



## Potentially coercive self-citation by peer reviewers: A cross-sectional study



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 29 March 2014

Received in revised form 14 August 2014

Accepted 11 September 2014

#### Keywords:

Peer review

Self-citation

Journalology

Publishing ethics

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Peer reviewers sometimes request that authors cite their work, either appropriately or via coercive self-citation to highlight the reviewers' work. The objective of this study was to determine in peer reviews submitted to one biomedical journal (1) the extent of peer reviewer self-citation; (2) the proportion of reviews recommending revision or acceptance versus rejection that included reviewer self-citations; and (3) the proportion of reviewer self-citations versus citations to others that included a rationale.

**Methods:** Peer reviews for manuscripts submitted in 2012 to the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* were evaluated. Data extraction was performed independently by two investigators.

**Results:** There were 616 peer reviews (526 reviewers; 276 manuscripts), of which 444 recommended revision or acceptance and 172 rejection. Of 428 total citations, there were 122 peer reviewer self-citations (29%) and 306 citations to others' work (71%). Self-citations were more common in reviews recommending revision or acceptance (105 of 316 citations; 33%) versus rejection (17/112; 15%;  $p < 0.001$ ). The percentage of self-citations with no rationale (26 of 122; 21%) was higher than for citations to others' work (15 of 306; 5%;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusions:** Self-citation in peer reviews is common and may reflect a combination of appropriate citation to research that should be cited in published articles and inappropriate citation intended to highlight the work of the peer reviewer. Providing instructions to peer reviewers about self-citation and asking them to indicate when and why they have self-cited may help to limit self-citation to appropriate, constructive recommendations.

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### Introduction

Medical journals rely on the input of outside peer reviewers to evaluate submitted manuscripts. Since peer review was introduced over 200 years ago, it has been viewed as an important quality control mechanism for scientific publication and a core component of the scientific process itself [1]. Clinicians give more credence to results published in

peer-reviewed journals [2], and peer review is seen as an important indicator of scientific reputability [3]. Peer review, however, has been criticized for its inconsistency, for sometimes supporting narrow consensus and bias, and because it can be subjective and easily abused [4–6].

The impact of academic research is commonly quantified via citation metrics [7,8], and it is well-documented that some researchers attempt to inflate their own citation counts through unnecessary self-citation to their own work in their publications [9,10]. Similarly, the practice of “coercive self-citation” by editors of academic journals has been described [11–15], by which editors make requests to authors during the article review process to add citations from the editor's own journal without any rationale provided. That is, the editor gives no indication that the manuscript is lacking in attribution or contains important inaccuracies

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2014.11.008>.

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or specific gaps, which will be addressed via a discussion of a recommended citation [11].

Peer reviewers may also practice coercive self-citation during the article review process by requesting that authors cite the reviewers' own publications unnecessarily [7,16]. Similar to coercive citation by editors, this would involve recommendations for citation to the reviewer's own work that does not address failures to properly attribute, information gaps, or inaccuracies in the manuscript. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers specifies that recommendations by a peer reviewer to cite his/her own work should be made only as necessary to substantively improve scientific publication and that peer reviewers should "not suggest that authors include citations to the reviewer's (or their associates') work merely to increase the reviewer's (or their associates') citation count or to enhance the visibility of their or their associates' work" [17]. In one study [18], however, 23% of US government researchers indicated in an anonymous survey that at some point a reviewer had requested that they include what they believed to be unnecessary references to his/her own publication(s) in a manuscript. No studies have examined actual peer reviews to determine how often potentially coercive peer reviewer self-citation occurs in the article review process.

The objective of this study was to examine peer reviews submitted to one journal over the course of a year and to assess whether there may be potentially coercive peer reviewer self-citation. We hypothesized that (1) a substantial number of peer reviews would include citations to the reviewer's work; (2) that if coercive peer reviews were present, then peer reviewers would include a greater proportion of self-citations in reviews where they recommended revision or acceptance compared to reviews where they recommended rejection; and (3) that a smaller proportion of peer reviewer self-citations would include a rationale that addressed attribution failures, specific information gaps, or inaccuracies in the manuscript compared to citations of the work of others.

