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Top Researchers May Suppress More Information Than They Provide:
Surveying NBER Dismissive Literature Reviews

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Abstract

The authors read a systematic sample of “working papers” downloaded from the website of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) from the past quarter century—the years 2000 to 2024. They looked for “dismissive literature reviews” in the introductory and concluding sections of the papers. A dismissive review is one declaring an absence of previous research, or previous research worth referencing, for example: “there is no previous research on,” “this is the first study of,” and “surprisingly, few studies have broached this topic.” Typically, dismissive reviews are raw declarations, made without mention or evidence of having conducted a literature search.

All working papers retrieved for the topic “education” are classified into three groups (lacking a true education focus, containing no dismissive reviews, containing one or more). The authors provide summary descriptive statistics for various quantities by category and a 1000+ line list of all the working papers retrieved and the dismissive reviews we found, which are highlighted within verbatim text. Dismissive reviews’ character and variety are discussed along with their implications for public policy.

KEYWORDS: Citation manipulation, research integrity, literature review, dismissive review, research literature, false novelty claims, firstness claims, citation cartels

Elite scholarly journals may push the new research showcased in a submitted manuscript through a gauntlet of grueling, nitpicky reviews. Though a casual, perfunctory literature review prologue to the prospective article may receive no scrutiny at all. "Dismissive reviews" declare there to be either no or very little previous research on the topic at hand, or none that is worth citing (Phelps, 2021). To gauge the prevalence of dismissive literature reviews, have a look for yourself. In an internet search engine, type phrases such as "this is the first study", "few studies", "paucity of research", "little previous research", and the like.

There exist profound advantages to dismissive reviewing, and profound disadvantages to conducting an honest, thorough literature review. Forthright literature reviews consume inordinate amounts of time for little or no professional benefit, and those time demands only increase over time with research and journal proliferation. Once source claims that 5 million research documents are published each year (Zul, 2023)

Professional accolades accrue, instead, to researchers who are "first," "pioneering," "innovative," and such. So long as a researcher can falsely claim to be first and suffer no negative consequences, there would appear to be little practical justification for conducting a forthright literature review. After all, the "first" scholar to study a topic becomes automatically the expert on that topic, as his or her research allegedly comprises the totality of its research literature.

Moreover, a "firstness claim" is more likely to attract funding to "fill (alleged) knowledge gaps" than is a promise to conduct the umpteenth study on a topic.

Unfortunately, some topics reviewed dismissively are policy related and affect multitudes. Public policy set by dismissive literature reviewers equals misinformed public policy. Particularly when the dismissive reviewers enjoy high profiles, ample funding, multiple dissemination outlets, generous media coverage, and fluid access to naïve, extremely time-constrained policy makers, social damage may be enormous.

Phelps (2016) built earlier collections of dismissive literature reviews by simply adding reviews to a list when encountered. This accumulation method tells us who is writing dismissive reviews, where, and when. That Phelps (2024) gathered over a thousand on just one relatively small topic—US education policy—strongly suggests an abundance. But how prevalent are they really? Do all researchers write them? Do all economists?

Responding to these questions requires reading articles within a prescribed domain and counting those without dismissive reviews as well as those with.

NBER

This article summarizes such a review of the "Working Papers" posted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Why look at NBER papers? Some of the world’s self-described “top” scholars—among those who directly affect public policy—post papers there. NBER Working Papers are more accessible than many other documents, such as paywalled journal articles. NBER maintains a standard format across all its working papers making searches more reliable. The range of topics is not limited; neither is the range of researchers, though those affiliated with Harvard or Stanford Universities in some fashion seem much better represented than others.

NBER labels them “working papers” and title-page disclaimers assert that they have not yet been reviewed. Nonetheless, they are widely disseminated, and journalists are encouraged to and do publicize them just as they would a peer-reviewed journal article (see, for example, Viadero, 2022).

Besides, most have been reviewed to some degree. Many NBER posters fill their title-page acknowledgements to bursting with thanks to several to dozens of other economists for comments and suggestions made at various seminars and workshops.

Our sample

We retrieved papers from the “education” topic category. We sampled systematically by year—every fourth year starting at 2000, thus: the years 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024. Circumscribing the domain between the two end points, 2000 and 2024, we cover more than a quarter of the education papers between and including them. Seven of 25 years amounts to 28 percent of those years.

