad enough, of course, but to steal from a colleague, especially a more junior colleague, is, to put it mildly, not ok.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Italian literary sensation Elena Ferrante staked out a position that took me aback: "On principle, I refuse to speak badly of another woman, even if she has offended me intolerably. It's a position that I feel obliged to take precisely because I'm well aware of the situation of women. ...[W]e are all deeply marked by a way of being in the world that, even when we claim it as ours, is poisoned at the root by millennia of male domination." In other words, give other women a pass, because patriarchy.

While picking my teeth with the bones of crushed men, I mulled her suggestion. As much as I loved her Neapolitan novels and despite my runaway rage at patriarchy of late (#MeToo, #TimesUp), um, no. Women do not get a mulligan from other women just for being women. We can both muster empathy for a woman's humanity and simultaneously recognize that she must to be held accountable for unethical choices.

If you can document plagiarism, you have a responsibility to yourself and to the profession to pursue your claim. Start by getting advice from the ombudsperson at your institution and from trusted mentors and peers. Especially if you do not have tenure, it will take courage to come forward. No one wants to be seen as a troublemaker, and women who speak up at the workplace are more likely to be perceived that way. But if there's a paper trail to back up your case and if the offender is not at your home institution, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Conspiracies of silence allow unsavory characters to fester in the shadows. That's how Harvey Weinstein and Jorge I. Domínguez got away with their reprehensible behavior for decades. Let's each of us do what we can to support one another, modeling the highest ethical standards as women, for women. That means calling out the few bad apples, if possible, when necessary.

In comradeship,
Aleksandra