## Methods

### Selection of peer reviews

The peer reviews that were evaluated were from manuscripts submitted to the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* from January 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012. The journal is a multidisciplinary research journal that publishes a range of types of articles that focus on the relationship between psychology, medical illness and health care. The 2012 impact factor was 3.3. No specific instructions are provided by the journal to peer reviewers with respect to self-citation.

The authors of this study included the two editors and two associate editors of the journal, who were able to access the peer reviews with the support of the journal publisher, Elsevier. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee of the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal, Canada.

All peer reviews, with the exception of reviews of manuscripts authored or co-authored by the investigators of the present study, were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. The reviews of the current investigators' manuscripts were excluded to protect reviewer confidentiality, because the journal's peer review process is blind to authors. In addition, reviews done by the present study co-authors were excluded due to the conflict of interest in rating whether self-citations by peer reviewers included a rationale.

Only peer reviews of *full-length articles*, *reviews*, and *short reports* were considered, because other publication types, including *letters-to-the-editor*, *commentaries*, and *editorials*, are not typically peer reviewed. We did not include editorial comments from articles that were pre-reviewed, but not sent out for peer review. We evaluated only reviews of the initially submitted version of manuscripts, but

not reviews of revised manuscripts. This is because reviewers' coercive self-citation via the peer review process would most likely occur during initial review and not subsequently, when the purpose of the review is to determine if the authors have adequately addressed comments previously made by the reviewers. Two investigators independently evaluated all reviews for inclusion with any discrepancies resolved by consensus.

### Data extraction

For each included peer review, we extracted the manuscript number, manuscript author, manuscript title, total number of reviews, number of reviews recommending acceptance or revision, identify of the peer reviewer, peer reviewer recommendation, final journal disposition (accept or reject), and the text of the actual review. From the text of the review, we extracted the total number of specific and general citations in the review and the number of these citations where the peer reviewer was an author or co-author. Specific citations were defined as citations with enough information to search and locate a specific publication (see Appendix 1 for example). To determine if a reviewer was an author or co-author of a specific citation, we used multiple electronic databases to locate the cited publication, and then reviewed the publication to determine if the peer reviewer had been an author. General citations were defined as broad references to the work of an author or group of authors without specifying a specific article to cite (see Appendix 1 for example). For each general citation, we identified the investigator or team whose work was being referenced then cross-cited to determine if the peer reviewer was an author or co-author of any publications that were part of the generally cited research. For general and specific citations, we documented whether citations could be linked to the reviewer through the citation in the review because the peer reviewer's name was listed or if a background search was required to ascertain the link. The latter could occur, for instance, when only the first author was listed, and the peer reviewer was a co-author.

We additionally coded whether a rationale was provided for each citation in the review. Citations were coded as having a rationale if the reviewer made any indication that the citation was included to address (1) a failure to properly attribute material presented in the manuscript, (2) specific information relevant to the topic, but missing from the manuscript, or (3) specific inaccuracies in the information presented in the manuscript. For each self-citation by peer reviewers, if the manuscript under review was ultimately published in the journal, we determined whether or not the recommended citation appeared in the published article. Two investigators independently extracted data with discrepancies resolved by consensus. The coding manual is available in Appendix 1. Examples of citations that would be coded as citations with and without a rationale are shown in Appendix 2.

### Statistical analysis

We used the chi-square test to compare the proportion of total citations that were self-citations in reviews recommending revision or acceptance versus reviews recommending rejection and to compare the proportion of self-citations that included a rationale compared to citations to the works of others that included a rationale. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 22.0 (Chicago, IL), and all statistical tests were conducted with a  $p < .05$  significance level.

## Results

There were 305 manuscripts submitted to the journal in 2012 that were sent for peer review, not including 50 that were rejected without peer review. These 305 manuscripts were associated with 656 peer reviews. There were 5 manuscripts submitted by investigators of the present study with 11 peer reviews, which were excluded, leaving 300 manuscripts and 645 peer reviews. Of these, 29 peer reviews were excluded because the

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