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Influential publications in social work discourse:
The 100 most highly cited articles in disciplinary journals: 2000-2009

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Abstract
Examinations of highly cited articles are common in professions such as medicine as a way to enhance professional self-reflection. Yet, little research has examined influential articles in social work. In light of the emergence of a distinct disciplinary knowledge base over the past few decades, this study identifies the 100 most cited articles in disciplinary social work journals (N = 79) published during 2000-2009. Analysis revealed twelve citation classics spanning a relatively diverse array of subjects. Among the various topics that appeared among the 100 most cited articles, the results suggest that evidence-based practice/social work research plays a particularly important role in professional discourse. Also notable is the fact that some two-thirds of the most highly cited articles were published in just four journals.

Key Words:
Bibliometrics; Professional Discourse; Social Work Literature; Highly Cited Articles
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Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of a profession is its disciplinary knowledge base (Randall & Kindiak, 2008). As Flexner (2001 [1915]) stated in a seminal essay, the first characteristic of a profession is engagement in intellectual activities. He goes on to note the importance of disciplinary knowledge that is transmitted via various disciplinary vehicles.

Among these vehicles, professional journals are perhaps the central repository of a discipline’s scholarship (Sellers, Perry, Mathiesen & Smith, 2004). Although scholarship is manifested in many forms, refereed journals typically play a primary role in housing and transmitting central disciplinary concepts. Academic journals are used by key disciplinary stakeholders, including researchers disseminating new findings, scholars publishing theoretical content, educators selecting syllabus content, and practitioners updating their skill sets.

As social work has developed as a profession, the number of social work journals has increased, particularly since the late 1970s. Sellers and associates (2004) estimated the number of social work journals increased from 10 in 1978 to 50 in 1994. By 2005, over 70 social work journals reportedly existed (Thyer, 2005). In short, a distinct professional knowledge base has emerged comprised of disciplinary social work journals that are committed to transmitting the field’s intellectual ideals, concepts, and accomplishments (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008).

Citation Analysis: A Window on Disciplinary Priorities

As a profession matures, it is common practice to examine the parameters of its knowledge base. Most refereed journal articles are never cited (Cameron, 2005; Seglen, 1997). Only a relatively small number of published articles are deemed to make a sufficient contribution such that they warrant being referenced in subsequent work.

Examining highly cited articles reveals important information about the relatively small number of papers that have a significant impact upon a given field (Celayir, Sander, Elicevik, Vural & Celayir, 2008). Such analysis can provide an important window into professional priorities. Identifying the papers that have made the most impact helps in the process of
professional self-reflection (Jones, Ripley, Kurusu & Worthington, 1998). Seminal works can be identified and built upon, gaps in the knowledge base can be determined, and future priorities mapped (Fan & McGhee, 2008; Price & Dake, 2001).

For example, perhaps the most well-established profession is medicine (Flexner, 2001 [1915]). Frequent analyses of highly cited articles have been conducted within medicine as a method to advance various sub-fields within the larger medical profession. Within the last decade, analyses have been conducted to ascertain the most influential articles in: anaesthesia (Baltussen & Kindler, 2004a), critical care (Baltussen & Kindler, 2004b), general surgery (Paladugu, Schein, Gardezi & Wise, 2002), hepatopathology (Crawford, 2006), occupational medicine (Gehanno, Takahashi, Darmoni & Weber, 2007), ophthalmology (Ohba, Nakao, Isashiki & Ohba, 2007), pain (Terajima & Aneman, 2003), paediatric surgery (Celayir et al., 2008), and plastic surgery (Loonen, Hage & Kon, 2008).

Although citation analysis is a common procedure, it is important to note that citations represent just one method of measuring of an article’s impact or influence on professional discourse (Soutar & Murphy, 2009). Nominally cited work can also have an impact (MacRoberts & MacRoberts, 2010). For instance, an article might have a substantial influence in practice settings even through it is un-cited in future academic work. Thus, other methods of documenting impact are often equally important and, in some cases, perhaps better at documenting influence or impact than citations. In short, citations are best understood as a rough proxy for one type of influence in professional discourse.

