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No Harm, Still Foul: Concerns About Reputation Drive Dislike of Harmless Plagiarizers

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Abstract

Across a variety of situations, people strongly condemn plagiarizers who steal credit for ideas, even when the theft in question does not appear to harm anyone. Why would people react negatively to relatively harmless acts of plagiarism? In six experiments, we predict and find that these negative reactions are driven by people's aversion toward agents who attempt to falsely improve their reputations. In Studies 1–3, participants condemn plagiarism cases that they agree are harmless (i.e., stealing credit from an anonymous source). This effect is mediated by the extent to which participants perceive the plagiarizer to have falsely benefitted from plagiarizing. In Studies 4–5, we demonstrate that this effect is not explained solely by participants' negative response to lies or violations of permission. In Study 6, participants condemn a plagiarism case in which the idea's original author actually *benefits*, providing the strongest evidence that people condemn plagiarism for reasons beyond perceived harm. We discuss how this work connects to broader questions of intellectual property and impression management.

Keywords: Reputation; Intellectual property; Plagiarism; Impression management; Harm

1. Introduction

Sharing our ideas—creative products of the mind like stories, jokes, theories, inventions, or works of arts—is a fundamental part of human interaction. At the same time, people endorse restrictive moral norms concerning idea ownership and exchange: We strongly condemn plagiarizers who pass off borrowed ideas as their own (for review, see Mandel, Fast, & Olson, 2015; Olson & Shaw, 2011). In some cases these negative reactions to plagiarism are simple enough to explain, such as when the plagiarism results in a direct monetary loss for someone (e.g., when one inventor steals another's idea and sells

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the product for a profit). Here, stealing an idea basically entails stealing physical resources, which is straightforwardly seen as wrong (Nucci, 2001; Robinson & Kurzban, 2006). Yet many cases of plagiarism that people ordinarily object to are much harder to explain (for review, see Buccafusco & Fagundes, 2015).

Some plagiarism cases involve no monetary loss for the victim (e.g., when a person takes credit for a friend's joke in a social setting) or no clear victim at all (e.g., when a singer performs an obscure folk song and claims to have written it). There are even cases when stealing an idea and popularizing it might *benefit* the idea's creator, such as when a new hit song plagiarizes an old one, which in turn receives renewed attention and acclaim (e.g., Miao & Grimm, 2013; Sanderson & Wiseman, 2015). Why do people condemn acts of plagiarism that are basically harmless? The present studies investigate this question and test the hypothesis that people object to harmless plagiarism cases because of the false reputational benefit garnered by the plagiarizer. Before getting to these experiments, we briefly review previous work on people's moral intuitions about plagiarism and reputation.

1.1. Previous work on plagiarism and reputation

Across a variety of contexts, adults and children dislike and punish those who plagiarize. There is a pervasive social stigma against idea theft across domains from science (Vandervoort, 1995), to stand-up comedy (Oliar & Sprigman, 2008), to business (Nitterhouse, 2003), to music (Miao & Grimm, 2013; Müllensiefen & Pendzich, 2009), and many others. Moreover, being caught stealing ideas can have life-altering monetary and reputational repercussions. In education, for example, plagiarism is an extremely serious offense that can lead to suspension or expulsion for students and faculty (Alschuler & Blimling, 1995; Park, 2003). More broadly, countries across the globe have stringent intellectual property laws to protect the inventors of ideas and punish people who steal them (Besen & Raskind, 1991; Buccafusco, Burns, Fromer, & Sprigman, 2014). Even young children dislike plagiarism: 6-year-olds think that individuals own their ideas (Li, Shaw, & Olson, 2013; Shaw, Li, & Olson, 2012) and negatively evaluate copycats (Olson & Shaw, 2011; Shaw & Olson, 2015; Yang, Shaw, Garduno, & Olson, 2014). These pervasive moral intuitions about plagiarism extend beyond cases of obvious monetary harm (Buccafusco & Fagundes, 2015) and even influence cases in which the idea originator benefits from the plagiarizer's actions (Sanderson & Wiseman, 2015).

Some authors have recently argued that moral objections to these less straightforward plagiarism cases can be explained by people's concerns about reputation and the rightful allocation of credit for good ideas (Goodenough & Decker, 2009; Shaw & Olson, 2015). Proponents of this reputational account note that when a person comes up with a good idea, he or she is thought to have positive qualities associated with generating that idea like creativity or cleverness (Miller, 2000; Shaw, Li, & Olson, 2013). Furthermore, these impressions contribute to a person's broader reputation, and a good reputation is a valuable social resource (for review, see Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, when an idea is

stolen, there are two important consequences that might provoke negative moral reactions: reputational credit being unfairly taken from the idea originator (i.e., reputational harm) and falsely gained by the plagiarizer (i.e., false reputational benefit). While these two factors often go hand in hand, in some plagiarism cases (like plagiarizing from an obscure anonymous source), they actually come apart. For this reason, we discuss each concern separately.

1.2. *Disentangling plagiarism's two reputational consequences*

First, and consistent with previous findings, we believe that people's negative reactions to plagiarism are driven, at least in part, by some notion of reputational harm—the taking away of rightful credit from a clear victim (Fu, Heyman, Chen, Liu, & Lee, 2015; Shaw & Olson, 2015). Having a good reputation can help one attract cooperative partners, amass resources, attract mates, and ultimately, achieve one's goals (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Shaw et al., 2013). Losing out on reputational credit means losing out on these resources and advantages (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Bird & Smith, 2005; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Miller, 2000; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Shaw & Santos, 2012). Thus, when someone steals an idea, he or she is often harming the idea's originator, and we know that people react negatively to theft and the harm it causes (Nucci, 2001; Robinson & Kurzban, 2006). Indeed, previous research has found that children respond negatively to reputational harm both in the domain of plagiarism specifically (Shaw & Olson, 2015) and more generally in cases of self-interested lying (Fu et al., 2015). Fu et al. (2015) demonstrated that children distrust actors who lie to benefit their reputation (e.g., by claiming someone else broke a vase when they actually broke it) more than actors who lie to benefit others (e.g., by claiming to have broken a vase when someone else did), even where there was no monetary punishment or reward associated with the lie. Results like these and others are consistent with the notion that people respond negatively to reputational harm and agents who inflict it.

But concerns about reputational harm alone cannot explain people's disdain for cases of plagiarism in which no obvious victim exists; such cases can be better explained by a separate but related concern about the plagiarizer gaining a false reputational benefit. Because reputation is valuable, people employ various impression management tactics to bolster their reputations and achieve their ends (for review, see Chen & Lin, 2014; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). While people often attempt to covertly manipulate their own reputations, they tend to *dislike* when others do the same thing. When observers infer ulterior reputational motives for behavior that makes an individual appear favorably, they tend to evaluate that individual more negatively (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Heyman, Barner, Heumann, & Schenck, 2014; Heyman, Fu, & Lee, 2007; Heyman & Legare, 2005; Newman & Cain, 2014; Vonk, 1998). This disdain for self-promoters is especially acute when the self-promoter tries to claim a positive trait that he or she actually lacks (Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Schoemann & Branscombe, 2011). We argue that people may dislike plagiarism because

it constitutes a deceptive impression management tactic that can falsely inflate the plagiarizer's reputation. To our knowledge, the present studies are the first to test the impact of this false reputational benefit mechanism on people's moral evaluations of plagiarism.

