

SELF-CITATION—WHERE’S THE LINE?

A recent post on Scholarly Kitchen [1] raised some interesting points about the ethics surrounding citation, and specifically self-citation. Previously, COPE has discussed related issues surrounding self-citation by journals and editors [2] and citation of preprints [3]. During this forum, we’d like to broaden the discussion to include some of the questions related to self-citation by authors in scholarly publication.

Questions for discussion:

1. Where is the line between what’s appropriate in terms of self-citation, and what’s not?

If an author did not cite any of their previous works, this could be considered to be an inappropriate deception, indicating that the present work is novel, and unrelated to past works. But on the other hand, too many citations to previous works by the same authors are also inappropriate, considered to be a potential attempt to manipulate an author’s own h-index. So where’s the line?

2. What is a peer reviewer’s responsibility in terms of calling out self-citation?

While journals often expect that reviewers will read a paper inside and out, front to back, how much time does a peer reviewer actually spend looking at the reference list? And even if they do take a look through the reference list, is it biased to call out an author for citing too many of their own works, especially if in their report, the reviewer asks for the author to add references to the reviewer’s work?

3. Should journals have specific policies about self-citation, and the peer review of reference lists?

Is there a certain number, or percentage, of references in a given work that can or should be a limit in referring back to the authors’ own publications? Is there any guidance journals or publishers can give to authors about what is considered “appropriate” vs. “excessive”? Are there, or should there be rules about changing reference lists during revision, in particular in adding more self-citations if not specifically requested by the editors/reviewers?

References

1. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/10/05/turning-critical-eye-reference-lists/>
2. https://publicationethics.org/files/u7141/Forum%20discussion%20topic_final.pdf
3. <https://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-comments-please-8>

This was discussed at the start of the COPE Forum on 13 November 2017.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (13 November 2017) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- Editors may have to judge this issue on a case by case basis. If an author lists many references to their own work, this may be an indication of inappropriate citing. Editors may need to systematically check that there are not excessive citations to certain authors or journals. Editor can ask authors to reduce the citation level if they feel there are excessive citations.

- The time frame is important because if authors are self-citing excessively, they may be doing so to increase their own h-index or to increase the impact factor of the journal.
- Sometimes it is acceptable to cite a series of works because research is iterative and in many cases, builds upon previous work. However, pilot studies should be replaced by more in-depth or review studies that would supplant a citation to a pilot study. Hence editors or reviewers need to look carefully at the reference list, looking at the quality in addition to the quantity of the citations.
- Is this a job for the editor or should it be the responsibility of the reviewer? The issue can be complicated when the peer review system is double-blind, so the reviewer is unaware of the identity of the author and therefore cannot know if he is self-citing. Initially, it is the job of the editor. If an editor sees excessive self-citation, then he can raise this directly with the reviewer, although the editor may not be able to reveal the name of the author.
- Some publishers have decided to implement new guidance for their journals. They plan to update their instructions to reviewers to look out for excessive self-citations. Reviewers will be asked to specifically look at the citation lists and check if there is inappropriate referencing.
- Self-citations being added at the revision stage is an issue that has arisen. Instructions to authors should make it clear that authors cannot add references at the proof stage. Editors need to pay more attention to the revised paper.
- If an article is published, and the editor did not notice there were excessive self-citations, particularly if they were added after original peer review, editors should be willing to publish an erratum to say there were inappropriately added references.
- Some journals limit the number of references—for example, no more than five articles from the same author (the author themselves or another author). However, they have come under some criticism from scholars who say they are doing an injustice to their work and they should be allowed to cite their own work. Other journals use percentage limits—self-citations as a percentage of the total citations—or have a strict policy on the total number of individual citations in an attempt to have only important appropriate citations, while other journals encourage authors not to cite references more than 5 years old. But do these measures restrict authors too much?
- References should be reviewed for quality and appropriateness.
- Appropriate referencing can be a difficult transition for students to make in becoming early researchers. Students are used to citing everything to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge and their command of the literature but when deciding which are the most appropriate resources to cite they often have difficulty. COPE may be able to help early researchers via institutional membership, which COPE is piloting at the moment.
- Education is important, in particular for early researchers.

ACTIONS: COPE will think about additional guidance it can provide, and in what form, to help in this discussion.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Daniel Kulp, 10/11/2017

This is a very difficult and delicate issue. In general, I would expect some self-citation since most work is built off previous studies by the same group. When this gets to be "too much" is difficult to assess. For the APS journals, we directly ask the referees "Are there appropriate and adequate references to related and previous work?" We definitely want to ensure that the work is properly placed within the context of previously published work.

Posted by Zoe Mullan, 13/11/2017

For a primary research article, all types of citation should be used to justify the need to do the current research and to put the findings into the context of existing evidence. That could legitimately involve self-citation, and, in some very niche fields, it could involve quite a lot of self-citation. So, for original research, I don't think it's appropriate to put a percentage on it. For review papers and opinion pieces, one could be a lot more critical.

In looking for appropriate peer reviewers, an editor can probably get a feel for whether or not the authors are dominant in the field or whether they are omitting others' work. But reviewers are probably better placed to assess this, and so I think an instruction phrased along the lines of Dan's is a good one.

Posted by Charon Pierson, 13/11/2017

I agree with both Dan and Zoe on this. I think this issue may be more straightforward in the sciences whereas mentioned, research is an iterative process and the full picture can only be viewed with an understanding of previous work by the author and other colleagues doing similar work. In the humanities, and social sciences, there is likely some difference, although, a scholar could easily develop a highly focused research trajectory requiring a lot of self-citation. Even in that situation, there is a need to cite contradictory work to flesh out the arguments. There is a need for careful review of the content and the references in the peer review process, but there is also a need for careful consideration by the editor to determine if the citations are appropriate. I do not believe any kind of "rule" is possible limiting the percentage of self-cites. One other factor to consider is the education of early career researchers and doctoral students on the purpose of citations. I don't remember learning anything like that in my education - it was very much an individual situation depending on the professors. Above all, students need to understand the importance of accuracy of citations and references.

Posted by Geraldine Pearson, 13/11/2017

I think my additional comment would involve education of reviewers around self-citation and the balance they look for as they review papers. References need to be examined just like the rest of the submission.