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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to estimate how many presentations at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) are subsequently published in peer-reviewed journals. A 30% random sample of abstracts presented at the 2006 Annual Meeting of SSWR was reviewed. To determine publication status of the presentations, the authors conducted searches using Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts, in addition to reviewing faculty pages and curriculum vitae (CVs). The authors recorded information about the published articles including the journal title, impact factor, year, and authors. Forty-three percentage (95% CI = [34.5%, 51.9%]) of presentations were published in a peer-reviewed journal. Twenty-eight percentage (95% CI = [20.9%, 36.7%]) of publications were in a journal with an ISI Impact Factor ($M = 1.32$). The number of presentation authors was not associated with a subsequent publication. No differences were observed by type of presentation.

Keywords

academic publishing, Society for Social Work Research, impact factor, journal quality

Academic conferences serve many functions. Such conferences provide an opportunity to present new knowledge to the field, to network with other professionals in order to develop collaborative projects, to receive consultation about ongoing work, and to interview for employment. The Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) is the largest disciplinary organization in the field of social work, with a current membership of over 1,300 individuals from 45 states, 15 other countries, and more than 200 universities and institutions (SSWR, n.d.-a). SSWR espouses seven overall goals, all of which are directly related to the scientific advancement of the social work knowledge base. The Annual Meeting is one of various activities to achieve the various goals and is arguably one of the most important conferences for the field of social work research. The Annual Meeting is also one of the few mechanisms available within the field of social work that provide timely dissemination of research findings before they are published.

Questions about the quality of the Annual Meeting of SSWR have been raised, particularly as it relates to the review process. For example, Howard (2010) raised questions about the reliability and validity of the abstract reviews, in addition to arguing for more data about the types of papers presented at the conference, and the extent to which those papers are later published and cited (Howard, 2010). In response to Howard's (2010) editorial, Fong (2010) provided detailed information about ensuring rigorous, high-quality and fair reviews. However, the extent to which presentations are subsequently published in peer-reviewed journals remains unclear.

As described in the editorials by Howard (2010) and Fong (2010), a significant amount of resources are invested into the abstract review process. A significant amount of resources are also invested in doing the actual research leading up to the presentation, travel costs, and lost time from regular work activities. Many of the resources used to execute and present the research findings are derived from public sources. This obligates researchers to work in earnest to make their research findings available to the broader scientific community and, ideally, the general public. The importance of research dissemination is also reflected in the recent open access policy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH): "The Public Access Policy ensures that the public has access to the published results of NIH funded research to help advance science and improve human health" (NIH, n.d.). While this policy is directed toward *published* research accessibility, the underlying assumption behind this policy is that research funded by public dollars ought to be published in peer-reviewed journals. Of course, research findings can be disseminated in ways other than peer-reviewed

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journals, including (but not limited to) white papers, monographs, book chapters, and newsletters.

As some critics have pointed out, peer-reviewed journals may not be the most effective or efficient way of communicating research findings and innovations (Henderson, 2010; Parmley, 1995). Peer-reviewed journals are arguably a *necessary* but not sufficient condition for disseminating social work research. We are not aware of any examples of high-impact social work research that have altogether circumvented peer-reviewed journals and that have meaningfully informed policy or practice. Circumventing peer-review can be a serious detriment to the growth of science in general and the social work knowledge base specifically. As a primary function, peer review serves as an important check for quality and merit. Of course, peer-review is not perfect, but it remains essential to scientific progress.

Online submission guidelines for the 2006 SSWR Annual Meeting require all abstracts to include, “**purpose, methods, results, and implications for practice or policy**” [bold in original source] (SSWR, n.d.-b). More recent meetings also require this same information. This statement by itself makes it clear that every presentation conveys implications for practice or policy. The abstracts have been subject to peer review, but abstracts do not contain the necessary information for judging the quality and merit of a given study. For example, it is unlikely that any given abstract contains all the information necessary to determine whether procedures of informed consent and human protections were adequate. Thus, it stands to reason that if research presented at the Annual Conference is to have an influence on practice or policy, the research should be subjected to full peer review. We are aware of no other mechanism outside of publishing in a peer-reviewed journal that can provide a sufficient peer review of the research.

The foregoing critique does not diminish the importance of the current peer review efforts of the Annual Meeting. In fact, we believe that these efforts represent a critical mechanism for identifying the highest quality research that is most germane to the field of social work. Unlike other conference formats, the Annual Meeting of SSWR expects every presentation to include results and implications for practice or policy. The Annual Meeting also requires researchers to have in place background information and a summary of methodology. In addition to presenting the major components of the research (i.e., background, methods, results, and implications for practice or policy), presenters can use the Annual Meeting as way of receiving feedback to further improve the quality of their research.