Finding evidence for the false reputational benefit mechanism could provide several important theoretical insights. First, the false reputational benefit mechanism, but not the reputational harm mechanism, can explain why people condemn plagiarism cases in which no one is actually harmed, and perhaps even cases in which all parties involved benefit from the act (e.g., if a plagiarizer purchases the right to claim credit for an idea from the idea originator). Furthermore, while only a subset of plagiarism cases involve clear harm (monetary or reputational), nearly all cases involve some form of false reputational gain (or, at least, attempted reputational gain). Thus, the false reputational benefit mechanism can cast a wider net in explaining people's moral intuitions about plagiarism cases. Finally, while the present studies focus on the effect of the false reputational benefit mechanism in driving plagiarism aversion specifically, evidence in favor of such a mechanism could provide a new lens into understanding people's negative reactions to a greater variety of harmless impression management tactics.

Before proceeding to our studies, we note two caveats. First, we primarily focus on cases in which actors succeed in falsely improving their reputations through plagiarism. However, we believe that concerns about false reputational benefit would apply also to plagiarizers who *intend* to falsely improve their reputations, even if they are unsuccessful in doing so (e.g., because the stolen idea is not a very good one), but we do not take up such cases here. Second, it is worth clarifying that we are not arguing that false reputational benefit is the only driver of negative reactions to plagiarism or making any prediction about its strength relative to other possible drivers. Indeed, we agree with previous studies indicating that people react negatively to harm, reputational or otherwise (e.g., Shaw & Olson, 2015). Here, we simply ask why harmless plagiarism cases appear to elicit moral disdain, and we provide a possible explanation for these negative reactions. We return to both of these issues in the General Discussion.

1.3. Present studies

The present studies investigate the hypotheses that people object to harmless plagiarism cases and that these objections are driven by concerns about false reputational benefit. Across six experiments, we test people's intuitions about a variety of scenarios involving different sorts of ideas (poetry, music, scientific research) and find support for our predictions. In Study 1, we demonstrate that people negatively evaluate plagiarizers in a scenario where potential harm to the idea creator is minimized (because the plagiarizer takes credit from an old, anonymous source). In Study 2, we show that, at least in some circumstances, people judge stealing the reputational credit for an idea as worse than stealing the monetary profits from it, revealing the importance of reputation in people's moral evaluations of plagiarism. In Study 3, using a new scenario, we again find that people judge plagiarism from

an unknown source to be wrong, even as they explicitly agree that stealing credit from an unknown source is not harmful. Furthermore, we find that perceptions of how much the plagiarizer falsely benefitted mediate moral evaluations of her act. In Studies 4 and 5, we rule out two alternative explanations for our previous results—that disdain for plagiarism is driven simply by negative reactions to lying or permission violations. Finally, in Study 6, we demonstrate that people condemn plagiarism even in a case where the idea originator actually *benefits* from the act. This last finding provides the strongest demonstration that negative reactions to plagiarism go beyond notions of harm (monetary or reputational) to the idea originator. Taken together, our studies provide unique support for the notion that people condemn harmless plagiarism cases and that our proposed false benefit mechanism plays a key role in driving this effect.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated whether or not people would condemn a minimally harmful case of plagiarism. As noted above, concerns about reputational harm and false reputational benefit are often confounded. To disentangle the two, we designed a vignette that minimizes possible harm to the idea originator. In it, a student stumbles on an old, abandoned book of handwritten poetry and decides to publish it either under his own name (False Credit Condition) or anonymously (True Credit Condition). Participants read one of the two vignettes and then evaluated the student's actions. We expected that both conditions would be viewed as harmless to the original author because he or she had abandoned the poems long ago and thus would not lose out in any obvious way. (In Study 3, we explicitly test this assumption that people view stealing from an anonymous source as harmless.) Even with harm minimized, we predicted a main effect of condition such that participants would think it was more wrong to take false reputational credit for the poems than to give true credit for them.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Fifty-six participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.3$, $SD = 9.6$, 44.6% female). In Studies 1–4, we aimed to recruit ~30 participants per cell. In all of our studies, participants were informed ahead of time that they needed to pass a basic reading comprehension check in order to be included. In Study 1, no participants were excluded. Before all experiments, subjects affirmed their consent to participate, and all were subsequently paid 25 cents.

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants read a vignette about a student named John who finds a very old, abandoned book of handwritten poetry on the street and decides to publish the poems. We

varied between subjects whether John publishes them anonymously (True Credit) or under his own name (False Credit). We believed that because the book is described as over 20 years old and abandoned, harm done to the original author would be seen as remote. Below is the full vignette:

John is a graduate student in creative writing at a local university. One weekend, while taking a walk around his neighborhood, John comes across an old notebook lying in the gutter. The notebook is completely worn out, and it has no name written anywhere on it. John guesses the notebook must be over 20 years old.

John decides to take the notebook home. That evening, John finds that the notebook contains dozens of staggeringly beautiful, handwritten love poems. John believes these poems are too beautiful not to be shared with a wider audience. But John also knows that he has absolutely no way of finding the poems' original author.

False Credit: After much deliberation, John decides to publish the poems under his own name.

True Credit: After much deliberation, John decides to publish the poems anonymously.

Thus, the collection is available to the world, and (*False Credit:*) John gets credit for writing the poems. (*True Credit:*) No one gets credit for writing the poems.

After reading the vignette, participants were asked to make a moral evaluation of John's actions by rating agreement with the statement, "John did something morally terrible." We used a standard Likert scale where 1 indicated "strongly disagree," 4 indicated "neither agree nor disagree," and 7 indicated "strongly agree." Across all of our experiments, higher scores indicated stronger moral condemnation. Participants then completed a brief comprehension check in which they needed to identify correctly that the vignette pertained to a book of love poems (vs. a violin, an antique lamp, or a collection of paintings). In all of our studies, participants were asked to provide a brief written justification for their moral evaluation after answering all relevant dependent variables. These "why" responses were not analyzed and were only included to deter random responding from Mturkers. The same basic demographic information (age and sex) was collected across all of our studies.

2.2. Results and discussion

An independent samples *t* test on participants' moral evaluations revealed that our subjects more negatively evaluated John for publishing the poems under his own name ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.43$) than for publishing the poems anonymously ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.86$; $t(53.9) = 5.77$, $p < .001$). Consistent with our predictions, this result indicates

that even when harm to the idea originator is minimized, people think it is wrong for an agent to take false credit for an idea he did not generate.

3. Study 2

The results from Study 1 are consistent with the hypothesis that people respond negatively to the false reputational benefits derived from plagiarism. However, there are often two senses in which a plagiarizer can benefit falsely from stealing someone else's idea. They can gain false reputational credit (i.e., fame), and they can also earn a false monetary profit (i.e., fortune). Our design in Study 1 did not differentiate between these two types of false gain, so our results could have been the product of participants' assumption that the plagiarizer would make money off of the stolen ideas. Indeed, legal scholars have previously noted the importance of integrating nonmonetary moral concerns in order to paint a more complete picture of why people object to plagiarism (Buccafusco & Fagundes, 2015). We addressed this issue in Study 2.

