Should authors cite sources suggested by peer reviewers? Six antidotes for handling potentially coercive reviewer citation suggestions

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Notice

Key Points

- Reviewers should carefully consider suggesting citations, particularly to their own work.
- I compile a typology of potentially coercive forms of citation suggestions.
- Authors should not feel compelled to cite inappropriate sources, or sources for inappropriate reasons.
- Six guiding principles for managing Reviewer Citation Suggestions (RCSs) are proposed.

Introduction

Authors familiar with the peer review process will, almost universally, have encountered a reviewer's suggestion to cite a single particular work. Peer reviewers, invited often due to their prior publication record on a topic, are uniquely placed to point authors towards sources which legitimately offer an additional perspective on the topic of the manuscript they are reviewing. At best, these Reviewer Citation Suggestions (RCSs) improve the quality of publishing by ensuring the recognition and integration of relevant prior work. At worst, RCSs for the reviewer's published works (a self-RCS, also known as a "coercive citation") may constitute corruption of the review process for selfish and otherwise unearned academic acknowledgement.

This viewpoint, intended mainly for authors stuck on dealing with a challenging RCS, outlines the ethical issues associated with peer reviews suggesting citation of a single work. Through an exploration of published perspectives of peer reviewer self-citation suggestions, I distil six specific guidance points for how peer reviews and authors may handle the delicate challenges posed by RCSs. While editors play a critical role in ultimately adjudicating peer review, it is the (often tense) intellectual stand-off between authors and reviewers at the revision stage, particularly in blinded forms of peer review, on which I am focused.

A Typology of Citation Suggestions

Invited, multiple concurrent peer review is widely considered to be one gold standard for ensuring the quality of published scholarly work (Weller, 2001). Through the review process, authors may be coerced into citing sources by editors and peer reviewers. Editors may have bibliometric incentives to suggest that authors cite earlier papers in the same journal to enhance its metrics (Wilhite & Fong, 2012). Editors may also have a personal inventive for authors to cite their own publications (Thombs & Razykov, 2012). Reviewers may similarly make suggestions that authors cite particular works, including sources by others, and sources in which the reviewer has an interest – either their own work (a "self-RCS"), work that cites their own work (a "second-degree" self-RCS), or a work by their affiliates (a "third degree self-RCS". Again, reviewers have an incentive to attract citations to work with which they are affiliated (Thombs et al., 2015). In each case, the reviewers and editors adjudicating on the paper hold the option to accept or reject the submission over the submitting author(s). Thus, any citation suggestion which would benefit them forms a conflict of interest, which can be potently coercive (Table 1). A suggestion is coercive if the conflict of interest influences (or is perceived to influence) the editor or reviewer's subsequent handling of the manuscript.

Table 1: A Typology of Citation Suggestions

Suggester	**Suggestion**	**Metric Influenced**	**Potentially coercive?**	**General Sources**
Editor	Cite articles in the same publication generally	Publication	Yes	(Wilhite & Fong, 2012)
	Cite editor's own work generally	Individual	Yes	
	Cite editor's specific own work	Individual	Yes	
	Cite (other/unrelated author's) paper in other/unrelated journal; general area of literature	Nil	No	N/A
Reviewer (RCSs)	Cite specific paper not related to reviewer; or cite general area of literature (third party/impartial RCSs)	Nil	No	N/A
	Cite self generally (self-RCS)	Individual	Yes	(Thombs et al., 2015)
	Cite own paper specifically (self-RCS)	Individual	Yes	
	Cite specific work which cites reviewer's own work ("second-degree" self-RCS)	Individual (via secondary metric)	Yes	
	Cite work of affiliates (known also as a "citation cartel"; could be conceptualised as "third-degree" self-RCS)	Institution, affiliate group, or publication	Yes	(Davis, 2012)

Citation suggestions from reviewers (RCSs) are frequent. Reviewers ostensibly suggest authors cite relevant works to ensure coverage of previous literature in academic articles. Reviewers may also suggest authors read (but not necessarily cite) other works as an example on style, or to allow for the consideration of additional conceptual or theoretical perspectives. Self-RCSs – where reviewers suggest a citation to their own work, or work with which they are otherwise affiliated - are a subset of all RCSs (per Table 1). Self-RCSs are not necessarily illegitimate or coercive, though they may be if not handled judiciously.