In comparison to medicine, relatively little is known about social work’s disciplinary knowledge base. A paucity of information exists about which articles have made a significant contribution to the profession’s knowledge base, what type of articles are more influential, or even the general parameters of social work’s knowledge base of highly cited articles. This is likely due, at least in part, to the relatively recent emergence of a disciplinary knowledge base comprised of distinct social work journals (Sellers et al., 2004).
Another related factor that has inhibited analysis of the social work literature is lack of access to citation data for social work journals. Most of the above referenced analyses conducted within medicine have relied upon data collected by Thomson ISI. While this organization appears to provide good coverage of medical journals, its coverage of journals in the social sciences is relatively limited (Baneyx, 2008; Jacobs, 2009; Kulkarni, Aziz, Shams & Busse, 2009). Thomson ISI indexes a small portion of the available universe of academic journals in the world (Cameron, 2005). According to some estimates, 126,000 scientific journals exist globally (Whitehouse, 2001). In comparison, Thomson ISI contains data from some 5,900 journals in science and technology, and just 1,700 journals in the social sciences (JCR, 2008).

This same pattern exists with social work periodicals. As noted above, over 70 social work journals exist (Thyer, 2005). Yet, at the time of writing, the most recent Journal Citation Reports (JCR, 2008) listed just 29 periodicals in the social work category. This is, however, an inflated number. Many of the journals included in the JCR social work category are interdisciplinary or extra-disciplinary journals (Thyer, 2010).

In addition to under-representing journals in the social sciences, some commentators have suggested that Thomson ISI disproportionately favours American-based journals (Auffhammer, 2009; Cameron, 2005). These two factors—the under-representation of journals in the social sciences and the under-representation of journals from outside the United States—complicates citation analysis. Obviously, the more comprehensive the literature from which citations are harvested, the more accurate the resulting citation analysis.

Fortunately, an alternative to Thomson ISI has recently emerged that may provide a better fit for the social work profession—Google Scholar. Although still in its beta version, Google Scholar appears to offer greater access to relevant, cite-able content in the social sciences relative to Thomson ISI. A number of studies have examined the citation coverage of Google Scholar and Thomson ISI from different perspectives (Bakkalbasi, Bauer, Glover & Wang, 2006; Baneyx, 2008; Clarke, 2008; Jacobs, 2009; Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis & Pappas, 2008;
Kulkarni et al., 2009; Harzing & van der Wal, 2008; Kousha & Thelwall, 2008; Kulkarni et al., 2009; Meho & Yang, 2007; Mikki, 2010; Smith, 2008; Walters, 2009).

Both Google Scholar and Thomson ISI have their respective advantages and limitations, which are somewhat discipline dependent. In broad relief, Google Scholar captures more citations, but more noise (e.g., non-academic citations). Thomson ISI is more rigorous, but fails to harvest many academically relevant citations, particularly in the social sciences. In addition, Google Scholar may also provide better coverage of journals based outside the United States (Auffhammer, 2009; Baneyx, 2008; Meho & Yang, 2007).

Due to these and other factors, Auffhammer (2009) argues Google Scholar is quickly becoming the primary citation database in many fields. Google Scholar has been used in a number of citation-based analyses (Ashkanasy, 2007; Baneyx, 2008; Keloharju, 2008; Lee, Kraus & Couldwell, 2009; Mingers, 2009; Moussa & Touzani, 2010; Soutar & Murphy, 2009). Included among these are studies that have sought to determine the most widely cited papers in economics (Auffhammer, 2009) and finance (Keloharju, 2008). This suggests that Google Scholar may provide effective access to social work’s disciplinary knowledge base.

Accordingly, this study determines the most influential articles in disciplinary social work journals over the previous decade. More specifically, the study determines the 100 most highly cited articles initially published during 2000-2009 in disciplinary journals using Google Scholar.

**Method**

**Data Sources**

To construct a list of disciplinary social work journals, a number of sources were consulted. Primary sources included Thyer’s (2005) list of social work periodicals, *An Author’s Guide to Social Work Journals* published by the American-based National Association of Social Workers (1997), and online indexing services such as Genamics JournalSeek and the 2008 social work JCR by Thomson ISI. Consistent with other efforts to delineate journals with a specific social work orientation (Thyer, 2010), each journal was examined to determine its status as a
disciplinary periodical (e.g., the mission and aims were inspected). Extra-disciplinary journals were eliminated (e.g., *The Journal of Community Psychology*), as were inter-disciplinary journals that lacked a social work orientation (e.g., *Family Relations*).

