

Nurse Author & Editor

Volume 22 - September 2012, Issue 3

Coercive Self-Citation: A New Concern in the Ethics of Publishing

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Nurse scholars are wise to devote time and attention to successful publishing practices. Authors commonly tailor manuscripts for the journals to which they intend to submit, a practice widely viewed as prudent for both novice and experienced authors. Authors may choose to cite articles that impact their own work, previously published in the targeted journals, in recognition of the journals' contribution to the science. These decisions seem not only strategic and pragmatic but also ethical. However, how should an author respond if, on submitting a manuscript for publication, the editor requests that the author add citations of articles published in that journal, without giving any indication that the manuscript was lacking appropriate citations? Would the author feel pressured to comply with the editor's request for fear that the manuscript might not be published otherwise?

Coercive Self-Citation – What's The Problem?

The above scenario describes a practice known as 'coercive self-citation', which has recently received attention in various scientific disciplines (Foo 2009, Wilhite & Fong 2012). Coercive self-citation refers to the editorial practice of requesting authors add intra-journal citations without suggesting specific articles relevant to the manuscript; in fact, in these instances, there is no indication that the manuscript is lacking appropriate citations at all (Wilhite & Fong 2012). The practice is essentially motivated by the intent to increase the journal impact factor, one of the primary bibliometric measures used to assess the quality of the science and, in many instances, to evaluate individuals for promotion, tenure, or external funding (Foo 2009).

There is strategic incentive for editors to increase impact factors and for authors to publish in high impact journals. In 2012, Wilhite and Fong presented findings of a study exploring the extent and nature of coercive self-citation in various disciplines, demonstrating potential ethical quandaries faced by authors and editors. In brief, they found that coercive self-citation is a pervasive problem in many disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, and predominantly business (medical sciences and nursing were not studied). The practice was more often concentrated in particular disciplines, likely because editors are more likely to coerce if other editors in the same discipline coerce. Finally, they found editors more commonly directed coercive requests toward assistant and associate professors (those with greater pressure to publish) rather than full professors, and they tended to target manuscripts with fewer authors, thus confronting fewer individuals who might react negatively to the request.

Implications for Nurse Authors and Editors

These findings bring to light a complicated, rarely discussed issue in the ethics of publication. While there is little or no evidence, to our knowledge, that coercive self-citation is a problem in nursing, it could be an issue that nurse authors have faced or will encounter. Nurse editors must acknowledge

the practice exists and decide to adopt the practice to enhance their own journals' impact factors or alternatively condemn it. Both authors and editors must consider the potential implications of this practice and make personal and collective decisions related to how to respond if faced with this potential publishing dilemma. To examine the implications of this practice, consider the following case and three alternate endings.

Cheryl Graham just completed her first year as an assistant professor in the nursing department of a prestigious university. She spent the greater part of this year learning her role as a novice nurse educator. She knew she was behind on publishing as she had yet to publish work from her dissertation. In her second year at the university, she prepared and submitted a manuscript for publication in a highly ranked nursing journal, per the department chair's recommendation. Consider the three following editorial responses:

Ending 1: Professor Graham was informed the manuscript would be accepted if she added citations to articles that had been previously published in the journal. No rationale for this request was given. The editor was reluctant to accept the manuscript without the addition of intra-journal citations related to the recent editorial board decision requiring all future manuscripts to include citations from the journal in an effort to increase the impact factor.

Ending 2: Professor Graham was informed the manuscript would be accepted with minor revisions. The editor suggested she consider citing two important, related studies that were published recently in the journal. At a recent editorial board meeting, the importance of the journal impact factor was discussed, and it was determined that for the journal to remain high-impact, authors should be encouraged to include citations from the journal. This would not, however, determine whether an article would be published.

Ending 3: Professor Graham was informed the manuscript would be accepted with minor revisions. Journal impact had been discussed recently at an editorial board meeting, and it was agreed that using intra-journal citations would help increase the journal impact factor. However, the members of the board decided against encouraging editors to request authors include these citations unless editors had specific, relevant articles to suggest authors review to strengthen the manuscript.