With the initial vetting for quality, explicit requirements for all the major research components, extensive opportunities to receive feedback, and the various obligations to publish research, it seems that a significant proportion of presentations should be published in peer-reviewed journals. However, as Howard (2010) noted, the extent to which presentations from the Annual Meeting are subsequently published is unknown. Addressing this issue can be an important way for helping understand where and how the Annual Meeting contributes to the social work knowledge base.

To date, we are aware of only one other discipline that has taken stock of publications that have emerged from a national meeting. Valderrama-Zurián et al. (2009) examined publications based on presentations made at the 1999 Annual Meeting on the College on Problems of Drug Dependence (CPDD). These authors found that 36.9% of presentations were subsequently published, and that those delivered in the oral presentation format, compared to poster had a significantly greater likelihood of being published compared to poster presentation (OR = 2.53, 95% CI = [1.80, 3.55]).

The purpose of this study was to estimate how many presentations at the SSWR Annual Meeting are subsequently published in peer-reviewed journals. Among those that are published, we were also interested in determining the average ISI impact factor of the journals in which the articles were published and the proportion of presentations at SSWR leading to published manuscripts appearing in the top-ranked social work journals. In addition, we examined how these publication characteristics varied by presentation format (e.g., oral presentation, poster presentation, and symposia).

Method

Data Collection

This study methodology was modeled after the work of Valderrama-Zurián et al. (2009) in their study of CPDD presentations. Similar to Valderrama-Zurian et al. (2009), we limited our study to a single annual meeting, which provided at least a 4-year period from presentation to publication (i.e., in press or in print). We selected oral presentations, poster presentations, and symposia for the review and excluded all other types of presentations (e.g., round table discussions and workshops). Each abstract was assigned a unique number. We generated a list of random numbers using the statistical program *R* (R Development Core Team, 2010) to randomly select 30% of abstracts from each type of presentation. The percentage of abstracts to be selected was based first on a power analysis and then increased based on available resources. We chose to sample 30% from each category to achieve precision of estimates for each category type. In other words, we knew in advance that oral presentations were the most common type of presentation. From a statistical standpoint, we know that we needed to collect more data for this presentation in comparison to symposia. Thus, we selected this sampling strategy rather than oversampling other types to achieve the same *N* size for each group. This sampling procedure resulted in a total of 75 oral presentation abstracts and 29 poster presentations abstracts. We also randomly selected 30% of the symposia and reviewed all the abstracts that comprised this random selection ($n = 17$). This produced an overall sample size of 121 presentation abstracts. A power analysis for the resultant sample was calculated using the R library known as “pwr” (Champely, 2009). A chi-square test based on a sample of 121 observations achieves 85.9% power at a .05 significant level ($df = 2$), with a medium effect size (w) of .30.

We used a two-level system to determine whether the conference presentation was published in a peer-reviewed journal. We did this by using four databases: Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts. We first searched keywords from the title of the abstract and then the first author's name. If similar matches were found, the abstract and published article were compared to determine if a match was made. If no match was found using the databases, we then searched a faculty biography or a curriculum vitae (CVs; or both) of the lead author on the presentation. If either were available, we carefully examined the publication titles to identify a matching publication. If a match was identified, the article was retrieved and a formal comparison made. The comparison took into account various aspects of the study design (e.g., setting, *n* size, and analyses) as well as the study results. Although some differences were expected between an conference abstract and a journal abstract, we relied on professional judgment to determine whether enough similarities were present to determine a match.

The reliability of the rating system was established with an independent comparison of the search process by two raters. Although many of the published presentations had title changes, the inter-rater reliability for the process was very good ($\kappa = .87$). The original citation for the SSWR presentation, citation for the peer-reviewed article, and ISI Impact factor for respective journals were recorded into a spreadsheet. The top-ten list of social work journals was based upon a national survey of social work faculty in the USA (Sellers, Smith, Mathiesen, & Perry, 2006). These journals were *Social Service Review*, *Social Work Research*, *Journal of Social Service Research*, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *Research on Social Work Practice*, *Journal of Social Policy*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *Children and Youth Services Review*, *Families in Society*, and *Journal of Community Psychology*.