This search strategy produced a list of 84 disciplinary journals. As expected, Google Scholar featured citation data for the vast majority of these journals. In only five instances was limited or no information available, typically because the journal did not appear to be active during the time period examined in this study. Thus, 79 disciplinary journals were used in the present study. These journals are delineated elsewhere (Authors, in press).

**Procedures**

To obtain a list of the most cited articles from each of the 79 journals, we used Harzing’s (2010) Publish or Perish, version 2.8, available at ([http://www.harzing.com/pop.htm](http://www.harzing.com/pop.htm)). This free software programme is designed to harvest citation data from academic journals using Google Scholar as the data source. The programme has been used to conduct various citation analyses in a number of disciplines (Ashkanasy, 2007; Franceschet, 2010; Keloharju, 2008; Lee et al., 2009; Mingers, 2009; Moussa & Touzani, 2010; Vanclay, 2008; Soutar & Murphy, 2009).

To identify journals, searches were conducted of the social science literature following the procedures outlined in the Publish or Perish software manual. Where relevant, spelling/grammatical variations where used (e.g., “and” and “&”). In addition, searches were conducted using each journal’s print and online ISSN (when available). For each identified journal, a list of the most frequently cited articles was obtained. All query results were visually inspected for incomplete or inaccurate results. In instances where we were able to determine that journals had changed their name during the 2000 to 2009 citation window, the search was adjusted to incorporate this fact.

Citation analyses have been conducted using various timeframes ranging from approximately five years (Fan & McGhee, 2008) to five decades (Baltussen & Kindler, 2004a). In the present study, a ten year citation window (i.e., 2000 to 2009) was used for the following reasons. A ten year window is consistent with the relatively recent emergence of a distinct set of
social work journals (Sellers et al., 2004). Google Scholar’s coverage of social science journals appears to be more accurate and comprehensive when harvesting more recent citation data (Harzing & van der Wal, 2008). Finally, the ten year window has been used in previous research in other fields (Jones et al., 1998).

To improve the reliability of the results, the search procedures were independently replicated by the third author and the results were merged with those obtained by the first author. Thus, a master list of the most frequently cited articles was created. The two searches spanned a number of months in early 2010. To ensure that articles identified early in the search were not disadvantaged relative to those identified later in the search (i.e., the number of citations per article had not changed during the study), the top 200 articles from the master list were selected. These 200 articles were then directly entered into Google Scholar over the course of a two-day period to ensure the equitable treatment of each article. The results were re-ordered and the top 100 most cited articles were selected. Although smaller (Price & Dake, 2001) and larger (Keloharju, 2008) compilations have appeared in the literature, sets of 100 articles have been commonly reported (Baltussen & Kindler, 2004a; Ohba et al., 2007; Paladugu et al., 2002).

Results

Table 1 depicts the 100 most influential articles published in disciplinary social work journals over the course of the past decade. Put differently, the table features the most cited articles during 2000-2009, that were initially published during 2000-2009. The table includes the total number of citations each article has accumulated since publication in the past decade and the average number of citations accumulated per year. In addition, full APA information is provided for each article in the table.

Due to the beta nature of Google Scholar, it is important to view the list as provisional. While we have accurately reported the results produced by Google Scholar, idiosyncrasies in the beta version’s algorithms could have resulted in undetected errors, including the omission of articles. The cross-sectional nature of the results should also be noted. Although there was a general increase in citations for most, but not all articles, over the course of the study, citation
counts for individual articles fluctuated both up and down. Thus, conducting the study at a different point in time would produce a different rank ordering of the articles, particularly in the lower tiers where differences between articles are relatively minor.

It should also be emphasized that the table depicts articles, not authors. Social work authors publish in a wide array of disciplinary and non-disciplinary journals. In leading graduate programmes in the United States, Green and Baskind (2007) found that faculty published approximately half of their articles in non-social work journals. Thus, many social workers have likely authored articles that are cited more frequently than those listed in Table 1 since citation rates vary from discipline to discipline (Cameron, 2005; Leydesdorff, 2008). Social Work authors contributing to other fields where citations norms are higher may have published articles that are cited more highly than those featured in this study. Since our focus is on the social work disciplinary knowledge base, our analysis is restricted to social work journals.

