

Relationship counselling for medical texts

Commentary on: Whose citations are they?

by Iain Patten

With the possible exception of Dawn Barker (see article on page 52), I would imagine few medical writers listing relationship counsellor as one of their usual professional roles. Careful reading of John Rodgers' article on the nature and function of citation suggests we might do well to reconsider. In fact, look closely and you will realise that, for those of us working with articles destined for publication in peer reviewed journals, an enormous amount of our work is directed towards ensuring healthy relationships—between the text and the material it makes reference to.

Nothing that is written in an academic article stands alone—it is inevitably embedded in a wider framework of meaning that is informed by other texts. This is the basic premise of intertextuality. Citations represent the individual expression of these interactions, the links between text and surrounding information that make up the framework of meaning. As in human relationships, citation encompasses a whole host of different interactions. Yet for something so central to how a text is understood, citation is too often a mere afterthought in the scientific writing process. John Rodgers presents us with an erudite challenge to face up to the dysfunctional relationships that pass for citation in so many articles.

Citation is not just about reference lists. In fact, formal references need not even come into it. Providing a reference to Watson and Crick's 1953 letter to *Nature* would hardly be needed to support a general statement on the structure of DNA in a biomedical research article, but the allusion to their work would nevertheless be understood by most readers without the need for a formal citation. An applied linguist who wanted to use their famous understatement "It has not escaped our notice..." [1] in a paper on scientific discourse would instead have to consider that the target audience is less likely to be familiar with the writing of Watson and Crick. This is what makes the informal citation allusory when provided in a biomedical research article. Thus, the careful interweaving of information is dependent not only on the writer but also on the reader. Skilled writers, aware of their intended audience, will adapt the citation relationships to their purpose. The important point is that the relationships between text and source (between citans and citandum in the terminology proposed by John) inevitably exist—the question is whether they are healthy or dysfunctional.

As in human relationships, the source of citational dysfunction may often be developmental in origin. Like John, I have believed for some time that the emphasis placed on acknowledgement of sources in student writing is itself

the cause of many of the citation problems found in academic articles. Inexperienced authors are often taught to paraphrase, use quotations and 'cite' their sources, but that only provides symptomatic relief for the problem of plagiarism. The references may all be present, but how they relate to the material discussed may be completely obscure. In many situations, readers can only make assumptions about the true content of the cited material or the reason it is provided. As a consequence, the information conveyed in the text may only be partially understood. Of even more concern is the possibility that the writing may suggest something inaccurate about the cited material and that misinterpretation may be perpetuated by other authors who themselves have limited skill in the art of citation.

John ends his article with a challenging hypothesis, that most citations are simply 'tokens' provided to meet a formal expectation but indicative of no meaningful relationship between the author and the cited material. Consider for a moment the last text you worked on. What informed the decision to cite certain studies? Was there a conscious relationship between the writing and the cited material or were some studies cited because they were referred to in a recent paper or perhaps because someone else provided them in an outline or draft? Did the purpose of the citation influence how the text was written (where in the text the reference was provided, whether the author's name was mentioned, etc.)? In sum, how actively involved are you in developing the citation relationships that will determine how the texts you work with are understood? Don't imagine for a moment that this does not have consequences beyond good writing style. When citation becomes a game of whispers, meaning can be lost and inaccuracy is introduced [2].

John points out that "mentors rarely have the skills needed to train the next generation of writers". If the peers and supervisors of publishing scientists have not been adequately trained in nurturing healthy citation relationships, then those of us who support their writing must take care to ensure that we are. Taking the time to carefully read and digest John's excellent article is one way in which we can do just that.

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References:

1. Watson JD, Crick FH. Molecular structure of nucleic acids; a structure for deoxyribose nucleic acid. *Nature* 1953;171(4356):737-8.
2. Greenberg SA. How citation distortions create unfounded authority: analysis of a citation network. *BMJ* 2009;339:b2680.