Ethical Perspectives

Each of the three endings has different implications for the author, an academic with significant pressure to publish in high impact journals. In the first ending, Professor Graham must include intra-journal citations to be published. Considering the manuscript would not be published, should she refuse to add the citations because she believes this to be an unethical request? Would her acquiescence potentially encourage this editorial practice? Is it ethical for an editor to reject a publishable manuscript because intra-journal citations are lacking? Should the editor explain the purpose of the request or leave the author to wonder? In ending two, the editor suggested specific citations to help increase impact but did not insist that they be included; therefore, the author must determine if the citations would enhance the manuscript. In ending three, the author was asked to revise and resubmit with the understanding that the manuscript would be published with no additional citations. However, if impact factor is important to the journal's status and the author's career, should both the editor and author overlook this factor? Should the author make an effort to identify and include appropriate intra-journal citations? Should the editor ignore the issue of journal impact altogether or instead work to avoid coercion and promote proper understanding of journal quality versus impact in the discipline?

From an ethical perspective, the two well-known theories of deontology and utilitarianism seem applicable here. Deontologists regard Immanuel Kant's well-known 'categorical imperative' as a useful criterion for judging the acceptability of the ethical principles guiding human actions. This imperative can be summarized as follows: one should never act except in such a way that he or she could support that behavior becoming universally acceptable (Beauchamp & Childress 2009). In the context of publication ethics, editors nor authors could rationally support this behavior becoming universally acceptable, for if both parties contributed to the artificial inflation of impact factors through coercive citation, this commonly used bibliometric measure would lose its reliability and value altogether. Additionally, editorial coercion of authors could not be deemed universally acceptable since the behavior fundamentally challenges key ethical principles such as truthfulness, beneficence, and justice.

Taking a slightly different perspective, utilitarianism may be another relevant ethical lens through which this issue can be viewed, particularly related to the second and third endings above. Through this lens, the right action is the one that produces the best result determined by the relevant theory of value (Beauchamp & Childress 2009). Increasing the impact factor could potentially promote the most good for the journal and author, and be ethically sound as long as the editor's intentions are clear to the author and no coercion exists. However, this view neglects to recognize that if widely adopted the practice of promoting inappropriate journal self-citations, even when no coercion exists, would ultimately decrease the reliability and value of the journal impact factor as it is currently calculated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nurse Authors

Given the nature of coercive self-citation, authors can become both victims and co-conspirators (Wilhite & Fong 2012). Authors may feel uncomfortable adding unnecessary intra-journal citations; however, they will be rewarded if their manuscripts are published as a result, and their participation in this practice helps increase the impact factors of the journals in which they publish. Wilhite and Fong found that the majority of survey respondents (academics) condemned coercive self-citation, yet not surprisingly less than 7% thought an author would refuse an editor's request to add unnecessary citations. Given the pressure to publish, especially in high impact journals for reasons related to evaluation, it seems rather unjust to expect authors, often junior faculty, to be the only or primary party to take a stand on this issue of coercion. Authors make important scholarly contributions by conducting rigorous research and disseminating their findings in appropriate journals with appropriate, relevant citations. Quality and impact may not be interchangeable terms, particularly as reflected by a journal's impact factor alone (Daly & Robinson 2011, SchÜKlenk 2011).

Nurse Editors

As Wilhite and Fong (2012) point out, there is a need to further study how patterns of coercive citation extend to the physical and biological sciences including nursing. However, in the meantime, academic associations such as the International Academy of Nursing Editors and professional nursing associations could help curb this potential practice by formally condemning it. Editors must collectively decide what is acceptable ethical behavior related to requesting or suggesting the addition of intra-journal citations. For instance, is the editor's response in the ending two situation described earlier considered an ethical, non-coercive request? If so, is the element of coercion the only to consider, or should editors strive to collectively acknowledge the differences between journal

quality and impact by recognizing the practical implications of artificially inflating journal impact factors? The American Nurses Association's (ANA) Code of Ethics for Nurses (Provision 9) calls nurses to collectively self-reflect and evaluate their values and ideals in order to "foster change within themselves, seeking to move the professional community toward its stated ideals" (ANA 2001). With strong, collective disapproval of coercive self-citation, perhaps individual editors would consider both the ethical and practical implications of this practice and be less likely to make such requests, thus moving our discipline closer to its stated ideals of intraprofessional integrity.

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