Analytic Plan

Appropriate bivariate statistics were calculated for the research questions. Because we used sampling procedures rather than examining the entire population of presentation titles, 95% CIs were computed to estimate the precision of our estimates. Cross-tabulations with chi-square, Fisher's exact test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and logistic regression analysis were employed.

Results

Presented in Table 1 is a descriptive summary of number and percentages of presentations that were subsequently published in peer-reviewed journals. Using the random sample of selected presentations, we found that 43.0% (95% CI = [34.5, 51.9]) were published in a peer-reviewed journal. A Fisher's exact test revealed no overall significant in publication rate by type of presentation ($p = .054$). The p value was close to the .05 cutoff, suggesting a possible trend in the data. From the contingency table a *Cramer's V* was computed to characterize the strength

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Presentations at 2006 Annual Meeting of Society for Social Work and Research Published in Peer-Reviewed Journals

Presentation Type	Not Published, N (%)	Published, N (%)
Oral presentation	38 (50.7)	37 (49.3)
Poster presentation	17 (58.6)	12 (41.4)
Symposia presentation	14 (82.3)	3 (17.6)
Overall	69 (57.0)	52 (43.0)

Note: *N* sizes reflect a 30% random sample from the overall number of presentations for each type. % = row percentages. Fisher's exact test revealed overall nonsignificant differences ($p = .054$).

of the association between presentation type and publication. With a *Cramer's V* of .22, the association is weak, although it should be interpreted cautiously because one cell did not have a minimum value of 5 to meet the full assumptions of the measure. The symposia publication rate was lower in absolute value (17.6%) compared to the publication rate of oral presentations (49.3%) and poster presentations (41.4%), even though the overall test was nonsignificant. The symposia were excluded in a subsequent analysis, and no differences were observed with respect to overall differences ($\chi^2 = .531[1]$, $p = .466$). The effect size was also smaller (*Cramer's V* = .071).

Of the published presentations, 28.1% (95% CI = [20.9%, 36.7%]) were published in a journal with an ISI impact factor. The average impact factor was 1.32 (95% CI = [1.08, 1.57], range = .32–3.60, median = 1.17). ANOVA revealed no significant differences in impact factors by type of presentation ($F[1, 33] = .60$, $p = .443$). Approximately 10.7% of the overall presentations were published in one of the top 10 social work journals (95% CI = [6.39, 17.5]), and a Fisher's exact test revealed no differences by type of presentation ($p = .132$). Logistic regression indicated that the number of authors on the original presentation was not associated with subsequent publication ($p = .126$).

Discussion

Reprise of Findings

To date, this is the first study to estimate the approximate number of publications to emerge from the SSWR Annual Meeting. As previously described, the work of Valderrama-Zurián et al. (2009) found approximately 36.9% from the 1999 Annual Meeting of CPDD presentations were published, which is slightly lower than the percentage of SSWR presentations that were published (43.0%). While oral presentations at CPDD were more likely to be published than other types of presentations, no differences were found among the SSWR presentations. The average impact factor of CPDD presentations (oral presentation = 3.04 and poster presentation = 2.42) was significantly higher than SSWR presentations (overall average = 1.32).

While the work of Valderrama-Zurián et al. (2009) provides a useful comparison for the current study of SSWR presentations, a few important differences should be identified.

Foremost, the work of Valderrama-Zurián et al. referred to a specialty conference that focuses on substance use disorders, whereas SSWR is arguably an interdisciplinary conference. Thus, the publication outlets and their respective acceptance rates are not equivalent. It should also be noted that Valderrama-Zurián et al. reported “time to publication,” but this was purposefully excluded from the current study based on known measurement error. That is, time to publication is influenced by factors beyond the researcher including (but not limited to) the timeliness of reviewers and editors, journal backlog, and whether a journal makes an article available ahead of press. Thus, we were not confident in making accurate and meaningful inferences from this measure.

In the current study, it is unlikely that the lack of statistically significant differences in the various comparisons by type of SSWR presentation is due to our methodology. More specifically, the statistical tests performed in this study have acceptable statistical power. Increasing the sample size would undoubtedly lead to statistically significant differences, but this will likely have no bearing on the practical significance—that is, effect size. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that SSWR presentations delivered as an oral presentation, poster presentation, or part of a symposium have approximately the same likelihood of being published in peer-reviewed journals with approximately the same ISI impact factor. And, the results suggest that the majority of presentations will not be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Strengths and Limitations

A notable strength of this study was a comprehensive search of multiple databases and CVs to ensure the greatest chance of locating the publications. Greater precision of estimates could be achieved by doing a complete study of all the presentations rather than examining a random sample of presentations. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the techniques of random sampling and inferential statistics provide good estimates of population parameters. The time frame for manuscripts to be published from the more recent SSWR Annual Meetings may be too short, and meetings prior to 2006 may not be informative, given the increasing emphasis on publishing and new journals in social work and allied fields. The results of this study help us clarify approximately how many presentations originally presented at the Annual Meeting are subsequently published in peer-reviewed journals, along with their major publication characteristics. However, the results do not provide any information for commenting on the quality or rigor of the SSWR peer-review process.