Ordering the results requires a choice between two approaches. One method is to simply compute the total citation counts over a given citation window (Jones et al., 1998; Price & Dake, 2001). Alternatively, it is also possible to calculate the number of citations per year and then rank order the results accordingly (Keloharju, 2008). The latter approach offers the advantage of correcting for the amount of time elapsed since publication. Articles that have been in existence for a longer period of time have more opportunity to be cited (Loonen et al., 2008). Calculating the average number of citations per year corrects for this bias.

The former approach offers the advantage of mitigating the effects of what might be called “flash-in-the-pan” papers, or articles that reflect hot topics but lack staying power over time. Similarly, it also helps to correct for differing publication schedules and time lags among social work journals (Barker & Thyer, 2005; Epstein, 2004). In addition, some observers have also noted that as an article ages, its unique contribution is often incorporated into the wider knowledge base (Celayir et al., 2008). This effect helps attenuate the bias mentioned in the preceding paragraph related to length of time an article has existed in the professional literature.
Table 1 features a hybrid method that incorporates aspects of both approaches. As implied in the method section, the 100 most highly cited articles were first selected. Then the results were subsequently ordered based upon each article’s average number of citations per year. Thus, the table lists the 100 most highly cited articles published during 2000-2009 rank ordered by each article’s mean number of citations per year. The total number of citations accumulated since publication is also reported for readers who believe that this approach is the most valid way to assess an article’s influence.

Discussion

This study determined the 100 most influential articles in disciplinary social work journals published over course of the previous decade. Analyses of highly cited articles are commonly used to provide a window into professional priorities (Nieri et al., 2007). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study of influential disciplinary articles to appear in the social work literature. As such, it provides an initial understanding of the articles that have played a part in shaping discourse in the social work profession.

The most influential article is Webb’s article on evidence-based practice, which appeared in the British Journal of Social Work. This topic was not an anomaly among the more cited articles. Indeed, evidence-based practice and/or social work research was the most prominent topic at the top of the list. This suggests that the link between research and practice, as manifested in the evidenced-based practice debate, is a subject of substantial concern to the profession. Put differently, evidence-based practice is perhaps the topic of primary importance within the profession. Based upon the number of citations attributed to this subject, many scholars are invested in various issues related to the concept of evidence-based practice.

A substantial portion of the 100 most influential articles were conceptually or theoretically oriented. This is not to say that research was absent. Rather, that the profession appears to value conceptual and theoretical work along with empirical work. All types of scholarship appear to influence professional discourse. A number of literature reviews were also highly cited. This is consistent with findings in other disciplines (Jones et al., 1998; Price &
Dake, 2001; Terajima & Aneman, 2003). Authoritative reviews and meta-analyses are often highly cited relative to other types of scholarship (Leydesdorff, 2008; Seglen, 1997).

Just over ten percent of the articles could be considered “citation classics.” The benchmark commonly used to determine a citation classic is a minimum of 100 citations (Gehanno et al., 2007; Nieri et al., 2007). Using this standard, twelve articles published during the previous decade met this criterion. These classics also covered a relatively broad array of subjects—ranging from spirituality to collaborations to teaching—implicitly underscoring the breadth of content areas that fall under the purview of what is considered “social work.”

The journals in which the 100 most influential articles appeared also warrant discussion. Some 79 periodicals were examined in this study. Yet, despite the breath of the profession’s disciplinary knowledge base, a disproportionate number of articles appeared in a relatively small number of journals.

Over two-thirds ($n = 68$) of the most influential articles appeared in just four journals (see Table 2). Ninety-three of the articles appeared in twelve journals. Of these twelve journals, most were American-based (e.g., Social Service Review, Research on Social Work Practice, Social Work). British-based journals, however, also published a number of influential articles. Indeed, the British Journal of Social Work featured more highly cited articles than any other periodical, publishing over twenty percent ($n = 22$) of the most influential articles.