RCSs are common across many research fields. In a review of 616 peer reviews for a medical journal, Thombs et al. (2015) identified 428 RCSs – of which 29% (122 suggestions) were a self-RCS to the reviewer's publications. In that study, self-RCSs appeared to be correlated with reviewer "revision" recommendations, whereas self-RCSs in "decline" recommendations were infrequent. In a survey of researchers at one environmental health research institute, 23% of those surveyed reported receiving at least one RCS they suspected as being for the reviewer's own work (Resnik et al., 2008). A survey of 208 editors in management studies by Hopp & Hoover (2017) found that 112 (53%) had encountered reviewer suggestions that authors cite the work of a specific researcher.

Self-RCSs are widely considered as being appropriate where they result in a genuine improvement to the manuscript under review. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE Council, 2017) specifically discourages reviewers from "suggesting that authors include citations to your (or an associate's) work merely to increase citation counts or to enhance the visibility of your or your associate's work", then adding "suggestions must be based on valid academic or technological reasons." This view appears to be normative among the academic literature (Thombs et al., 2015). Whether an author can assess whether a RCS is "based on valid academic or technological reasons" or is coercive depends on the reviewer's substantiation for the suggestion, the editor's handling of it, and critically, the context of peer review in which the RCS was made.

RCS in Different Forms of Peer-Review

The nature of RCSs varies by the form of peer review in which it arose. In traditional blinded forms of peer review, the *prima facie* anonymity of reviewers and authors is intended to reduce bias and favouritism in the assessment of manuscripts by reviewers. However, this anonymity means authors cannot reliably know whether an RCS is a self-RCS (though RCSs may form a clue to the identity of the reviewer). Authors thus cannot reliably identify a conflict of interest that might arise from an RCS they encounter. Within insufficient information, authors may not be able to place an RCS into a specific category outlined in Table 1.

The prevalence of self-RCS in blinded forms of peer-review is unsurprising. Many journals recruit peer reviewers based on recent publications on the same topic or keywords (Björk & Hedlund, 2015; Taylor & Francis, 2020). Editorial management systems increasingly perform this function through cross-referencing to publication databases. Potential reviewers recruited through contemporaneous publications are likely to be active and contactable. Hence, in blinded peer review, authors who receive a RCS to quote recent or obscure work, or multiple works by the same author (especially works with similar keywords to the manuscript) can reasonably interpret these as an indication of the reviewer's identity. The similarity of the language of the reviewer's comments and the RCS source may compound this suspicion. This one-way compromise of the anonymity of intentionally blinded peer review should alone strongly discourage the practice of self-RCS.

In open forms of peer review, in which reviewers' identities are shared with the author - and sometimes also to readers (see Tennant et al., 2017, p. 12) - authors may be more readily able to identify RCSs which hang on an obvious conflict of interest (Table 2; Ioannidis, 2015, p. 4). Open peer review is thus widely regarded as a primary remedy for mitigating against inappropriate self-RCS (Thombs & Razykov, 2012). However, less obvious forms of citation coercion (especially for second or third degree self-RCSs described in Table 1) may still be challenging to identify based on the open review comments alone.

Table 2: RCSs in Types of Peer Review

Form of Peer Review	**Can editors identify plainly inappropriate RCS?**	**Can authors identify plainly inappropriate RCS?**	**Can readers identify plainly inappropriate RCS?**
Blinded	Yes	No	No
Open Identities (reviews not published)	Yes	Yes	No
Open Reviews (reviews and reviewer identities published)	Yes	Yes	Yes

While open peer review holds promise in improving peer review (see Tennant et al., 2017 for a comprehensive review), many existing publications continue to practice traditional forms of blinded peer review (Thombs & Razykov, 2012). Some years after the adoption of open peer review by some journals, the majority of scholarly periodicals still retain the traditional double-blinded peer review process. For instance, the publisher of this journal reports that 66% of Wiley titles across all fields are single-blind reviewed, and a further 34% being single blinded (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2020). A reader seeking detailed and updated data on review practices across publications may find the Transpose database (TRANsparency in Scholarly Publishing for Open Scholarship Evolution (Transpose) Database, 2020) of interest.