To separate false reputational from false monetary gain, we used a modified version of our poetry vignette from Study 1 in a broadly similar design. This time, two characters find a poetry book and conspire to commit plagiarism together by publishing the poems. They agree that one of them will receive all the profits, and the other will receive all the credit. We assessed participants' moral evaluations of each of the two characters' actions, this time within subjects. While we thought that people would react negatively both to the character who makes a false profit and to the one who takes false reputational credit, we also predicted, in line with the reputational account, that participants would consider it worse to take the false reputational credit.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Fifty-eight participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.3$, $SD = 9.5$, 43.3% female). Two additional participants failed the comprehension check and were excluded.

3.1.2. Procedure

All participants read a single version of our poetry vignette from Study 1 with a few modifications. This time, there were two protagonists, John and Frank. John and Frank find an abandoned book of poetry and publish it with one receiving all of the credit and the other receiving all of the profits. The vignette read:

John and Frank are friends. They are both graduate students in creative writing at a local university. One weekend, while walking around a local park, John and Frank come across an old notebook. The notebook is completely worn out, and it is over 10 years old. The notebook has no name or identifying information anywhere on it.

John and Frank decide to take the notebook home. They later find that it contains dozens of staggeringly beautiful, handwritten love poems. The two agree that these poems are too beautiful not to be shared with a wider audience.

They also know that if even they wanted to, they couldn't contact the poems' original author.

After much deliberation, John and Frank decide to publish the collection of poems. They agree that Frank will be listed as the poems' author, and John will keep all of the collection's profits.

John says: 'I don't really care at all about reputation, I just want to make some money.'

Frank says: 'I don't really care at all about making money. I just want to gain a reputation as a good writer.'

After reading, participants answered the same moral evaluation prompt as in Study 1, but they answered for both John's and Frank's actions. They rated agreement on the same Likert scale with the statements "John did something morally terrible" and "Frank did something morally terrible." The order of these questions was counterbalanced and the items were presented on consecutive pages so that we could do an additional between-participant analysis of participants' first responses. (We aimed for ~30 participants in each of the two orders.) Participants answered an identical comprehension check to that used in Study 1.

3.2. Results

We first conducted a paired t test on participants' moral evaluations, which revealed that the person who claimed the false credit was considered morally worse ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.34$) than the person who claimed the false profits ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.69$; $t(58) = 3.31$, $p = .002$). To supplement this within-participants comparison, we also conducted a between-participants comparison, examining only the first rating that each participant made. An independent samples t test on only these first responses revealed the same pattern of results. The person who received the false credit was rated as morally worse ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.14$) than the person who gained the false profit ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.67$, $t(55.48) = 2.85$, $p = .006$).

3.3. Discussion

The results of Study 2 reveal that people think it is morally wrong both to steal a false profit and to gain a false reputation by plagiarizing an idea. However, our participants actually thought it was morally worse to take false reputational credit for an idea than to take a false profit. This finding provides evidence that people dislike plagiarism for

reasons that go beyond mere short-term monetary profit and specifically for the notion that false reputational gain plays a role in driving negative reactions to plagiarism.

We must caution two points in interpreting these data. First, the finding from Study 2 should not be taken as evidence that false reputational benefit will always be seen as worse than false monetary benefit in plagiarism cases. As an extreme example, compare a scientist who steals the idea for a new cancer medication from a colleague and makes billions selling the drug (but never takes personal credit for the idea) with a scientist who steals a colleague's joke (never gaining any money but getting reputational credit for it). It seems likely that the former would be judged much more harshly than the latter. Second, we note that it is difficult to disentangle reputational and monetary benefit entirely. Indeed, having a reputation as a good author may lead to monetary benefits down the road. Future work will be necessary to fully understand how people think about reputational and monetary incentives, but this issue will not be the primary focus of the remaining studies.

With these caveats in mind, these results demonstrate that short-term monetary profit is not necessary for negative evaluations of plagiarism and that, in some cases, falsely inflating one's reputation may be seen as worse than stealing monetary profits in cases of idea theft.

4. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 provide basic evidence that people find false reputational benefit objectionable even in cases where potential harm is minimal. However, it is possible that despite our efforts to minimize harm, participants still perceived the act to be harmful to the idea originator in some way. To investigate this possibility in Study 3, we manipulated harm by having the plagiarizer copy an idea either from a known friend or an unknown, anonymous source and then asked participants not only to judge how wrong it was to plagiarize the idea but also to evaluate whether they thought the act harmed the idea originator. We predicted that people would think it was significantly less harmful to steal from an unknown, anonymous source than a known friend, but that people would still think it was wrong to plagiarize in both cases. In other words, we predicted that even in a case participants would agree is harmless, they would still find plagiarism morally wrong.

In Study 3, we tested these predictions on a new set of vignettes (i.e., situations that did not involve finding an old, mysterious book of poetry) to show that our effect generalizes across different plagiarism scenarios concerning different sorts of ideas. Our new scenario pertained to two musicians. One musician, Sarah, hears her friend Ruby play a song, and then Sarah later performs the song and either claims to have written the song herself (False Credit Condition) or tells the truth about where she discovered the song (True Credit Condition). As noted above, we also manipulated harm done to the idea's originator by varying whether the song was an original of Ruby's (Known Author Condition, where we expected perceived harm to be high) or a traditional folk tune that Ruby had stumbled on from an obscure, anonymous source (Unknown Author Condition, where we expected perceived harm to be low). In both of the False Credit versions, Sarah took credit for the song. In the

two True Credit versions, Sarah either gave credit to the true author, Ruby (True Credit Known Author), or accurately indicated that it was an old folk tune (True Credit Unknown Author). Participants were then asked to evaluate how morally wrong Sarah's actions were and also how much harm was inflicted on the idea's originator (the latter as a measure check of our anonymous/known source harm manipulation). In sum, we predicted that there would be a main effect of both Credit and Harm, but importantly, we also predicted that people would negatively evaluate plagiarizers even when the idea was plagiarized from an anonymous source (where harm is minimal).

Finding that people negatively evaluate acts of plagiarism that they consider relatively harmless would suggest that negative evaluations of plagiarism go beyond harm, but it would not provide evidence in favor of our preferred mechanism: false reputational benefit. To test the effect of false reputational benefit directly, we added a question that measured participants' intuitions concerning the extent to which the plagiarizer falsely benefitted. We then tested whether perceived false reputational gain would mediate moral wrongness judgments. We predicted that plagiarism would be seen as falsely improving the plagiarizer's reputation and that this perceived false benefit would drive participants' negative moral judgments.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

One hundred twenty-one participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.6$, $SD = 8.36$, 43.3% female). No participants were excluded.

4.1.2. Procedure

Participants read our vignette about two musicians—Ruby and Sarah. Study 3 employed a 2 (Harm: Known Author or Unknown Author) \times 2 (Credit: False or True) between-subjects design, with each participant reading one of four versions of the story. As explained above, harm was varied according to whether the song was written by a known author named Ruby (i.e., higher harm) or an anonymous folk source (i.e., lower harm). In the two False Credit conditions, Sarah falsely claims to have written the song herself. In the two True Credit conditions, Sarah gives true credit either to Ruby or to the unknown source (as is accurate based on the corresponding harm condition). The full vignette read as follows:

Sarah and Ruby are friends. They both like to sing and play guitar. Ruby just likes to play at home for fun, while Sarah is an aspiring singer-songwriter. One night, while hanging out at Ruby's house, Ruby plays a song for Sarah that Ruby has been practicing. Sarah has never heard the song before.

Unknown Author: Ruby explains that the song is a very old and obscure folk tune that she has been working on playing and singing.