We divided the papers given us by the “education” topic search into three groups. The first group comprises papers that may have something to do with education but were not mainly about formal K-16 education, our domain of interest. For example:

“The Firm as a Dedicated Hierarchy: A Theory of the Origin and Growth of Firms”

“Empirical Bayes Methods for Labor Economics”

“Why Doesn’t Asia Have Bigger Bond Markets?”

“Asset Management, Human Capital, and the Market for Risky Assets”

Papers in this first group were labelled “N/A,” for “not applicable” and were not included in our analyses.

The second group comprises those fitting within our education domain for which we found no dismissive reviews.

The third group of papers comprises those fitting within our education domain for which we found one or more dismissive reviews.

Table 1 displays the distribution of working papers across the three categories.

Table 1. Education topic NBER Working Papers retrieved, by category

Type	# Papers retrieved	% Papers retrieved	# Education Papers	% Education Papers
N/A (i.e., education not paper focus)	114	19%		
Without a dismissive review	154	26%	154	32%
Contain dismissive review(s)	321	54%	321	68%
TOTAL	589		475	

Suppose one were to assume that 68% of all research documents across all subject areas contained dismissive reviews. Then consider the earlier estimate of 5 million research documents a year. That implies that most new research – more than 3 million research documents per year – contain dismissive reviews.

One typically finds dismissive literature reviews in the introductory sections (e.g., abstract, introduction, overview, background, literature review) and sometimes in the conclusion and discussion sections at the end. They can occasionally be found in the middle, methods or analysis sections, but rarely enough to make it worthwhile searching there.

One critic of our work asserts that all scholars write dismissive reviews. If true, one might expect to find a roughly equal use of them across all the NBER papers surveyed. Instead, we find a wide range in their use. As table 1 reveals, 154 papers contain no dismissive review. Hundreds more contain but one, whereas some papers contain a dozen or more. We discuss this range of dismissive review prevalence in more detail later.

Our complete sample data base can be found online [here](#).

Why education?

Aside from the fact that it is the subject field the authors know best, it is also not a natural “economics” field. Its foundations lie in psychology and most of its policy-related research has been conducted by psychologists and program evaluators since the 1800s. Yet, even here in the NBER papers, we see economists prescribing highly consequential public policies based on the work of economists alone.

How can one tell what NBER Working Papers contributors read and know? To get some idea, survey the bulk of a scholar’s papers to look at the sum of their citations and references. Among most of the economists who publish regularly at NBER, they either limit their citations and references to economists’ work, or they limit it even more to a smaller group of economists they collaborate with. Citations to subject fields other than economics are found only occasionally.

Yet, statements about “the research literature” in the NBER papers seldom clarify that the author refers only to economists’ work. One must examine the lists of citations and references from a scholar’s work to discern.

Fact-checking or falsifiability?

There exist two general methods for analyzing collections of dismissive reviews.

The first, fact-checking method attempts to verify all the dismissive review claims, which can be practically impossible without access to a gargantuan quantity of resources. If every dismissive review stated “there are no previous studies of any type from any subject field” one supposes that the search would be relatively easy — finding just one such study disproves the claim. But most dismissive claims hedge: “there are few studies,” “little previous research,” “there is no previous *rigorous* research,” and so on.

Essentially, thorough fact-checking would involve conducting the thorough literature searches that dismissive reviewers chose not to do. Such an effort could easily consume many fact-checkers’ lifetimes. Phelps (2016) attempted this method on the education policy topic over the course of decades.

A second method for analyzing a collection of dismissive literature reviews focuses not on facts but, rather, on *falsifiability*. The philosopher of science Karl Popper asserted this concept to be a necessary component of a healthy scientific community. Popper (1959) argued that science, and our understanding of our world, advances only by continuous challenges:

“In so far as a scientific statement speaks about reality, it must be falsifiable: and in so far as it is not falsifiable, it does not speak about reality.”¹

Scientific progress, in other words, operates as a dialectic (Popper 1934, 1959).² Truth is temporary—what we believe based on the evidence available until new evidence arrives to challenge it.

According to Popper, we never know anything for certain, but we can get closer to truth if we allow what is currently accepted as fact to be challenged. In surviving those challenges propositions grow successive coatings of legitimacy, just as a pearl expands in size as it responds to continuous irritations.

Are critical literature reviews falsifiable? Strictly speaking, yes. One must simply find one or more previous articles of the type declared not to exist.

