

The Ombudsman: Who's at Fault at Faulty Towers? Commentaries on the Citation Dilemma

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My role is to provide an introduction and independent perspective on the Wright and Armstrong (W&A) focal essay, "Verification of Citations: Faulty Towers of Knowledge?," the related commentaries, and W&A's rejoinder. Each of these essays is accessible and easy to follow, and the authors clearly present and support their own positions.

The Issues

There are two main issues: the first is the problem of citation errors in our literature; the second is what to do about this problem. Reading W&A, one might wonder if the authors are more concerned about the issue in general or if their larger concern is the lack of substantive impact of the Armstrong and Overton (1977) paper in particular (another citation!—did I read it?) in spite of that paper's very high nominal citation count. W&A do provide evidence beyond this specific case, however, that authors of much of the published academic research in management (a) overlook important, related, existing substantive or methodological work, or (b) cite but ignore or misrepresent the content of work that they do cite.

W&A recommend that authors cite all relevant literature, read the papers they cite, ensure that they represent their cited work appropriately, and try to contact the authors of key supporting work to be certain that they (the authors) "have it right." They also recommend that editors police the situation to be sure that authors follow these rules.

Dillman concurs with the diagnosis but disagrees with the prescription. He argues that bringing attention to the problem is an important and necessary first step to a resolution. Martin notes four purposes of citations: "(1) to support an argument; (2) to indicate

to readers the most important and useful studies in the field; (3) to acknowledge sources of ideas, methods, or quotations; and (4) to impress readers, referees, and editors." While one might refine or expand the list (e.g., Martin himself mentions "rivalry citation omission"), he stresses one critical point: "If the source is methodologically central, then careful reading is essential." He disagrees with the need to provide exhaustive citations or read all sources completely.

Uncles is concerned with excessive and redundant citations, stating, "the sheer density of referencing . . . is out of control." Indeed, a few decades ago, I could scan an article's references and know the (manageable) prerequisites for reading it. If I applied the same rule today, I would be perpetually engaged in catching up and would never read anything new. Uncles' prescription and goals are simple: cite better and cite less. While his argument is compelling, incentives and institutional norms oppose those goals (see below).

A&W's reply provides a manageable list of five action items. I concur with the first four and a relaxed form of the fifth ("attempt to contact that author to confirm the citation accuracy"). The last action item should be relaxed to "ensure that you fully understand (and cite) the substantive and methodological foundations of your work." When one is at all in doubt about understanding a citation, there are good reasons to err on the side of making such contacts to get that assurance. Most of us are proud of our work and seek to have it used and interpreted appropriately. Hence, an important and unstated takeaway for young researchers should be: "Don't hesitate to contact those whose work you cite for clarification or advice." They will be flattered, almost certainly will

be eager to help (rewarded by a citation!), and might even be interested in a future collaboration with you.

Who's at Fault and What to Do?

Why has it come to this? Any published researcher reading these essays can contribute multiple examples and extend the diagnoses and prescriptions. So, why is nothing being done?

None of the essays commented on the nature and dynamics of research collaboration. Almost all papers in management have multiple authors, and such collaborations often use a divide and conquer approach. It would be surprising (and likely unnecessary) for all coauthors to read all references; as collaborators they work together to take advantage of complementary skills and knowledge bases. Some of the problems discussed here emerge simply from trusting (inappropriately) that one's coauthors actually have read the cited papers they contributed and did not merely acquire the reference in a second-hand manner. Attempting to police one's trusted colleagues to be sure they really have read their contributed citations has few benefits and can undermine trusted relationships.

Much as our scholarly journals (*Interfaces* excepted, of course) appear to reward obfuscation and punish lucidity (Armstrong 1980, for example), the system rewards excessive citation and rarely punishes inappropriate citation. At most journals, authors are routinely asked to recommend referees. (If they don't, the editor can look at the work cited in the paper to guide referee choice.) Hence, authors can strategically assess those who are most likely to referee their work and attempt to preempt rejection by citing any (at least marginally) relevant work by potential referees. For the many on-the-fence articles, when the difference between a referee's recommendation of outright rejection or "major revision required" is small (a night and day difference for the author), the number of times a referee's work is cited could be the tiebreaker. Reviewers know they are selected because of their domain-specific knowledge; hence, they feel justified in recommending that their own (at least marginally relevant) work be cited.

In addition, journal editors, involved in a journal-ranking competition driven by citations, have been known not only to recommend that the author cite within-journal articles that referees recommend, but also to add to the list. In this system, there seems to be no incentive to reduce the number or improve the quality of those citations.

Can the System Be Fixed?

The value of the W&A essay and related commentaries is that they shed light on these issues. Self-regulation and self-control, while laudable goals, conflict with the system's incentives and metrics. Do we face a prisoner's dilemma problem? Those who follow the guidelines here will be punished by the rest of us who have strong incentives to defect. Perhaps, as with the prisoner's dilemma and related research (Axelrod 2006), the solution can come from the evolution of new norms and mutual trust. Those norms and trust could be built through the sharing of values, altruism, and having the more senior members of our profession visibly lead by example.

There is some promise. As I describe above, it is in the interest of young researchers to circulate their work among those they cite prior to publication. And, as technology that makes it easier to locate citations becomes more widely used (as W&A demonstrate), penalties will increase for those authors who are careless or sloppy in their citations: poor scholarship will become more transparent and will have associated career costs.

Confucius noted (sorry, I can't find the original cite) "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." A continuing dialog on this issue can help us begin that journey.

References (Careful Here)

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