Known Author: Ruby explains that the song is an original of hers that she has been working on playing and singing.

Sarah loves the song so much that she decides to learn it herself. She doesn't tell Ruby. At a concert a few weeks later, Sarah performs the song she had heard Ruby practicing. The audience loves it.

False Credit: Sarah tells the audience that she wrote the song herself.

True Credit: Sarah tells the audience that the song was an old folk tune [Unknown Author version]/that her friend Ruby wrote it [Known Author version].

The song becomes a mainstay in Sarah's set, and she gains widespread acclaim for

False Credit: having written it.

True Credit: playing it.

Participants were then given the same moral evaluation measure as in Studies 1 and 2, rating their agreement with the statement: "What Sarah did was morally terrible." This time, each participant also rated their agreement or disagreement with two additional statements to be used in further analyses. These were (a) "Sarah harmed the song's original author" (harm measure) and (b) "Sarah falsely benefitted from someone else's work" (false reputational benefit measure). The same 7-point agreement scale was used for both. All participants saw the moral evaluation first, followed by the harm and false benefit follow-ups in random order.

Participants also completed the comprehension check statement, "The story you read contained information about..." and were offered four choices: a singer/song-writer, an aspiring author, a talented actor, and a ballerina. All answered correctly.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Harm manipulation check

First, we examined whether or not our manipulation of harm influenced participants' harmfulness judgments. We conducted a 2 (Harm: Unknown Author or Known Author) \times 2 (Credit: False or True) between-subjects ANOVA on the harm follow-up question, which revealed a main effect of Harm ($F(1, 117) = 16.6, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .12$), such that people thought it was more harmful to perform a song written by a known author, Ruby ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.81$), than one by an unknown folk composer ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.91$). There was also a main effect of Credit ($F(1, 117) = 25.8, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .18$), such that participants thought it was more harmful for Sarah to take false

Table 1

Results from Study 3 on our harm measure broken down by condition. Recall that Known Author and Unknown Author represent high-harm and low-harm conditions, respectively

Harm Judgments				
	True Credit	False Credit	Total	$F, p, \eta p^2$
Known Author	3.72 (1.77)	5.71 (1.24)	4.75 (1.81)	16.6, <.001, .12
Unknown Author	2.90 (1.80)	4.03 (1.87)	3.49 (1.91)	
Total	3.31 (1.82)	4.86 (1.79)		
$F, p, \eta p^2$	25.8, <.001, .18			

credit for the song ($M = 4.86, SD = 1.79$) than for her to give true credit to the song's originator ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.82$). The interaction was not significant ($F(1, 117) = 1.92, p = .169, \eta p^2 = .02$). See Table 1.

Furthermore, a one-sample t test revealed that in the Known Author Condition (high-harm) people were above the midpoint (4) in agreeing that harm was present ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.81, t(59) = 3.42, p < .001$), whereas in the Unknown Author Condition (our low-harm condition) they were below the midpoint in agreeing that harm was present ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.91, t(60) = 2.09, p = .041$). These results indicate that our known versus unknown manipulation influenced people's harm judgments as we intended.

4.2.2. Moral evaluations

We next examined moral evaluations of Sarah's actions. We conducted a 2 (Harm: Known Author or Unknown Author) \times 2 (Credit: False or True) between-subjects ANOVA, which revealed a main effect of Credit ($F(1, 117) = 62.9, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .35$), such that participants thought it was worse for Sarah to take false credit for the song ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.02$) than for her to give true credit to the song's originator ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.82$). There was no main effect of Harm ($F(1, 117) = 1.2, p = .28, \eta p^2 = .01$), such that people thought it was equally morally bad to perform a song written by a friend ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.85$) or an old folk song with an unknown author ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.76$). There was no significant interaction effect ($F(1, 117) = 1.80, p = .183, \eta p^2 = .02$). Although there was no interaction, we note that people thought that it was morally worse to take false credit than to give true credit regardless of whether the author of the song was known ($t(43.59) = 4.36, p < .001$) or unknown ($t(39.84) = 6.82, p < .001$). See Fig. 1. In other words, consistent with our prediction, even when participants agreed that harm was minimal, they still thought it was wrong to plagiarize.

4.2.3. False benefit judgments

We next conducted a 2 (Harm: Known Author or Unknown Author) \times 2 (Credit: False or True) between-subjects ANOVA on the false reputational benefit measure, which revealed a main effect of Credit ($F(1, 117) = 79.79, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .41$). This result indicates that participants thought Sarah claimed a greater false benefit when she took false credit for the song ($M = 6.44, SD = 0.88$) than when she gave true credit to the

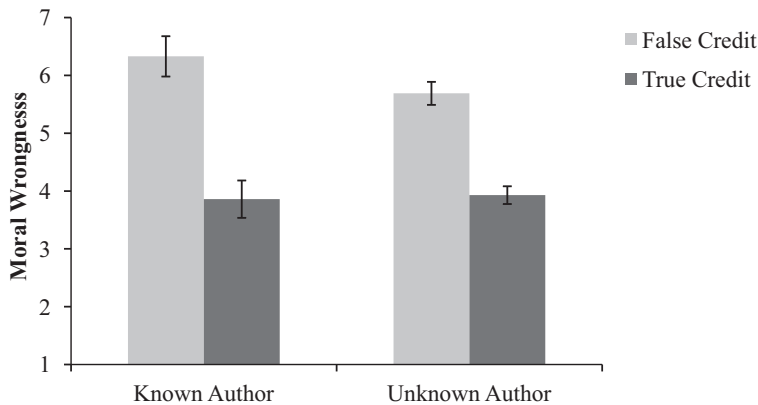


Fig. 1. Moral evaluations by condition from Study 3. Higher numbers represent stronger negative evaluations. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

song's originator ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.90$). There was no main effect of Harm ($F(1, 117) = 0.04$, $p = .95$, $\eta^2 = .00$), such that people thought the plagiarizer benefitted equally if they performed a song by a known friend ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.96$) or an anonymous folk composer ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.83$). There was a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 117) = 3.05$, $p = .083$, $\eta^2 = .03$), which was driven by the fact that people thought there was a greater false benefit when the plagiarizer took false credit from a known friend ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 0.54$) as compared to an unknown composer ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.08$; $t(44.2) = 2.23$, $p = .03$), whereas there was no difference (although directionally opposite) in false benefit judgments when the agent gave true credit to a known friend ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.85$) as compared to an anonymous composer ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.96$, $t(56) = 0.90$, $p = .38$). See Table 2.

4.2.4. Mediation

Finally, we tested whether false reputational benefit mediated the effect of credit on moral evaluations. We found that Credit (False vs. True) increased reported moral wrongness ($\beta = 2.12$, $p < .001$) and false reputational benefitting ($\beta = 2.37$, $p < .001$). Reported false benefit, in turn, increased moral wrongness judgments ($\beta = 0.69$, $p < .001$), and the inclusion of reported false benefit in the analysis reduced the effect of

Table 2

Results from Study 3 on our false benefit measure broken down by condition. Recall that Known Author and Unknown Author represent the high-harm and low-harm conditions respectively

False Benefit Judgments				
	True Credit	False Credit	Total	F, p, η^2
Known Author	3.83 (1.85)	6.33 (0.84)	5.12 (1.85)	1.2, .28, .01
Unknown Author	4.28 (1.96)	5.69 (1.09)	4.85 (1.76)	
Total	4.05 (1.90)	6.44 (0.88)		
F, p, η^2	79.8, <.001, .41			

Credit on moral wrongness judgments ($\beta = 0.51, p = .054$). A bootstrap analysis (10,000 bootstrapped sample) revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (1.09, 2.17), suggesting a significant indirect effect of false benefitting (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). Thus, false reputational benefit mediated the relationship between credit and moral evaluations.

