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Short Reply

Does Citation Analysis Help or Hinder the Professional Development of Social Workers and Their Profession? A Reply to Slater, Scourfield and Sloan

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Abstract

This article responds to Slater, Scourfield and Sloan's assessment and analysis of our earlier *British Journal of Social Work* article delineating the 100 most highly cited articles in disciplinary social work journals during the past decade. We address two primary issues in our response. First, we provide background on the circumstances that animated the larger research agenda from which the BJSW article emanated. Second, we discuss how the authors' empirical work illustrates the potential of citation analysis to spark conversations that facilitate professional reflection and growth. We conclude by noting that every method is characterised by a certain set of limitations and that citation analysis has the potential to assist both social workers and their profession if used appropriately.

Keywords: Bibliometrics, methodological limitations, professional discourse, highly cited articles

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Introduction

We appreciate the opportunity to interact with Slater, Scourfield and Sloan's response to our earlier article, published in the *British Journal of Social Work* (Hodge *et al.*, 2012), which delineated the 100 most highly cited articles in

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disciplinary social work journals over the course of the past decade. We begin by reviewing some of the events that encouraged us to embark on a programme of citation-based research that uses the Google Scholar h-index to assess what might be broadly referred to as academic merit. This background provides some important context for understanding some of the underlying philosophical aims that animated the BJSW article. Next, we discuss how the authors' empirical work illustrates the potential offered by citation analysis, sparking important conversations that can foster professional reflection and development.

What prompted our citation-based research?

Slater, Scourfield and Sloan begin by noting considerable debate exists about the merits of using citation analysis to measure academic merit. We want to clarify that we are in full agreement regarding these cautions. We are sympathetic to those who question the quantification of scholarship, journals, authors and other aspects of the social science project (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita, 2007). If used in isolation, it is our opinion that quantification can produce biased results that do more to obscure, than clarify, academic merit.

We both share an interest in the study of knowledge dissemination within our respective fields (mental health; Lacasse, 2005; and spirituality, religion and culture; Hodge *et al.*, 2006). Initially, in our academic careers, we had little interest in attempting to further the quantification project in the social work profession.

Circumstances, however, conspired to alter our thinking. At a Promotion and Tenure information session, we were informed that the h-index was being used within the University-level Promotion and Tenure process to evaluate faculty. At the time, we and many of our colleagues were unfamiliar with the Google Scholar-derived h-index. It was a little disconcerting to us that social work faculty were being evaluated using a metric well known in other scientific fields (e.g. physics) but with which many, if not most, social work faculty were completely unfamiliar. Informal conversations with social workers at other universities convinced us that ours was not an isolated experience.

As a result of this revelation, we embarked upon a research agenda designed to empower social work faculty. Given the reality that faculty are being assessed using citation-based metrics, we sought to acquaint faculty with these metrics so they could make their own choices regarding the use of citation-based approaches. Our aim was not to supplant other methods for assessing academic merit, but to give faculty the option of another tool that they could use in constructing their own cases for promotion, tenure and annual reviews.

Towards this end, we worked on validating the Google Scholar h-index as a measure: (i) of individual faculty productivity (Lacasse *et al.*, 2011) and (ii) of the quality or impact of disciplinary journals in which social workers publish

(Hodge and Lacasse, 2011*a*). Building upon our work in the former area, an impending article describes disciplinary norms for h-index within the field of social work (Lacasse *et al.*, 2012). Another article illustrates how faculty might use the latter method to document academic merit when publishing in disciplinary journals (Hodge and Lacasse, 2011*b*). Social workers are thus equipped to document the quality/impact of their work for social work and non-social work audiences.

It is important emphasise that a central aim of this larger research agenda, which includes the BJSW piece, was to empower social work faculty who are likely to be evaluated through the use of citation analysis and h-index. We concur a real risk exists that citation-based approaches to assessing academic merit can be abused. Consequently, it is important to underscore their limitations. Concurrently, at a philosophical level, we believe faculty deserve to be well informed regarding the citation-based approaches used to evaluate them. If some faculty decide not to employ the Google Scholar h-index due to its limitations, that is a decision we support. We think, however, that this choice is best made by faculty members who have access to disciplinary-specific information regarding h-index—a void we have attempted to fill in the peer-reviewed literature.

Illustrating the potential of citation analysis

In addition to agreeing with Slater, Scourfield and Sloan regarding the limitations of citation analysis, we also wish to affirm their efforts to build upon our findings. As alluded to above, our BJSW piece on the 100 most cited articles represents an extension of our prior work designed to assist faculty in developing their cases for tenure, promotion and annual reviews. However, in the case of the BJSW article, a central aim was to stimulate professional assessment and reflection at the macro level.

Slater, Scourfield and Sloan effectively illustrate the potential we envisioned in the original BJSW article. In keeping with best practices in social science, they confirm our findings and then extend them. Based upon their analysis, the authors report that US authors disproportionately cite American journals and UK authors disproportionately cite journals based in the UK. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time this provocative information has appeared in social work discourse. After reporting these data, the authors conclude by issuing a call for social work researchers in both the USA and the UK to adopt a more international outlook.

The authors' empirical work illustrating a propensity towards within-country citations provides the necessary data to facilitate a conversation about the direction of our profession. Personally, we tend to agree with the authors' call for more international cross-fertilisation. Others, however, might differ, citing a variety of rationales in favour of a more nationally distinct academic cultures (e.g. the importance of maintaining distinctive academic traditions or of

developing and disseminating services that reflect, respond to, and serve local cultures). Regardless of where one stands on the international cross-fertilisation–national autonomy continuum, the authors' empirical work serves as the focal point from which a discussion can proceed. We see this a step forward in our evolution as a profession. Without the data provided by the authors, such a discussion could not proceed in the same empirical manner.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that the limitations associated with citation analysis are less salient at the macro level. As the authors helpfully note, essentially the same set of limitations exist with their attendant potential for harm. Rather, the key benefit is that we have some data—limited though it may be—that can be used to shed light on previously unobserved issues and trends of professional importance.

In conclusion, we wish to thank Slater, Scourfield and Sloan for illustrating some of the potential uses of citation analysis. Every method is characterised by its own unique set of limitations. Like other methods, citation-based approaches are characterised by limitations of which it is important to be cognizant. Concurrently, they provide us with a unique data-based window on professional discourse. We invite others to participate in this process. If used appropriately, citation analysis has the potential to assist both individual social workers and our profession to operationalise our full potential as we move into the future.

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