The manner in which reviewers make RCS, and how editors handle them, is influenced by the incentives and normative practices in a research discipline. Understanding these incentive structures is critical to addressing potentially coercive RCSs.

Incentives of Citations

As the currency of citations has increasingly inflated, exposés of outrageous and persistent coercive RCSs have found their way into the academic and grey literature across fields (Noorden, 2020; Wilhite & Fong, 2012; Wren et al., 2019). This underpins the conflict of interest created through self-RCSs. This places particular pressure on authors to cite the subject of an RCS, under the reasonable impression that doing so may increase the odds of reviewers recommending acceptance – and the contrary, there is a perception that reviewers may suggest rejection of a revision which refuses an RCS (Wilhite & Fong, 2012, p. 542).

Peer review is a duty of the already privileged (Johnson & Krauth, 2008); reviewers and editors enjoy a decision-making power imbalance over authors (Wren et al., 2019). The practice of self-RCS may, over a long period, artificially inflate the metrics and advancement of scholars who are privileged

with the time, status, and existing publications to coerce authors to cite. For academics, particularly early-career scholars who face immense pressure to "publish or perish", the safest action is to assume any RCS is a self-RCS and cite it, irrespective of the actual relevance or quality of the work (Wilhite & Fong, 2012). Authors in less-developed countries – or those who are otherwise without access to extensive library subscriptions - may also face difficulty or costs retrieving a specific source. For other reviewers, widespread self-RCS may be considered simply "playing the game" of academia, creating an expectation that making coercive citation suggestions is an essential tactic for enhancing performance metrics and thus supporting competitive career progression (Ioannidis, 2015, p. 9). Each of these effects can warp free and fair science, and reinforce existing privilege and the persistent structural inequities within the academy (Fyfe et al., 2017).

Reviewers may regard self-RCSs as appropriate, based on their perceptions of accepted review practices. Even through self-RCSs may have potentially corrupting effects, it is broadly recognised that a reviewer's self-RCSs may be justifiable if the suggested citation would improve the quality of the work. This is especially the case in specialist or niche topics, in which the reviewer may be one of a very small set of people able to assess a manuscript. Secondly, rather than perceiving a self-RCS as the scandalous consummation of a conflict of interest, peer reviewers may see the opportunity of making a self-RCS a legitimately earned *quid pro quo* benefit or fair reward for the otherwise volunteer service of performing peer review – especially if that peer-review is blinded and otherwise not openly recognised. Self-RCS, especially for highly relevant works, may thus be seen to both improve the corpus of science while also recognising the work of the reviewer contributor. In this way, the benefits to the reviewer can be perceived as "incidental", justified by the quality of the reviewer's work.

Editors should be the ultimate impartial adjudicators of the academic record, with a specific duty to identify and mitigate against coercive RCSs (Wren et al., 2019). However, editors may vary in their handling of RCSs, especially if their incentives align with those of the reviewer. Editors may also lack the time or topic-specific expertise to fully scrutinise the legitimacy of RCSs, which may not be immediately evident in reviewer reports alone (Thombs & Razykov, 2012). Editors may also be concerned that excessive citations to the journal could threaten the long-term reputation of the publication, and threaten the journal's Impact Factor – as excessive self-citations within a periodical can result in suppression of impact rankings (Davis, 2018). While editors do play an important screening role in any review process, they should not be the only line of defence against the coercion of authors (Wren et al., 2019) – which can be the case in blinded forms of peer review. Hence, authors must be empowered to consciously consider and decline potentially coercive forms of RCS.

