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