4.3. Discussion

The results from Study 3 supported our predictions: Participants thought it was morally wrong to take false credit for an idea even in a case they disagreed was harmful. In addition, participants' harm judgments aligned with our known/unknown manipulation, validating the assumption from Studies 1 and 2 that people do not believe stealing from an unknown or anonymous source is harmful. Finally, in Study 3, perceptions of false benefit mediated people's negative moral evaluation of plagiarizers. In other words, the more our participants believed that the plagiarizer had falsely inflated her reputation, the worse they judged her actions to be. This last finding extends our previous results by supporting the mechanism we believe drives people's negative reactions to harmless plagiarism cases: false reputational benefit.

5. Study 4

While we favor the false reputational benefit mechanism for explaining our previous results, there is an alternative account that is consistent with our results. Perhaps our participants simply dislike agents who lie (Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983; Xu, Luo, Fu, & Lee, 2009). In Study 4, we investigated this lying account by providing participants with two false credit scenarios, both of which involved lying, but only one of which involved an agent trying to falsely improve her reputation. We again used our musician vignette from Study 3. In our Taking False Credit Condition, Ruby writes the song and Sarah performs it and claims false credit for writing it. In the Giving False Credit Condition, Sarah writes the song and performs it but falsely gives Ruby credit for writing it.

If people respond negatively to false credit claiming simply because it entails lying, then people should evaluate these two conditions similarly—thinking that both conditions are morally bad as both involve lying. However, if people are responding negatively to an agent trying to gain a false reputational boost, then participants should evaluate the Taking False Credit Condition as much worse than the Giving False Credit Condition. We predicted the latter result.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

Sixty participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.3$ years, $SD = 11.9$, 45% female). No participants were excluded.

5.1.2. Procedure

The procedure for Study 4 was, by and large, similar to that used previously. We tested our musician vignette with two conditions: Taking False Credit and Giving False Credit. In the Taking False Credit Condition, Ruby writes the song; Sarah steals it, performs it, and claims false credit for it (an exact replication of Study 3's False Credit Known Author Condition). In the Giving False Credit Condition, Sarah actually writes the song, performs it, and then lies to the audience by saying that Ruby wrote it. Participants then answered the same moral evaluation measure from Studies 1–3. Participants completed a comprehension check identical to that used in Study 3.

5.2. Results

A between-subjects *t* test revealed that participants rated the Taking False Credit Condition, in which the agent takes false credit for someone else's song ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 0.99$), as morally worse than the Giving False Credit Condition, in which the agent merely lies about who wrote the song ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(58) = 11.57$, $p < .001$).

5.3. Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, participants rated the actions of an agent who claimed false credit for an idea as morally worse than the actions of an agent who lies by giving credit for her idea away. This result suggests that moral condemnation of plagiarism and plagiarizers goes beyond condemnation of lying and aligns with previous work on plagiarism in children. By the time children are 6 years old, they believe that it is less wrong to give away false credit for one's own idea than to take false credit for someone else's idea (Shaw & Olson, 2015). Indeed, more broadly, people differentiate between prosocial and selfish lies (Fu et al., 2015), an issue we will return to in the General Discussion.

6. Study 5

Although the results from our previous studies are consistent with our proposed account, another alternative is possible. Perhaps people think it is wrong to plagiarize simply because plagiarism involves using someone else's idea without their permission. We know from previous work that people react negatively to permission violations (e.g., Neary & Friedman, 2014), and this alternative is also consistent with our previous results (including those from Study 4 in which participants thought it was morally permissible to give false credit away for one's own ideas—doing so obviously does not involve a violation of permission). To rule out this alternative, we tested whether people would negatively evaluate a plagiarizer who is given explicit permission to use the idea in question and to take credit for that idea.

In Study 5 we again used our musician vignette, varying this time whether Sarah obtained permission from Ruby to use her song. In the No Permission conditions, Sarah

plays Ruby's song without asking for Ruby's permission. In the Permission conditions, Sarah asks and is granted permission to play the song and take credit for it before she performs it. In the Purchased Permission conditions, Sarah asks and is granted permission to play the song and take credit for it, and she also pays Ruby for all the rights to the song. Because people think it is wrong to use other people's property without permission (Cohen, 1954; Neary & Friedman, 2014; Snare, 1972), we predicted that we would find a main effect of permission such that people would think it is worse to play Ruby's song without her permission than with it. We also manipulated whether Sarah gave Ruby credit for the song or took false credit for herself. We once again predicted a main effect of Credit, such that people would more negatively evaluate an agent who claims false credit than one who gives true credit.

Importantly, we also predicted that even when Sarah was given explicit permission, participants would still think it is wrong to take false credit for Ruby's idea. An account based on permission should predict that participants would think it is morally permissible to claim credit for a song if the true songwriter grants permission to do so (Permission and Purchased Permission conditions). On the other hand, if our hypotheses about the false reputational benefit mechanism are correct, then participants should think it is wrong to take false credit for an idea even when permission is obtained.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

Two hundred ninety-seven participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.6$ years, $SD = 12.7$, 49.2% female). For Studies 5 and 6, we anticipated testing subtler effects and so increased the sample size to 50 participants per cell. In both cases this was decided prior to launching the study.

6.1.2. Procedure

The procedure for Study 5 was similar to that used previously. Participants read a version of our musician vignette and then made moral judgments about the characters' actions. As noted above, participants were randomly sorted into one of three Permission conditions (No Permission, Permission, and Purchased Permission) and one of two Credit conditions (True Credit and False Credit) in a 3×2 design. Below is the vignette used:

Sarah and Ruby are friends. They both like to sing and play guitar. Ruby just likes to play at home for fun, while Sarah is an aspiring singer-songwriter. One night, while hanging out at Ruby's house, Ruby plays a song for Sarah that Ruby has been practicing. Ruby explains that the song is an original of hers that she has been working on playing and singing. Sarah really loves the song and wants to perform it.

No Permission: Ruby doesn't know that Sarah takes the song and learns to play it.

Permission: Ruby agrees to permit Sarah to use the song and says she can even take credit for writing the song if she wants. Sarah takes the song and learns to play it.

Purchased Permission: Ruby agrees to permit Sarah to use the song and says she can even take credit for writing the song if she wants. Sarah pays Ruby for the rights to the song and she takes the song and learns to play it.

At a concert a few weeks later, Sarah performs the song she had heard Ruby practicing. The audience loves it.

False Credit: Sarah tells the audience that she wrote the song herself. The song becomes a mainstay in Sarah's set, and she gains widespread acclaim for having written it.

True Credit: Sarah tells the audience that her friend Ruby wrote the song. The song becomes a mainstay in Sarah's set, and she gains widespread acclaim for playing it.

After reading the vignette, participants made a moral evaluation, rating Sarah's actions from 1 ("Totally morally right") to 7 ("Totally morally wrong"). Note that we altered the moral evaluation scale so that we could measure if people thought that any of the actions were morally good—we realized that purchasing permission and then giving the person credit anyway might be seen as good. We again used the comprehension check from Study 3.