In practice, it depends. In more than a few NBER papers, authors cite previous research and then criticize it as inadequate, providing details. While critical, they are not dismissing the previous research but, rather, engaging it. They inform the reader of its existence and

point to locations where it can be found. Such claims—no matter how critical—are practically falsifiable.

A falsifiable claim may be accurate or inaccurate. The author might be wrong in his or her criticisms of the previous research, but at least the debate is out in the open where, ideally, the claims can be verified or falsified.

The literature reviews in this NBER collection that we have classified as dismissive have not been falsified because either:

- the journal editor and reviewers trusted the author and so did not check the dismissive claim; or
- the cost of falsification was judged to be too high.

Indeed, whether editors and reviewers are even responsible for attempting to falsify dismissive reviews remains ambiguous in most venues. One might well consider it unfair to pin all the blame for false dismissive reviews on authors. When journals lack the resources to verify research literature claims, as most do, they could admit as much and eschew publishing dismissive literature review claims.

When an author declares a void in previous knowledge, which the author claims to be filling, editors who may wish to verify the claim are presented with a blank slate. Voids have no specific location. The editor is, essentially, challenged to conduct the time-consuming literature review that the author avoided.

Trends

Judging from our sample of NBER Working Papers, dismissive review prevalence seems to have grown up to the time of COVID19. The number of papers in our sample with dismissive reviews totaled less than twenty in the years 2000 and 2004. By 2016, the number had grown to almost eighty, before plateauing in 2020. See Table 2. With more papers came more dismissive reviews.

Table 2. Number of NBER Working Papers retrieved, with education focus, and with dismissive reviews, by year

Calendar Year	# Papers included in “Education” Topic	# Papers with formal education focus	# Ed focus papers with dismissive review(s)	% Ed focus papers with dismissive review(s)
2000	29	25	15	60
2004	36	31	19	61
2008	67	58	34	59
2012	91	73	52	71

2016	108	95	78	82
2020	149	106	73	69
2024	109	87	54	62
TOTAL	589	475	325	

Dismissive review vocabulary

An author may express a dismissive literature review bluntly, as in “there is no research on,” “this is the first study of,” or “my study is unique.” Other dismissive reviews elaborate, perhaps doubting that few will believe a blunter claim.

Elaborations add details that may or may not be relevant. Over seventy of the dismissive reviews in our sample add a qualifying adverb, as in “Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to this line of research,” or “Unfortunately, few researchers have studied this topic.” In addition to “surprisingly” and “unfortunately,” one finds “remarkably,” “noticeably,” (as in “noticeably absent from the literature”), and “relatively” (as in “relatively few studies have”).

The function of the adverb precedent may be to divert skepticism of the dismissive claim, as if to say “yes, I know it seems far-fetched to claim no one has studied this topic before; I was skeptical too, just like you, so I was surprised.”

Another very common phrasing goes like this “While there is much research about X, there is less about Y,” with topic Y being the focus of the paper at hand. One finds over thirty examples of this in our NBER sample. Once again, the function may be to divert skepticism by adding detail that infers one must have spent some time searching the literature.

Even if such a claim is true, larger could mean two studies versus one, or a thousand studies versus 900. And 900 previous studies would hardly validate an appeal for more research and the money to fund it.

Also rather uninformative are excuses of the type “We are unaware”(of previous work), or “To (the best of) our knowledge” (no previous work exists). More than fifty of our sample’s dismissive reviews fit this type. Such claims at least bear the virtue of honesty ... maybe. But they also provide no useful detail, and they still suggest there exists no previous research (because this expert in the field apparently knows of none).

If one has not conducted a literature search one does not in fact know the state of previous work. And when one doesn’t really know, it may be more helpful to stay quiet about it.

In our NBER sample, references to works outside of economics are rare. Yet, many of the authors feel no hesitancy in recommending consequential public policies based solely on that economics literature with which they are familiar. Meanwhile, they may treat earlier work or work outside economics as if it never existed. One can find claims of first-ever

evidence or analysis in our NBER sample made apparently oblivious to substantial bodies of work on the same topic conducted long ago by psychologists or other non-economists.

The limit of toleration

One might consider it unfair to summarily judge a scholar's literature review habits based on just one or two papers. With more than several papers and dozens of dismissive reviews, however, one may be less circumspect.

Most often, when these NBER researchers imply that they have looked at all relevant research, they have not. "The research" to which they refer is not all that there is, it likely isn't even all there is in economics.