The findings suggest a number of implications for scholars, educators, students, and practitioners (Price & Dake, 2001). Scholars seeking publication outlets that might enhance the probability of their work being cited might target journals that disproportionately publish highly cited work (Green, 2008; Seipel, 2003). Similarly, scholars might build upon, supplement, and add to existing influential work in their respective areas of interest. For example, authors writing about evidence-based practice might use the results to ensure that they are engaging the most highly cited works on the subject.
Educators might assign students highly cited articles as a way to introduce them to seminal works in the profession. Students interested in focusing upon a particular topic might identify prominent scholars in their area of interest and seek admission to the corresponding educational programmes. Practitioners might examine works relevant to their area of practice. For instance, practitioners interested in training programmes designed to prevent child abuse might review Lundahl, Nimer, and Parsons’ (2006) highly cited meta-analysis on the subject.

**Limitations**

This study defined the profession’s disciplinary knowledge base to consist of journals with a specific social work orientation. As Thyer (2001) notes, no agreed upon criteria exists for selecting such journals. An alternative conceptualising of the profession’s knowledge base would likely produce a different ordering of highly cited articles.

Citation analysis is also characterized by a number of limitations. Although citation analysis is premised upon the assumption that higher quality work will tend to be cited more frequently, there is no necessary relationship between citations and quality. For example, an article may be highly cited simply because it is controversial. In addition, citations may be listed incorrectly (Spivey & Wilks, 2004). Complete journal issues and/or individual articles may be missing from databases (Holden, Barker, Covert-Vail, Rosenberg & Cohen, 2008). The analysis did not control for self-citations, which may unduly inflate an article’s total number of citations. Google Scholar is still in a beta version, which suggests that its search algorithms will continue to be refined and improved.

In spite of the limitations associated with citation analyses, it is important to note that analyses similar to the one used in this study are relatively common (Nieri et al., 2007). Likewise, it might also be noted that self-citations are warranted in some situations (Holden, Rosenberg & Barker, 2005). For example, in contexts were scholars are building upon their previous work or working in newly emerging fields. Google Scholar may undercount citations (Baneyx, 2008). Thus, while providing boarder coverage of the social sciences than Thomson
ISI, Google Scholar does not access the full universe of academic citations (Harzing & van der Wal, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Based upon our survey of the extant literature, this is the first comprehensive examination of influential disciplinary articles to appear in the social work literature. As such, this study offers insights into key professional priorities in social work discourse. It identifies seminal works, and facilitates professional self-reflection. It is, however, only an initial, preliminary picture. It is our hope that future researchers will build upon this study to further enhance our familiarity with social work’s disciplinary knowledge base. By understanding where we have come from and what we have accomplished, we are better positioned to address future challenges.
References
Authors (in press). Ranking disciplinary journals with the Google Scholar h-index: A new tool for constructing cases for tenure, promotion, and other professional decisions. *Journal of Social Work Education*.


### Table 1

**Most Cited Articles in Disciplinary Social Work Journals (N = 79)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>C/Yr</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Smokowski, P.R., &amp; Kopasz, K.H. (2005). Bullying in school: An overview of types, effects, family characteristics, and intervention strategies. <em>Children &amp; Schools, 27</em>(2), 101-110.</td>
<td>10.60</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Myles, J., &amp; Quadagno, J. (2002). Political theories of the welfare state. <em>Social Service Review, 76</em>(1), 34-57.</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Padgett, D.K., Gulcur, L., &amp; Tsemberis, S. (2006). Housing first services for people who are</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Social Service Review, 76(4), 642-662.


1 Google Scholar may have conflated the citations of Part I and part II of this article at the time of the study.
2 This paper was published simultaneously as a journal article and book chapter, which may have inflated the total number of citations for this entry.
Table 2

Social Work Journals in which Influential Articles were Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>n&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Region&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>British Journal of Social Work</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Social Service Review</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Research on Social Work Practice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Health &amp; Social Work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Social Work Research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Journal of Social Work Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>International Journal of Social Welfare</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Children &amp; Schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Child &amp; Family Social Work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Social Work Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Child &amp; Adolescent Social Work Journal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup> Number of influential articles published in a given journal

<sup>2</sup> Region in which the journal is primarily based.