DO INDIAN RESEARCHERS READ INDIAN RESEARCH?

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It is the authors' experience that papers in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry (IJP) under-reference relevant research previously published in the journal. To empirically address this issue, four volumes of the IJP, from 1989 to 1992 (both years inclusive), were surveyed. It was found that of 292 articles examined, 133 articles (45.5%) had neglected to cite relevant articles previously published in the IJP. The overall ratio of IJP reference included to IJP reference omitted was 1:1. Surprisingly, four articles were found to have been published twice in the IJP without the duplicate publication having been noticed and recorded. These findings suggest a need for introspection at author, referee and editorial levels.

Key words: journal, citations, references.

INTRODUCTION

An brief note is necessary to explain what prompted the introspection evident in this paper. One of the authors of this paper (CA) has been a referee for the Indian Journal of Psychiatry (IJP) since 1988; a common observation has been that papers submitted to the IJP for consideration for publication fail to cite relevant, published Indian research. This lapse is also apparent in articles that have satisfied the referees and have been published in the IJP. For example, Singh and Kulhara (1991) reported on simple schizophrenia without being aware that, not nine months earlier, a discussion on the same subject had been published in the same journal (Andrade & Andrade, 1991a). Similarly, Vahia et al (1993) reported the results of their study on meditation for generalized anxiety disorder without citing a single IJP reference on the subject; in 1991 alone, there were four publications on meditation in the IJP (Bhaskaran, 1991; Chandiramani, 1991; Andrade & Andrade, 1991b & c). Ananth et al (1993) did not cite Derasari and Shah (1988) who had also studied characteristics of depression in India vis a vis the USA. Examples of this nature abound.

A literature review in the IJP that under-cites Indian research suggests a sobering thought: Indian researchers are inattentive to Indian research. Such inattention carries varied implications ranging from bland unawareness of Indian research at one end of the spectrum to disrespect for Indian research at the other end. This must provoke some soul searching amongst researchers, referees and editors alike. A specific hypothesis was therefore addressed in this study: that articles published in the IJP under-reference relevant papers previously published in the Journal.

MATERIALS & METHOD

All scientific articles, from editorials to letters to the editor, published in the IJP between 1989 and 1992 (both years inclusive) were scrutinized. The following information was collected for each article: number of references listed in the bibliography, number of IJP citations included and number of relevant IJP citations omitted.

Data for the last mentioned variable was collected as follows: excluding the current and previous three issues of the IJP, all issues were scanned back to the first issue of 1985 to identify articles relevant to the field of the paper under scrutiny.

The current and previous three issues were not included in the search because the submission, review, revision [review, revision...], acceptance and publication process at the editorial office of the journal usually spans nine months or less, during which period up to three issues of the IJP would be released. At the time of submission, therefore, the authors of a paper would not have had access to these three issues. The cut off year for back-scanning of volumes was selected as 1985. This was largely arbitrary as a line has to be drawn somewhere; it was also felt that while authors have little reason to fail to cite research published in recent years, older research may be ignored with some justification because of, for example, outdated methodology.

Relevance was defined as follows: all articles covering the same field were deemed relevant and hence meritorious of citation. This definition was broadly interpreted (see Appendix). In addition, all review articles (including Presidential Addresses, Tilak Venkoba Rao orations and D.L.N. Murthy Rao orations) were considered citation worthy in their respective fields. Where more than one review existed in the same field, citation of one was considered sufficient.
RESULTS

The citation characteristics of volumes 31-34 of the IJP are presented in Table 1. A few articles cited no references at all. These were editorials and/or letters to the editor. Other papers - the reviews, orations and presidential addresses - cited a very large number of articles. This resulted in a skewed distribution, and hence, statistics presented include the median along with the range, mean and standard deviation.

Table 1
Citation characteristics of articles in volumes 31-34 of the Indian Journal of Psychiatry.

| Volume | No. of articles | No. of references | No. of IJP references cited | No. of IJP references omitted |
|--------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 31     | 69             | 0-137             | 0-12                        | 0-5                          |
|        |                | 15.8 (19.1)       | 1.2 (2.4)                   | 0.8 (1.5)                    |
|        |                | 10                | 0                           | 0                            |
| 32     | 78             | 0-193             | 0-12                        | 0-7                          |
|        |                | 17.2 (14.0)       | 1.3 (2.3)                   | 1.0 (1.4)                    |
|        |                | 14                | 0                           | 0                            |
| 33     | 72             | 0-100             | 0-11                        | 0-11                         |
|        |                | 15.5 (14.6)       | 1.1 (2.3)                   | 1.1 (1.9)                    |
|        |                | 12                | 0                           | 0                            |
| 34     | 73             | 0-112             | 0-8                         | 0-7                          |
|        |                | 16.3 (16.6)       | 1.0 (1.6)                   | 1.6 (1.8)                    |
|        |                | 12                | 0                           | 1                            |
| Total  | 292            | 0-193             | 0-12                        | 0-11                         |
|        |                | 16.2 (18.6)       | 1.1 (2.2)                   | 1.1 (1.7)                    |
|        |                | 12                | 0                           | 0                            |

Statistics displayed are: minimum - maximum, mean (standard deviation) and the median.

While the number of IJP citations in the articles scrutinized varied considerably, the average number was low: less than 2. In like manner, the average number of relevant IJP articles omitted was less than 2. Computed across the 292 articles surveyed, the overall ratio of IJP articles cited to IJP articles omitted was 1:1.