Sometimes, the implied totality of relevant research is truly just that from ...

- ... one's own field of study (e.g., economics)
- ... recent years (and many less that predate the World Wide Web)
- ... English-language sources
- ... North American and Western European sources
- ... academic journals (i.e., no "grey literature," such as evaluation reports)
- ... a single subject index or two
- ... a Google search
- ... one's circle of colleagues
- ... that which can be recalled "off the top of one's head"

The problem with this behavior—suggesting one knows "all the research" when one knows (or is willing to cite) only a small part of it—is that many readers and policy makers will naively accept the claim at face value. They will believe the dismissive scholar who implies that he or she is intimately familiar with literally all the relevant research on the topic at hand. Public policies will be set by whichever celebrity scholar has most recently talked to policymakers on the topic.

Moreover, when authors are willing to gaslight about the research literature writ large, why should we trust what they tell us about their own little study?

But, what if there really is no previous research literature?

Dismissive literature reviews may be considered something of a dare, to editors and reviewers. Essentially, dismissive authors dare those reviewing to prove them wrong. Of course, it is always possible that a dismissive claim could be valid, despite extraordinarily low odds outside of research on recent events or on new technical discoveries.

Editors and reviewers do not just accept the author's word with respect to any other manuscript claims. By enforcing strict standards of evidence for assertions in the current study they may maintain a stellar reputation for their own journal. By passing without

question assertions about entire research literatures, they abnegate responsibility for their profession and its research literature.

If a scholar has not, in fact, conducted an honest and thorough literature search, they needn't make any claims about the literature. If they wish to make claims, and they conducted a search, then they can describe that search in some detail. Search details are falsifiable.³

Analysis

To provide more detail on the behavioral variation among NBER education topic contributors, we extract from our sample of papers a sample of authors, limited to all those who had authored, or co-authored, at least five papers in our NBER Working Papers sample. Papers are counted whether they included dismissive reviews or not. Forty authors fit these requirements. Table 3 presents a summary, with the authors sorted high to low based on their average number of dismissive reviews (DRs) per paper (in bold).

Table 3. NBER Working Paper education topic authors and their dismissive literature reviews (DRs), 2000 to 2024

Author	# papers	# papers with DRs	# papers without DRs	# DRs	# firstness claims	# DRs per paper	% papers with DRs	# papers as first author	% papers as first author
Bridget Terry Long	5	4	1	34	5	6.80	80	1	20
Eric Bettinger	7	7	0	38	10	5.43	100	5	71
Thomas Dee	6	6	0	27	9	4.50	100	4	67
James Wyckoff	5	5	0	19	3	3.80	100	0	0
Sandra Black	5	5	0	18	3	3.60	100	5	100
Michael F. Lovenheim	7	6	1	24	16	3.43	86	1	14
David Figlio	12	11	1	38	13	3.17	92	7	58
Susanna Loeb	7	7	0	22	6	3.14	100	0	0
Judith Scott-Clayton	10	9	1	30	10	3.00	90	7	70
Brian Jacob	10	10	0	27	4	2.70	100	5	50
John A. List	7	7	0	18	5	2.57	100	2	29
Jonah Rockoff	8	6	2	19	1	2.38	75	4	50

Author	# papers	# papers with DRs	# papers without DRs	# DRs	# firstness claims	# DRs per paper	% papers with DRs	# papers as first author	% papers as first author
Krzysztof Karbownik	6	6	0	14	5	2.33	100	0	0
Scott E. Carrell	5	4	1	11	2	2.20	80	5	100
Robert W. Fairlie	5	5	0	10	6	2.00	100	2	40
Thomas Kane	6	4	2	11	1	1.83	67	1	17
Scott A. Imberman	5	5	0	9	1	1.80	100	2	40
James Heckman	8	7	1	14	3	1.75	88	4	50
Philip Oreopoulos	11	9	2	19	7	1.73	82	4	36
Eric Hanushek	13	13	0	22	3	1.69	100	10	77
Victor Lavy	9	9	0	15	10	1.67	100	9	100
Douglas O. Staiger	6	3	3	10	1	1.67	50	0	0
Charles Clotfelter	5	4	1	8	1	1.60	80	5	100
B. Zafar	5	5	0	8	4	1.60	100	0	0
Lesley J. Turner	5	4	1	8	0	1.60	80	1	20
Esther Duflo	7	5	2	11	4	1.57	71	6	86
Karthik Muralidharan	5	4	1	7	2	1.40	80	2	40

