

# Unconscious Plagiarism in Young and Older Adults

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## Conjunction Errors in Event Memory

When young and older adults witness events, they often falsely remember a familiar person performing a familiar action that was in fact performed by someone else. This happens more with older adults than with young adults (Kersten, Earles, Curtayne, & Lane, 2008).

Kersten and Earles (2010) provided evidence that this phenomenon is due to errors in binding together features of events in memory.

## Unconscious Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious issue in academia, music, literature, and many other disciplines. However, plagiarism is not always intentional.

The most common definition of unconscious plagiarism is as the belief that a newly generated idea is original when in reality it is from a past event. This includes previously encountered ideas from one's self and others. It can also refer to the incorrect recall or recognition of an old idea as one's own.

McCabe, Smith, and Parks (2007) demonstrated that in a category exemplar generation task older adults were more likely than younger adults to come up with exemplars that had in fact already been provided to them.

Thus, they showed that older adults are more susceptible than younger adults to unconscious plagiarism. McCabe et al. hypothesized that this increase in susceptibility to unconscious plagiarism with increased age was due to age related decreases in working memory capacity.

## The Present Study

Older adults are expected to exhibit more unconscious plagiarism than young adults because of deficits in source monitoring and in the ability to bind together features of events.

In addition, young adults are expected to perform better on measures of cognitive speed and working memory.

## Method

### Participants

22 FAU undergraduates aged 19–38 ( $M = 21.3$ )  
23 older adults aged 62–83 ( $M = 73.2$ )

### Procedure

#### Encoding

Participants saw 30 objects on the computer.

Example: Flower



For half of the objects, they watched a video of someone performing an action with the object.

Example: Smell the flower



For the other half of the objects, they were given the object and asked to perform an action.

#### Retrieval

Participants returned one week later and went through six tasks:

**Generate-New Task:** Shown 45 objects (30 from encoding plus 15 new ones) and asked to generate a new action with each.

**Vocabulary:** 30 multiple choice synonym questions.

**Letter Comparison:** Cognitive speed measure. Shown pairs of strings of 3, 6, and 9 letters and asked to determine if they were the same or different.

**Reading Span:** Working memory span measure. Shown a sentence and then asked a question about the sentence. Afterwards asked to recall the last word of the sentence. Number of sentences before recall increases as the task progresses so that more words must be remembered.

**Source Monitoring Task:** Shown same 45 objects and asked whether they had watched an action with that object, performed an action with it, or had not seen it the previous week.

**Recall-Own Task:** Shown same 45 objects and asked to provide the actions they generated in the Generate New Task.

## Results

An independent samples t test showed no significant difference between the young and older adults' performance on the generate new task. The mean number of plagiarisms (out of 30 possible) was 3.6 (12%) for young adults and 3.4 (11%) for older adults.

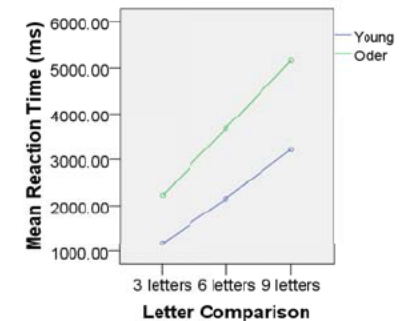
Combining young and older adults, the range for number of plagiarisms was from 0 to 9 (30%).

There was a significant correlation between scores on the reading span task and number of plagiarisms in the generate new task ( $r = 0.33$ ).

There were significant differences between the age groups on several of the other tasks (shown below). Older adults performed better on the vocabulary test, but younger adults had faster reaction times on the letter comparison task and remembered more words on the reading span tasks.

	Mean for Young Adults	Mean for Older Adults
Vocabulary	35% Correct	72% Correct
3 Letter Comparison	1190ms	2226ms
6 Letter Comparison	2153ms	3670ms
9 Letter Comparison	3210ms	5162ms
Reading Span	35.8 Correct	29.3 Correct

A repeated measures ANOVA indicated significant differences among the three levels of the letter comparison task and also an interaction with age group with older adults experiencing a larger increase in reaction time across the task than the young adults. (see graph below).



## Discussion

Unconscious plagiarism was present at moderate rates in both young and older adults. It is possible that we did not detect age differences because both younger and older adults consciously remembered the actions from encoding well.

As in McCabe, Smith, and Parks (2007), we found a correlation between reading span and unconscious plagiarism, which indicates that a working memory deficit may be a key component of this phenomenon.

## References

- Kersten, A. W. & Earles, J. L. (2010). Effects of aging, distraction, and response pressure on the binding of actors and actions. *Psychology and Aging, 25*(3), 620 – 630.
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