I argue that the incremental "benefits" that might return to editors and reviewers who perpetuate potentially coercive RCSs is marginal compared to the corrosive costs of inappropriate RCSs

articulated in this opinion piece. Thus, clearer best practice standards of handling RCSs by authors and reviewers are needed.

Principles as Antidotes to Potentially Coercive RCSs

I suggest that clearer definition of standards for reviewer inclusion of RCS and author's responses to RCS should be adopted to cauterise the unethical manipulation of citation suggestions in all forms of peer review. Building on the suggestions of Wren et al (2019) that authors advocate against potentially coercive RCSs, and focusing on the interface between the roles of reviewers and authors common to manuscript revision, I propose six interlinked principles for managing all RCS.

Principles for Reviewers

Reviewers bear a critical responsibility for maintaining ethical conduct in suggesting citations. Reviewers can manage these responsibilities by adhering to the four below principles:

1. Reviewers should, where possible, refer authors to a concept or area of research, or a general example, rather than making a specific RCS.
2. Any RCS should be expressed as a suggestion only. Reviewers must substantiate why the paper is lacking without the citation, and detail specific reasons for how the citation to the specific source would improve the paper. Reviewers should also explicitly state that the author's handling of the RCS will not weigh on their subsequent judgement of the revised paper. The reviewer must state this for the assurance of the author, and as a transparent reminder to the editor who will ultimately adjudicate on the revision. For blinded forms of review, this should apply to both RCSs to the work of others, and for self-RCSs, as authors cannot reliably distinguish between them.
3. In blinded forms of review, reviewers should avoid making RCSs for only one source, or for sources by only one author. By making numerous (e.g. 3 or more) suggestions to work by different authors – without any overlap in authorship or meaningful difference in the age of the sources – the corrosive effects of identification by RCS can be mitigated. Alternatively, reviewers making a single RCS can disclose that it is not their work, and that no conflict of interest arises from their suggestion.
4. A reviewer who cannot practically avoid making a self-RCS should separately declare this to both the editor and the author, and offer to recuse themselves of performing any further review of subsequent iterations of the manuscript. The editor and author should have equal right to accept the recusal. The self-RCS should still comply with principle 2, and principle 3 if practicable.

Principles for Authors

Responding to peer reviews is one of the most challenging aspects of scholarship. However, authors share a responsibility to reduce the corrosive potential of RCS. They can do so by cautiously and selectively responding to RCSs, without fear or favour:

1. Authors should feel confident to refuse an RCS as a default/standard practice, particularly for any suggestion which does not comply with all of the principles above. Since the burden of justifying the RCS should fall on the reviewer, failure to substantiate the specific reasons for the RCS in the initial review comment (in line with COPE guidelines, etc.) is sufficient grounds for authors to refuse it. All editors should accept this practice. (Authors may, voluntarily, reference this article in their response letter/table to support this action. Unless that response document is itself published, no citation count will be registered for this paper.)
2. Authors who receive a set of RCSs in line with point 3 above should cite only the most relevant of the sources suggested. By reducing the likelihood that any single RCS will result in a citation – particularly for the least relevant of the suggested works – the incentive for reviewers to make a self-RCS (and, thus, any conflict of interest) is minimised.

Conclusions

While editors retain ultimate responsibility for the documentation of science, the process of article revision is an important discursive process, common to practically all academic disciplines. It is among the most learned of dialogues, where many definitions and descriptions of knowledge are ultimately determined.

Many proposals to combat unethical citation suggestions have recently been proposed, such as more open forms of peer review, standardised conflict of interest declarations by reviewers, and judicious editorial practices (Wren et al., 2019). Building on this work, I further suggest that authors should be empowered to fearlessly refuse RCSs, especially where they cannot be assured that no conflict of interest exists. An RCS failing to adhere to any of the principles outlined in this article, especially in blinded forms of peer review, should alone be adequate grounds for authors to refuse to add the citation. Reviewers can also improve the quality of their reviews by using these points to manage any citation suggestion. These antidotes will, if enacted through time, preserve the integrity of the published academic record.

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