Author	# papers	# papers with DRs	# papers without DRs	# DRs	# firstness claims	# DRs per paper	% papers with DRs	# papers as first author	% papers as first author
C. Kirabo Jackson	8	6	2	10	5	1.25	75	8	100
Susan Dynarski	10	5	5	12	0	1.20	50	6	60
Steven Rivkin	6	5	1	7	1	1.17	83	0	0
David Deming	6	3	3	6	2	1.00	50	2	33
Christopher Avery	5	3	2	5	2	1.00	60	4	80
Bruce Sacerdote	5	2	3	4	1	0.80	40	4	80
Michael Kremer	5	2	3	4	1	0.80	40	1	20
Jesse Rothstein	10	5	5	7	1	0.70	50	5	50
Kalena Cortes	5	3	2	3	1	0.60	60	2	40
Dennis Epple	5	2	3	2	0	0.40	40	3	60
Richard Romano	5	2	3	2	0	0.40	40	0	0
David Card	9	2	7	3	0	0.33	22	9	100
Joshua Angrist	6	1	5	2	0	0.33	17	6	100

Circling back to the critic who claimed that all scholars write dismissive literature reviews, Table 3 suggests that they have a point. Every author listed wrote at least two. Granted, dozens of authors who wrote no dismissive reviews are not included in the table because they did not meet the minimum threshold of authoring five or more papers. Still, the critic might argue that Table 3 suggests that all authors will eventually write *some* dismissive literature reviews if they keep working in the field and accumulate enough papers.

Even though the critic technically may be correct, their point misses quite a large variation in dismissive behavior. The five economists at the bottom of table 3, for example, are each associated with either two or three dismissive reviews. For one, all three DRs reference other economists' claims of no or little previous research, he initiated none himself.⁴ In every other case—that is for the remaining nine dismissive reviews among the other four economists—papers were co-authored. Thus, a different co-author may have been responsible for conducting the paper's literature review. Indeed, few NBER Working Papers are *not* co-authored.

Given this dispersion of responsibility, probably one can only reasonably judge an author's predilection for dismissive literature reviews in the long run, by observing DR prevalence across time, papers, and sub-topics, and with different combinations of co-authors.

At the high end of the range, one frequent contributor averages close to seven dismissive literature reviews per paper. Another scholar who contributed seven papers included dismissive reviews in each one—38 in all. Moreover, ten of the 38 are “firstness” claims—declarations that he or he and co-authors are the first in the history of the world to have either studied a certain topic or done a worthwhile job in studying it.⁵ In none of the 38 cases does the author (or authors) tell us where they searched for previous relevant work, how they searched, or whether they searched at all. The reviews are raw declarations, made without evidence.

Again, our complete data base can be found online [here](#). We welcome any suggestions or corrections.

¹ "Falsifiable" may have been a poor word choice. In Popper's use, the word means something like "challengeable," "testable," or "reviewable." That is, for a proposition to be considered true, it must be capable of being challenged or tested through normal scientific processes, such as an experiment. Sleight (2021) takes Popper to task, essentially, for what may be a poor word choice by blaming him for the behavior of scientific nihilists and moral relativists who assert "In order to know if a theory could be true, there must be a way to prove it to be false" (i.e., there is no universal truth).

² "Hegel's Dialectics" <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics/>

³ To be complete, however, some dismissive literature reviews are so careless that one can prove them wrong with a simple internet search finding examples of previous research. The dismissive claim may still be protected by hedging vocabulary, however, such as “almost no previous research,” or “no previous *rigorous*

research.” At that point, the dismissive reviewer’s article is already published, and its editor and reviewers have already moved on to other work.

⁴ In other papers the same scholar provides specific details in his literature reviews. He directly cites previous review articles (so anyone can check his claims about them) and exactly circumscribes the topical domain of his own review. He tells us exactly where he looked for past work so we can check his claims if we wish to.

⁵ His (and his co-authors’) dismissals include some that seem difficult to believe: “ ... there is almost no research on the impact of remediation on student outcomes.” (2004); “ ... little is known about the role of instructor quality in higher education or how to measure it.” (2004); “We are among the first to examine impacts of merit aid on graduation and earnings,” (2016); and “... evidence on fostering regional, and particularly local, economic growth remains elusive” (2024). Even if he meant to refer in each statement only to the *economics* research literature, these claims seem far-fetched.

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