

Self-citation: to do or not to do?

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Keywords: *Self-citation; Scientometric; Researchers.*

Dear Editor,

Human beings used to pile up their experiences to shape human knowledge and apply them in problem solving. In the modern world, accumulation of research findings and written scientific records dramatically contributed to the formation of applicable knowledge. In order to document scholarly works, scientists and researchers were required to cite earlier studies. Occasionally, prolific authors cited their own works too; this, however, tended to become canonical for authors of scholarly articles, irrespective of their specialized research interests. But it was intentionally practiced, particularly after citations turned into a yardstick for authors' ranking and reputation from that point on, self-citation turned into a double-edged sword. On the one hand, authors who repeatedly refer to their own works in the 'References' section of their publications are not few; this occasionally reflects their established and highly specialized research routes over long years of their academic career. These elite scholars have already established a spectacular place in the world of science, in terms of dealing with one single professional area, where other scholars also cite their scholarly works as well. Under these circumstances, citations to their works vividly reflect their scientific impact. On the other hand, the second category consists of authors who fancifully cite their own works in the hope of maximizing their academic reputation in metric terms by inflating the 'References' section, in order to

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Received: 20 Jan 2023

Accepted: 1 April 2023

Published: 12 Jun 2023

Citation to this article:

Shomoossi N, Rad M. Self-citation: to do or not to do? *J Med Ethics Hist Med.* 2023; 16: 1.

to improve indicators such as the H-index. Of course, in scientometric studies, self-citation by 20 percent is conservatively allowed for researchers as a tolerable limit, while beyond that is considered illogical and inappropriate (1).

The question is, to what extent are authors really allowed to cite their own publications? Scientific views in this regard unanimously emphasize the relevance of the work and the technical focus of the manuscript. In other words, irrelevant references in a context and placement of awkward patches on a manuscript may aggravate this violation. To avoid such pitfalls, a previous review suggested authors' cooperation with experienced copy editors and technical translators, since the latter can help bar authors from making severe mistakes. In addition, since plagiarism software can barely detect and report overindulgence in self-citation, it seems essential for manuscript reviewers to carefully watch out for the issue (2). In addition, a solemnly stressed point may be the need for training novice researchers regarding the subtlety of this matter. The indirect training effect of comments posed by peer reviewers may turn into a valuable asset for novice researchers in the long run.

Another alternative is to help junior researchers to start modelling the role of highly prolific researchers with established academic positions who avoided meandering from one discipline to another; this is undoubtedly a point to be emphasized and presented to impatient researchers wishing to rise to fame overnight. Early career researchers might be successfully directed into a lifelong career where they are empowered to both publish and shine academically. But overemphasis on avoiding self-citation may apprehend most of these less experienced researchers to totally pause self-citation of some really valuable references. In many cases, despite the relevance and specialist scope of their own published articles, they may prefer to sidestep the self-citation trap (3). That is why we stress '*both the necessity and subtlety of self-citation*' up to an acceptable load, particularly for inexperienced researchers. This, in turn, will shed light on the road ahead of them, in addition to giving them the courage to discern the desire to develop a specialized future path in line with the global knowledge growth at the edge of science (4). Apparently, too much stress on avoiding self-citation has concealed its positive inspirational

aspect for the younger generation of researchers. Therefore, it is suggested that the motivational aspect of self-citation be expressed in a more logical way, and early career researchers become cognizant of its importance, necessity and harms. Last but not least, the training of peer reviewers and journal editors should be at the top of the training plan. In short, the necessity and subtlety of self-

citation is to be particularly studied to enrich its status in academic publishing.

Acknowledgements

There are no Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interests

There are no conflicts of interests.

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