6.2. Results

We first conducted a 3 (Permission: No Permission, Permission, Purchased Permission) \times 2 (Credit: False or True) between-subjects ANOVA on the moral evaluations, which revealed a main effect of Credit ($F(1, 291) = 265.25, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .48$), such that participants thought it was worse for Sarah to take false credit for the song ($M = 5.37, SD = 1.65$) than for her to give true credit to Ruby ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.59$). There was also a main effect of Permission ($F(2, 291) = 35.6, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .20$), such that participants thought that it was worse for Sarah to use Ruby's song without permission ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.81$) than to do so having obtained permission ($M = 4.04, SD = 2.35$) or purchased permission ($M = 3.63, SD = 2.43$). In addition, there was a significant interaction effect ($F(2, 291) = 1.02, p = .361, \eta p^2 = .01$). See Fig 2.

Furthermore, we found a significant effect of Credit at every permission level. In the No Permission conditions, taking false credit ($M = 6.44, SD = 1.07$) was seen as worse than giving true credit ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.76; t(86.39) = 10.81, p < .001$). In the Permission conditions, taking false credit ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.54$) was also seen as worse than giving true credit ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.39; t(94) = 9.18, p < .001$). Finally, in the Purchased Permission conditions, taking false credit ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.67$) was

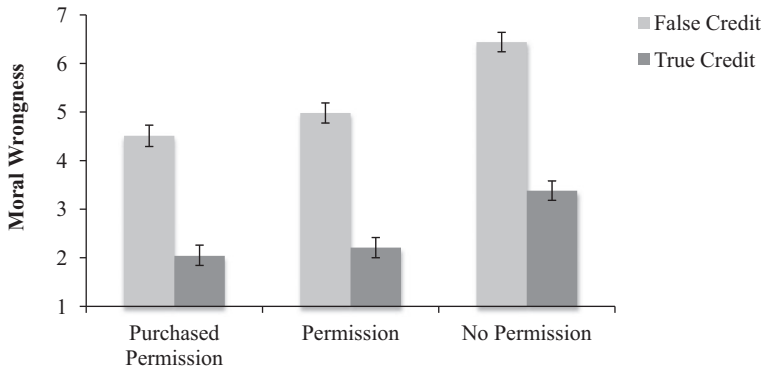


Fig. 2. Moral evaluations by condition from Study 5. Higher numbers represent stronger negative evaluations. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

considered worse than giving true credit ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.23$; $t(75.81) = 8.08$, $p < .001$).

6.3. Discussion

Consistent with our previous results, participants in Study 5 more strongly condemned the musician's actions in the false credit conditions as compared to the true credit conditions. Importantly for our purposes, they also condemned Sarah for claiming false credit for Ruby's idea even when Sarah received explicit permission or purchased all the rights to do so. Indeed, in the false credit conditions, people's evaluations of plagiarism did not differ across the three permission levels—all were condemned. It is interesting to note that obtaining Ruby's permission did influence participants' moral judgments of Sarah, which means that part of people's negative reaction to plagiarism may be related to notions of permission. We believe that this result is interesting and merits future research elsewhere. For our purposes, though, the key finding from Study 5 is that people's negative reactions to plagiarism go beyond concerns about permission.

7. Study 6

In Study 6, we tested one of the more extreme predictions of our hypotheses regarding the false reputational benefit mechanism: People will react negatively to a plagiarism case in which the idea originator actually *benefits* from having her idea stolen. Such a result would provide the strongest possible evidence against a purely harm-based account of plagiarism.

We offered participants a new scenario in which a young professor stumbles onto an older, retiring professor's research manuscript—one that the older professor had no intention of ever publishing. The young professor considers publishing the manuscript with his

name and the older professor's both listed as authors (even though he did not contribute to the manuscript whatsoever), which would result in both professors getting widespread recognition and the world having access to the research. We created three conditions: one in which the young professor goes through with his plan to take partial credit for the manuscript (False Credit), one in which the young professor publishes the manuscript under only the older professor's name (True Credit), and one in which he does not publish the manuscript at all (Not Published). Note that in the False Credit Condition, the manuscript's true author actually *benefits* from having her work published.

If negative evaluations of plagiarism are driven solely by harm, then we should see no negative evaluation of plagiarizers in any of the three conditions because there is no condition in which the original author is harmed. In two of the conditions, the idea originator actually benefits from having her idea plagiarized (an assumption that we validated by measuring participants' perception of harm or benefit to the idea originator). However, consistent with our previous results, we predicted that participants would judge the plagiarizer's actions as wrong in the False Credit Condition, even if they simultaneously agreed that the idea originator benefits.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

One hundred fifty-two participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.6$, $SD = 12.2$, 44.7% female). No participants were excluded.

7.1.2. Procedure

The design and procedure for Study 6 were similar to that used in previous studies. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the three versions of the following vignette:

Dr. Kim is a professor of psychology at a major university who is retiring after a long career. A week before her retirement, a younger psychologist named Dr. Mark, who has been selected to take over her faculty position, volunteers to help her clean out her office. In one of Dr. Kim's drawers, Dr. Mark finds an old research paper about parenting psychology that Dr. Kim wrote 15 years ago and never published. Dr. Mark thinks the paper is absolutely brilliant and should definitely be published and shared with the scientific community.

Dr. Kim explains that she never got around to publishing it and that since she was at the end of her career she definitely never will.

False Credit

Though Dr. Mark never worked on any of the material in the paper, he plans to publish it, exactly as he found it, under both of their names. That way, the findings from Dr. Kim's research will be available, and both he and Dr. Kim will benefit from

receiving credit for the work. Dr. Mark hopes that this paper can help him jump-start his reputation as a great professor of psychology.

In the end, Dr. Mark goes through with his plan. The paper is published with both of them listed as authors. Thus, the research is made available, and both Dr. Mark and Dr. Kim gain widespread recognition for conducting the research and writing the paper. Thus, Dr. Mark gains a reputation as a brilliant psychologist and Dr. Kim becomes an even more famous world-renowned psychologist. How morally right or wrong was it for Dr. Mark to publish the paper under both of their names?

True Credit

Though Dr. Mark never worked on any of the material in the paper, he plans to publish it, exactly as he found it, under Dr. Kim's name. That way, the findings from Dr. Kim's research will be available and Dr. Kim will benefit from receiving credit for the work.

In the end, Dr. Mark goes through with his plan. The paper is published with Dr. Kim as the sole author. Thus, the research is made available and Dr. Kim gains widespread recognition for conducting the research and writing the paper. Thus, Dr. Kim becomes an even more famous world-renowned psychologist. How morally right or wrong was it for Dr. Mark to publish the paper for Dr. Kim?

Not Published

Though Dr. Mark never worked on any of the material in the paper, he plans to publish it, exactly as he found it, under both of their names. That way, the findings from Dr. Kim's research will be available, and both he and Dr. Kim will benefit from receiving credit for the work. Dr. Mark hopes that this paper can help him jump-start his reputation as a great professor of psychology.

In the end, Dr. Mark doesn't go through with his plan. The paper is never published. Thus, the research is not made available, and neither Dr. Mark nor Dr. Kim is recognized for conducting the research or writing the paper. How morally right or wrong was it for Dr. Mark to not publish the paper under both of their names?