There were 23 (33.3%) articles in volume 31 of the IJP which had neglected to cite relevant previous publications in the IJP. For volumes 32, 33 and 34, the figures were 33 (42.3%), 32 (44.4%) and 45 (61.6%) respectively. Overall, 133 (45.5%) of 292 articles had neglected to cite at least one previous relevant paper.

There was an astonishing by-product finding in this study: during the four years of review (1989-1992), no less than four articles in the IJP were published twice in an identical or near identical form (Dubin et al, 1985a & 1990; Dubin et al, 1985b & Ananth et al, 1990; Bhatia, 1988a & 1988b; Andrade et al, 1987 & 1988). There was no record in the IJP of these anomalies having been detected.

DISCUSSION

The methodology employed was biased against the hypothesis of the study for the following reasons:

1. The database for cross references in the papers under scrutiny theoretically comprised all previous issues of the IJP. The database for identification of omission of relevant IJP citations comprised previous issues of the IJP dating back only to the first issue of 1985. The importance of this source of bias is evident from the finding that there was a progressive increase, from volumes 31 to 34, in the percentage of articles failing to cite relevant IJP papers. This increase probably reflected an increase in the number of back issues available for identification of omitted citations.

2. The data on IJP cross-references included in the paper under scrutiny made no note of whether these were directly relevant to the field being investigated or were peripheral - such as referencing a scale used, a similar finding from another field of investigation etc. In contrast, an IJP article was noted as an omission only if it was directly relevant to the field of the paper.

3. The current and the three immediately prior issues of the IJP were ignored in the identification of IJP references omitted. Strictly speaking, during the revision process, the corresponding author of the paper would have had access to at least the third (if not the second as well) prior issue, and could have therefore updated the references accordingly, if warranted.

Delays in publication of the IJP (e.g. due to shift in the editorial office etc.) were discounted because a delay in the publication of one or more issues would at some time be cancelled out by a lesser time lag in the publication of later issues, making the inter-issue duration an average of three months.

It is acknowledged that the broad interpretation (see Appendix) of relevance of an article for citation may have to a certain extent offset the bias described above; however, the decision to interpret relevance broadly was made after some thought: psychiatric
research in India is still in its infancy, and if a narrow definition of relevance is applied, in most fields there will be few (if any) references to cite. Furthermore, a broad interpretation permits a greater awareness of Indian research - which, in the authors humble opinion, will promote the cause of Indian psychiatric research.

It is acknowledged that some Indian researchers are successful in publishing their work in books and in international journals while others patronize regional psychiatry journals or Indian journals of wider scope. No attempt was made to bring such articles within the purview of this study because such articles are few in number and difficult to trace. Furthermore, the Indian Journal of Psychiatry, as the main psychiatry journal in the country, and the sole journal to appear with any degree of regularity, surely merited independent examination as specified in the hypothesis of this paper.

What purpose does the literature review in a paper serve? It justifies the need for the study, relates the study to the present status of the field and places the content of the paper in perspective. It is sobering that 45.5% of articles published in four volumes of the IJP failed to cite at least one relevant IJP paper, and that, overall (computed for all 292 articles), for every IJP paper cited there was one IJP citation missed. Since roughly half the articles surveyed had missed at least one relevant IJP citation, a little mental arithmetic shows that in these defaulting papers there were roughly two IJP citations omitted for every IJP citation included. These data are certainly not insignificant.

Is it necessary to be regional in one’s citations? In other words, why should Indian authors cite previous Indian publications even if relevant? May not an author consider that the previous Indian paper(s) in the field do not contribute either to the methodology or to the discussion in his paper?

While there can be more than one opinion on the matter, it is suggested that greater attention to Indian research will partly fulfill the purpose of a literature review as discussed above, will encourage Indian research, and will provide a cultural perspective. It is well known that some characteristics (e.g. symptoms, outcome) of disorders in psychiatry show cultural variations. Cultural aspects of psychiatry, a neglected area in India, will not become apparent if authors review their research solely in a Western context.

In a more emotional context, in India today there is a perceptible shift in attitudes developing towards self-reliance and taking pride in what is Indian. Every psychiatry student is aware that, when facing his examinations, he is expected to be thorough with Indian research in different disciplines. Should not similar expectations be held of persons who conduct and publish such research?

With reference to the four papers that had been published twice in the IJP; since it inconceivable that the authors involved would have deliberately sought a dual publication in the same journal, the most likely conclusions are either that the authors resubmitted their work without knowing of the prior publication or that the editorial office erred. Either way, it suggests that the referees and officials involved in the editorial processes were unaware of the previous publication. Even more interesting is that no corrigendum regretting the lapse was published, suggesting that the error was not noticed by the editorial office and the readership of the IJP. Again, the implication is that of a low level of awareness of what is published in the IJP.

The findings of this study suggest one or more of the following: a lack of commitment in conducting the literature search, a lack of interest in the IJP, a lack of respect for the standard of Indian research and a lack of credibility of the IJP.

The authors of this study therefore suggest that researchers seeking to publish their work in the IJP make a more serious effort to place their contribution in the context of previous Indian contributions to the field. Referees need to pay more attention to the attention that authors have paid to Indian research; indeed, the editorial office of the IJP would do well to include an item to this effect in the referee’s checklist. Finally, researchers and referees alike will find their task easier if the IJP provides a detailed index in the last issue of each volume. If Indian researchers do not nurture Indian research, who will?

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