Toward a Publication Benchmark

The study raises an important question: Is the current publication rate acceptable? Although the study was not designed to answer this question, the question is provocative and important. In fact, it is unlikely that any further investigation of publication rates would be informative to establishing a benchmark publication rate. That is, a benchmark publication rate reflects

the values of the membership and meeting objectives. At present, no external objective criterion exists to determine whether the current publication rate is acceptable. It is very likely that a poll or other form of discussion with the current SSWR membership would reveal significant heterogeneity as to what the publication rate ought to be. Motivated by the ongoing importance of reaffirming values and objectives, such a discussion could be particularly useful to ensure the long-term success of SSWR as an organization and the objectives of the Annual Meeting.

As authors of the current study, we propose a 60–75% publication benchmark as a point of departure for further consideration. A few things should be noted in proposing this benchmark. In light of the major goals espoused by SSWR, we believe the Annual Meeting ought to have a strong orientation to promoting research that is on a trajectory to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. Thus, as a group, we believe that at least a simple majority (>50%) of presentations ought to be published in peer-reviewed journals. A range is presented rather than a single value to reflect the heterogeneity within our own research group, which is prescient of heterogeneous views among the broader membership.

The proposed range takes into account numerous factors that may have influenced whether a presentation is subsequently written as an article and published in a peer reviewed journal. We considered many factors including (but not limited to) the motivation, incentives, resources, and skill set of individual researchers. We also agreed that some presentations have potential to be published, but the researcher may be presenting for reasons that supersede the need to contribute to the knowledge base of social work. For example, the presentation may be serving as an employment seeking strategy. Or, for others, delivering a presentation may be the minimum requirements to a researcher to receive funding to attend the Annual Meeting. We also recognized that various personal and professional circumstances could easily cause a disruption in the research process. The extent to which the individual members of our research team considered these reasons (and others) acceptable is reflected in the proposed range.

As pointed out in the review process of this article, it is possible that a sizable percentage of presentations could be pilot studies, smaller parts of a larger project, or even a dissertation project that was not yet published. While these may be common study characteristics, it is important to note that abstracts submitted to the conference are required to have all the major research components and completed findings. In other words, a study must be completed and have meaningful results in order to be considered for a presentation at the conference. The information provided in the abstracts reviewed did not contain the necessary data to assess this issue, so the issue remains open for further investigation.

Implications and Future Directions

While variability in the publication rates for different types of presentations was observed, less than half the presentations at the Annual Meeting of SSWR were subsequently published

in a peer-reviewed journal. In proposing that benchmark, we believe that the SSWR should set an expectation that researchers presented at the Annual Meeting work in earnest to publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals. Establishing a benchmark will undoubtedly require discussions and consensus building among the SSWR membership. Such efforts will likely reveal significant disagreement. However, the amount of time and resources invested in the Annual Meeting make this necessary to ensure a strong and continuing evolving social work knowledge base.

Future research can focus on monitoring publication rates across SSWR Annual Meetings to help reveal trends over time. It would be helpful to establish a mechanism to help monitor which presentations are submitted for publication, the target outlets, and characteristics of the presenting authors (e.g., doctoral student vs. faculty member). Additionally, it would also be interesting to understand why researchers may not attempt to publish their research and better understand what happens to research that was rejected by the reviewers of the Annual Meeting. This could be helpful in clarifying the purpose of the types of presentation and possibly expanding the options. For example, if it was determined that a large number of doctoral students were presenting simply to receive funding to attend or as part of the employment process, it might be reasonable to have separate forums for dissertation research. This could help attendees better identify the presentations that will be of most value to their work.

Building a greater understanding and increasing the transparency of the reliability of the peer-review process would also be important to improving the overall quality of the conference and more effectively aligning it with the espoused goals of SSWR. In the absence of a benchmark or publication expectations, it is essential for SSWR to clarify the intended purpose of the Annual Meeting and consider what indicators could be used to monitor its outcomes.

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