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Bibliometrics and Social Work: Useful Tool or a Waste of Time?

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Holden, Rosenburg, and Barker (2005) provide social workers with a comprehensive review and analysis of bibliometrics in its various forms and offer some interesting, if not disappointing, observations about social work and scholarship. Indeed this approach to assessing scholarship can be traced to 1927 with the analysis of a chemistry journal (Garfield, 1972). As Holden et al. (2005) so aptly note, a plethora of articles using bibliometrics have been published over the years in the social work literature presumably to shed new light on the profession's scholarship.

As noted by Holden et al. (2005), documentation of the work of academics is on the increase and social work does not stand alone in these deliberations. For example, The American Society of Pediatric Neurosurgeons reviewed over 1,800 citations in their field's professional journals and found that 75% of their members published less than half of their work in their discipline-specific journals (Dias, 1998).

The field of criminal justice has published numerous articles that address institutional productivity of authors (Sorensen, 1994; Taggart & Holmes, 1991), the effect of gender on productivity (Stack, 2002), with no difference found, and the historical contribution of African American scholarship in early criminology texts (Gabbidon & Greene, 2001). Another study found that those who are most cited in criminology journals are not the same as those most cited in criminology textbooks (Wright, 2002). In psychology, a study of the most cited authors in introductory psychology texts found Sigmund Freud to be the most cited with an average of 28 pages

per text and more than double Jean Piaget, the next most cited author (Griggs & Proctor, 2002).

A Web of Science search (http://isi4.isiknowledge.com/portal.cgi) notes that our 1995 article (Ligon, Thyer, & Dixon) using bibliometrics has been cited twelve times, cited every year except 2000 from 1998 – 2003, and has been self-cited twice. Then is this a "quality" article? Does this article have "impact?" While Holden et al. (2005) make a case that there are ways to answer these questions, others have noted "the inherent difficulties in trying to quantify an essentially intangible concept- the relative quality and importance of research" (Sims & McGhee, 2003, p. 22).

Perhaps more attention should be paid to improving the relatively low level of publication rates, citations, and the impact of social work scholarship. A good place to start is publication lag times. As an example, for the 17 articles appearing in the April 2004 issue of *Social Work*, three were accepted for publication in 2000, five in 2001, eight in 2002, and only one in 2003. Therefore, most articles did not appear in print for 2-3 years following acceptance while two articles exceeded three years. If an author submitted to *Social Work* and cited an article from this issue it would easily be two years before the article could be cited, which exceeds the two-year post-publication window used by those who analyze citations. In effect, the authors are set-up for failure where those who publish in other disciplines where journals offer shorter lag times are more likely to be cited in their fields.

Another area of concern is the quality of peer review. As current or former editors of peer reviewed journals we are fully aware of the potential to nurture many manuscripts to publication through helpful peer feedback. Far more attention needs to be

paid to informing those who review manuscripts how to provide helpful feedback and the importance of doing so in a timely manner. A final area of concern is the plethora of journals that have evolved in our profession. Just as doubling the number of social work doctoral programs has not increased the numbers of doctoral level social workers, continuing to introduce new journal titles does not appear to improve the production, quality, or impact of scholarship in our profession. We would argue that fewer journals, with short review and publication cycles, offering quality peer review, with sustained circulation over time would contribute to improving the quality of our scholarship.

It is difficult to say if bibliometrics makes a contribution to the social work profession, although is hard to argue with the fact that as a profession our scholarship falls below other disciplines by various measures. The challenge is to improve by taking what we have learned and proceed bow to implement measures to take the profession forward with respect to our research, publications, and other scholarly endeavors.

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