Participants rated Dr. Mark's actions on the same 7-point scale from "Totally morally right" to "Totally morally wrong" used in Study 5. Participants also answered a question that assessed the extent to which Dr. Kim's reputation was helped or harmed by Dr. Mark's action (or inaction). Participants completed the statement: "What Dr. Mark did...'" with a choice on a scale from 1 ('Strongly helped Dr. Kim's reputation') to 7 ('Strongly

harmed Dr. Kim's reputation'). The midpoint, 4, indicated 'What Dr. Mark did neither helped nor harmed Dr. Kim's reputation.' This item always came after the wrongness judgment. Participants also answered a simple yes/no comprehension check question ("Did Dr. Kim publish her own paper?").

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Moral evaluations

We first conducted a one-way ANOVA on participants' moral evaluations by condition (False Credit, True Credit, Not Published), which revealed a main effect of condition ($F(2, 149) = 27.53, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .27$). We then followed up on this result with planned comparison t tests and found that people thought it was more wrong to take false credit ($M = 5.69, SD = 1.40$) than to give true credit to the real author only ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.46, t(100) = 5.81, p < .001$) or not to publish at all ($M = 3.26, SD = 2.10, t(85.46) = 6.81, p < .001$). See Fig 3. These results are consistent with our predictions and suggest that people think it is wrong for someone to take false credit for an idea even if they agree that the action benefits the idea originator (see Participants' reputational benefit ratings for confirmation of this point). Our participants would prefer that only the true author get credit if the paper is published, but actually think it is morally preferable not to publish the research at all. In other words, they thought it was morally worse to publish and give true credit than not to publish at all ($t(87.15) = 2.17, p < .03$). This last result is consistent with the result from Study 5 that people think it is morally wrong to use someone else's work without their permission even if the person gets credit.

7.2.2. Reputational benefit/harm judgments

We next conducted a one-way ANOVA on participants' judgments of the benefit or harm to Dr. Kim's reputation by condition (False Credit, True Credit, Not Published), which revealed a main effect of condition ($F(2, 149) = 79.29, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .49$). Following up with planned comparison t tests, we found that people thought Dr. Kim benefitted significantly less in the Not Published Condition ($M = 3.94, SD = 0.65$) as compared to the

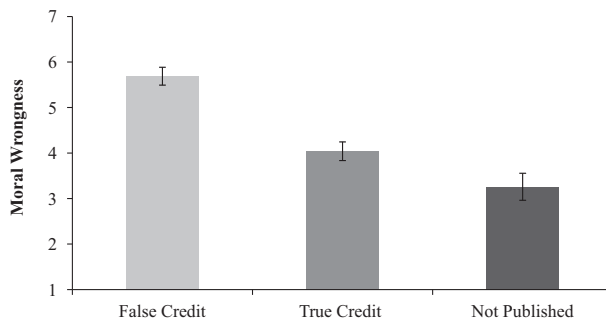


Fig. 3. Moral evaluations by condition from Study 6. Higher numbers represent stronger negative evaluations. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

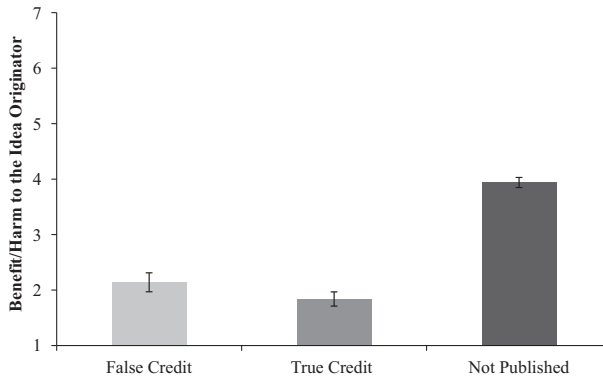


Fig. 4. Perceived harm or benefit to the idea originator by condition from Study 6. Lower numbers represent perceived benefit and higher ones represent perceived harm. The midpoint here indicates no harm or benefit. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

True Credit Condition ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.9$, $t(91.05) = 13.40$, $p < .001$) or the False Credit Condition ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.22$, $t(76.84) = 9.31$, $p < .001$; recall that lower numbers here indicate a reputational benefit and higher numbers indicate a reputational harm). There was no significant difference in perceived reputational benefit between the True Credit and False Credit conditions ($t(100) = 1.39$, $p = .17$), although directionally Dr. Kim was thought to have benefitted a bit more from getting sole true credit for her manuscript. See Fig 4. Still, on average, participants thought that Dr. Kim benefitted quite a bit in both of the conditions in which the manuscript is published. Taken together, these results indicate that people think it is wrong to plagiarize even when doing so simultaneously benefits the idea originator.

7.3. Discussion

We again found a strong tendency to condemn plagiarism, even though doing so here meant rejecting a mutually beneficial arrangement in which every involved party (including, critically, the idea generator) benefitted. Ultimately, the results of Study 6 indicate that the psychology which condemns false credit claiming uncovered in Studies 1–5 operates independently from concerns about perceived harm or benefit to the idea generator and can, in fact, override these in driving negative moral sentiments toward idea theft.

8. General discussion

Across six studies, using different sorts of ideas (poetry, music, and scientific research), we find support for the notion that perceived false reputational benefit can drive people's negative moral evaluations of harmless plagiarizers. We demonstrated that participants consider plagiarism wrong even when there is minimal harm to the idea

originator (Studies 1, 2, and 3), suggesting that these negative reactions go beyond harm alone. We also found a case in which participants think it is worse to falsely improve one's reputation than to falsely profit from plagiarism (Study 2), emphasizing the influence of reputational concerns on participants' negative moral evaluations. Moreover, we found that moral condemnation of plagiarizers is mediated by the extent to which participants believe that the plagiarizer falsely improved her reputation (Study 3). We also showed that this negative reaction is not simply driven by disliking lying (Study 4) or permission violations (Study 5). Finally, we demonstrated that people condemn plagiarism even in a case where the idea's creator *benefits* from the act (Study 6).

A comprehensive theory of people's moral intuitions about idea theft needs to be able to explain people's negative reactions to a wide variety of ordinary plagiarism cases. We have argued that previous accounts have left a particular subset of plagiarism cases, namely, those in which minimal harm is done to the idea originator, largely unexplained. Some authors have suggested that people's concerns about credit and reputation can account for otherwise puzzling moral reactions to certain plagiarism cases (Goodenough & Decker, 2009; Shaw & Olson, 2015). Yet experiments on the reputational consequences of plagiarism—and self-interested lying more broadly—have often confounded reputational harm and false reputational gain. In many of the scenarios tested, an agent either doles out false blame for something bad to a victim or steals credit for something good from a victim (Fu et al., 2015; Shaw & Olson, 2015). By isolating the influence of false reputational benefit on people's negative reactions to idea theft, our studies extend and clarify this reputational account. We empirically demonstrate people's moral aversion to harmless plagiarism cases and supply a mechanism to explain this effect.

Our proposed mechanism can help to explain people's reactions not only to the specific scenarios we invented but also to cases that arise in the real world. For example, in a recent lawsuit, pop music stars Robin Thicke and Pharell Williams were found guilty of stealing musical ideas from Marvin Gaye's "Got To Give It Up" to create their 2013 mega-hit "Blurred Lines" and ordered to pay millions of dollars to Gaye's estate. Thicke and Williams were widely ridiculed and condemned, despite the fact that sales of Gaye's "Got To Give It Up" actually skyrocketed in 2013 when its similarity to "Blurred Lines" brought it back into the public consciousness (Miao & Grimm, 2013; Sanderson & Wiseman, 2015). Just like in our Study 6, the idea originator in this case was not evidently harmed—indeed, he and his estate appear to have greatly benefitted—yet people still reacted negatively. Judgments like these, and those we found in our experiments, seem to be the result of the false reputational benefit mechanism in action.

8.1. *Remaining questions and future directions*

Our results dovetail with previous work demonstrating that people respond negatively to dishonest reputation management (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Godfrey et al., 1986; Heyman et al., 2014; Hornsey & Jetten, 2003), but questions remain as to why such a mechanism exists in the first place. Why would people object to impression management tactics that come at no cost (or even confer a significant benefit) to others? One factor that might

drive the false benefit mechanism is a need to evaluate others accurately. When an agent manipulates his reputation, it becomes more difficult to accurately gauge what he is like and what can be expected from him in the future. Not knowing what abilities those around us possess makes it harder to know whom to turn to for expertise or strategic partnerships, which in turn hinders our ability to navigate the complex social world and select trustworthy social partners. A second possible reason people may object to false reputational gain is that they view reputation as a zero-sum resource, where one person's reputational gain necessitates another's reputational loss. In our studies, we tried to control for reputational harm done to the idea's originator specifically, but it is possible that people implicitly assume that any reputational boost represents a competitive advantage that inherently harms others in the relevant domain. Such an account certainly seems to explain, for example, why people might condemn a student who copies material from a textbook directly into his essay. While he may not be harming the textbook's author, he may be gaining an unfair zero-sum advantage over other students in his class, especially if the class is graded on a curve. Such an explanation could apply in any domain where there is competition for scarce accolades, income, or jobs. Future research should investigate whether condemnation of plagiarism corresponds to perceived competitive disadvantages for others. More generally, we think the question of whether reputation is seen as zero sum is of broad significance and merits future consideration.

Another important question concerns how the false benefit mechanism emerges over the course of development. Previous work has demonstrated that a negative response to plagiarism appears quite early (Li et al., 2013; Olson & Shaw, 2011) and that this response is driven in part by concerns about reputation (Shaw & Olson, 2015). Curiously, while Shaw and Olson (2015) demonstrated that 6- to 9-year-old children's judgments of plagiarism were sensitive to reputational harm, they failed to detect an effect of false reputational benefit (Shaw & Olson, 2015). The false reputational benefit mechanism likely relies on an ability to impute deceptive reputational motives and calculate possible reputational consequences, tasks that may be challenging for younger children. However, moving into early adolescence, children grow increasingly attuned to and critical of the self-presentational motives of others (Banerjee, 2000; Heyman et al., 2007; Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982), and this developmental shift may result in more negative attitudes about show-offs, self-promoters, and plagiarizers. As far as we are aware, our studies are the first to provide evidence that people object to plagiarism on the grounds of false reputational benefit *per se*, and we hope that future investigations further examine when and how children develop such intuitions.

Although our studies were aimed at deepening our understanding of people's responses to plagiarism, the false reputational benefit mechanism likely extends beyond the domain of ideas. As we have indicated, our results align with a growing body of evidence showing that people dislike deceptive impression management (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Godfrey et al., 1986; Heyman et al., 2014; Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Newman & Cain, 2014; Schoemann & Branscombe, 2011; Vonk, 1998). In light of our results, we suggest that this moral inclination may be at play in a wider set of circumstances than previously considered. Indeed, we note that a variety of social behaviors resemble dishonest reputational

manipulation in terms of their underlying patterns of intent and consequence from plagiarism to humble bragging to conspicuous charitable giving. There is good reason to believe that similar patterns of judgment as those we uncovered in the domain of plagiarism may emerge in these cases and that a similar reputational approach to investigating them may prove fruitful. From a brand management perspective, companies, social movements, and government administrations may all benefit from an understanding of how the false benefit mechanism works. Ultimately, we believe that a unified account of the strategic tension between reputation management and evaluation across domains may be warranted in order to explain a broad array of observed social norms and behaviors.

Finally, we highlight a few important caveats to the present findings. First, we note that while our participants reacted negatively to plagiarizers who were “successful” in garnering a false reputational boost, we do not think that any particular reputational outcome is necessary to elicit these judgments. Consistent with the broader literature on the importance of intentions for moral judgments (for review, see Cushman, 2008) and recent indications that intentions seem particularly important for evaluating deceptive acts (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015), we suspect that the mere intention to boost one’s reputation would elicit some amount of moral scorn. For example, if a performer steals someone’s song, performs it, and it happens to be received poorly, we still think the plagiarizer would be judged negatively. However, we also suspect that people’s judgments would be somewhat outcome biased (Baron & Hershey, 1988), trending more negative if the outcome corresponded to their intentions (e.g., Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007). Future work could examine how intentions and outcomes interact to influence people’s moral judgments of plagiarism and impression management tactics more broadly.

We would also like to clarify that while our experiments were designed to isolate and test the effect of false reputational benefit, we recognize that real-world cases of plagiarism can be more complex. In reality, people’s reactions to plagiarism cases are likely driven by a combination of factors including not only reputational benefit, monetary benefit, and harm but also things like the idea originator’s permission, the plagiarizer’s intentions, the nature of the ideas in question, or the cultural and legal norms in which the agents are embedded. While we have touched on these notions peripherally, our primary focus has been on testing a particular driver of people’s negative reactions to plagiarism in the absence of other possible drivers, and further work is needed to achieve a more nuanced understanding of how multiple factors intersect to yield the powerful moral response to plagiarism we observe in everyday life. Still, it occurs to us that while various drivers will be present to varying degrees in any given case, nearly every example of plagiarism involves an agent trying to dishonestly improve her reputation, a fact which may suggest the centrality of the false reputational benefit mechanism in any account of people’s moral judgments of idea theft.

Furthermore, we note that our findings do not address a slew of fascinating open questions concerning what constitutes an original idea for the purposes of ownership and credit. Whereas we focused on cases in which proper credit allocation is obvious, situations often arise in which rightful credit is less straightforward (see Bechtold, Buccafusco, & Sprigman, 2015). How much does an individual need to alter or expand on an idea she

encounters to be granted rightful credit for it? What sort of contribution does an individual need to bring to an idea generated by a group to earn a slice of reputational credit? Where is the line between homage and idea theft? Along similar lines, if an idea is easier to generate or requires less creative input, is it considered less reputationally valuable or more acceptable to steal? Future investigations could explore questions like these in order to elucidate the relationship between creative contribution and people's perceptions of idea ownership.

9. Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, we suggested that there are many cases of idea theft that people ordinarily condemn but which cannot be accounted for by existing theories—those in which there is no clear victim or harm caused by the act. We found that people do indeed judge harmless cases of plagiarism negatively and demonstrated that this occurs because people think it is wrong to claim a false reputational boost from stolen ideas. More broadly, we believe that future research guided by a similar reputational approach can help psychologists make sense of a myriad of otherwise puzzling behaviors as well as unlock a better understanding of the social norms that govern them. To what extent can dynamics of reputational credit explain people's intentions, norms, and judgments in the social sphere? At least in the case of plagiarism, reputation is key.

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