THEORY DISCUSSION IN SOCIAL WORK JOURNALS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

James G. Daley
Jon Peters
Ron Taylor
Victoria Hanson
Delthea Hill

Abstract: *Social workers are taught to strive to link theory with practice. A primary source for social workers to update theory and practice knowledge is the myriad of social work journals. However, how much discussion of theory occurs in social work journals? The authors developed criteria to evaluate the degree and quality of theory discussion and progression in social work journals. They used the criteria to evaluate 885 articles from 30 journals published in the year 2002. Great variability in theory discussion was found. The majority (71.7%) of articles contained no theory discussion (discussion that mentions a theory superficially but does not provide refinement of the theory). Few (9.5%) of the articles had theory progression (an article which is an empirical study or conceptual explanation that advances a theory in clarity, evidence base, or precision). Those articles that include theory provide a low quality of theory discussion or progression. Implications for practice and education are discussed.*

Keywords: *social work theory, empirical assessment of theory, theory progression*

INTRODUCTION

Virtually every social work textbook, whether practice, policy, or human behavior in the social environment (HBSE), asserts the importance of theory as a tool to better understand or change a situation (Fischer, 1973; Payne, 1997; Turner, 1996). Theory is often given as a foundation for justifying a practice approach (Simon, 1994; Turner, 1996). The Council on Social Work Education has, for many years, required theory to be part of the curriculum at both the Bachelors (CSWE, 1994; section B6.0 on page 100) and Masters level (CSWE, 1994; section M5.7.1 on page 137). Likewise, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education has recommended a discussion of theory be part of the doctoral curriculum (GADE, 1992). Brown (1999) described theory as the "coin of the realm" of academia (p. 359).

Despite these calls to ground social work knowledge in theory, the importance or

credibility of theory has been challenged. Thyer (1994) has bluntly said "devoting time to the teaching of theory is largely a waste of time" (p. 148), partly because "we have abandoned any effort at discriminating empirically supported theories from those that are less well documented" (p. 149). Payne (1997) believes that theory is invaluable but, as theory is deeply intertwined with its social construction, there is "no agreement about what 'theory' or social work practice 'theory' is" (p. 26). Others have argued that theories are filtered through our value stance (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1999) and should be balanced with practice wisdom or reflection by practitioners (Klein & Bloom, 1995; Parton, 2000).

Regardless of the ongoing debate about whether to value theory or not, one could easily assert that theory is important to knowledge development. But how does one sift through a theory to determine its value or credibility? How does one decide what is an "empirically supported theory?" Are there alternatives to "empirical evidence" as the most important criteria (e.g., social justice) in rating the quality of a theory? If one seeks to assess how much theory progression has occurred within a year, what should be used as evaluative criteria? Our profession claims it is theory-based (Turner, 1996) so we should apply careful scholarship to the theories we use and determine if we are refining or creating theories useful to the profession.

A social work doctoral class began a project, called the *Theory Progression Project*, to explore how much theory discussion and progression has occurred in one year within a cross-section of social work journals. We began with a belief that a useful way to gauge the "pulsebeat" of theory in the field could be a critical review of a cross-section of social work journals. Further, as we discussed reviewing the literature, we sought to develop reasonable criteria to aid our review of the large volume of articles published in one year. We decided on a *two-step* process. The *first* step was to review journal articles and exclude the articles that had neither theory nor empirical findings. The *second* step was to then rate the remaining theory and/or empirical articles with more detailed criteria specifically focusing on the quality of the discussion about the theory. Thus, the objectives of the project were to: 1) quantify the proportion of social work journal articles in 2002 that contained theory discussion, 2) develop acceptable criteria for evaluating the quality of theory discussion, and 3) evaluate the theory-linked articles and place them on a continuum from theory discussion to theory progression.

Three terms are important to clarify: *theory, theory discussion, and theory progression*. Several authors have discussed the definition of theory. Queralt (1996) describes a theory as a "collection of related statements or propositions that attempt to describe, explain, or predict a particular aspect of experience" (p. 12). Mithaug (2000) describes "constructive theorizing" as "problem solving to understand why a circumstance is inconsistent with a belief about how things work, how to judge them, and what to do about them" (p. x). Turner (1996) states that theories "develop bodies of tested facts in a manner that helps us understand and predict some aspect of the reality with which we deal and so provide us with guidelines for effective action" (p. 3). Each author seems to be reinforcing our belief that theories aim to explain social phenomena in a clear and concise way.

Thus, a *theory* is a set of ideas that are cogently connected in operationally defined

components that seek to clearly explain a specified phenomenon. Often the phenomenon we seek to explain is a clinical issue, an understanding of human behavior, or a specific intervention for our clients. Theory can strive to explain micro, mezzo, or macro level issues. The hallmark of theory is the clarity and credibility of its explanatory power.

Theory discussion indicates a general description of a theory that does not provide refinement of the theory (i.e., components or empirical base of the theory are not clarified). The discussion may range from merely mentioning a theory to a description of the basic aspects of that theory.

Theory progression indicates the degree to which empirical studies or conceptual papers advance the theory in clarity, evidence base, or precision. We defined theory progression as articles that: 1) focus on an existing theory, 2) provide additional refinement or supporting data for that theory, and 3) discuss future directions for theory development. Even articles proposing new theories should clearly outline the components of the theory, offer data to demonstrate some evidence base for the theory, and explain the future developments suggested for the theory.

In sum, we would expect the social work journal literature to range from no theory discussion to theory progression. Ideally, the field of social work journals within a given year would be a fertile field from which to glean theory discussion and progression articles. Such a collection of articles would reflect a meaningful cross-section of theoretical discussion and could be invaluable to readers.

DEVELOPING CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING THEORY QUALITY

A number of authors have sought to develop criteria for theory development (e.g., Fischer, 1973; Payne, 1997; Turner, 1996; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). For example, Payne (1997) describes five authors' frameworks but does not propose a synthesizing rating system as much as he critiques efforts to develop such frameworks. Other authors have created different frameworks for evaluating models of practice but were not specifically trying to evaluate theory (Berger, 1986; Gorey, Thyer, & Pawluck, 1998; Kettner, 1975; Rosen, 1988).

Fischer's (1973) framework incorporated 80 different issues with a four-point scale (1=clear criterion to 4=does not deal with criterion). The primary difficulty with the Fischer model is that each item is equally weighted (e.g., clarity, use of differential assessment, and focus on the present would all be weighted the same) and many items are contradictory (e.g., reductionism, comprehensiveness, use of disease model, use of psychological model). Therefore, scoring to attain a quality rating would be difficult. Fischer even admits that "a higher rating does not necessarily indicate that a given theory is 'better' on a specific dimension than a lower rating..." (p. 126). Fischer's framework is invaluable when considering a myriad of factors to think about in theory development but is too unrefined to use as a rating format.

Turner (1996) defined nine criteria for evaluating the quality of a theory and then recruited authors of 27 different theories to discuss their theory in relation to the criteria. These criteria worked well for the practice theories within Turner's book. However,

the criteria would not be useful in evaluating a macro-level theory or any theory that does not focus on the behavior change of individuals.

Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) describe a very different framework that emphasized the life experiences of clients. They challenge a theory to address social justice as a quality criteria. Unfortunately, there are no empirical components, no practice-focused items, and it is too vague as a framework.

In sum, none of the existing frameworks is developed enough to adequately use in evaluating theory progression. We did not find a framework that would allow us to systematically assess the quality of theory discussion in social work articles. Therefore, we developed a framework that built upon the components of the existing models while adding specificity to the rating of the quality of theory discussion. Further, we sought to develop an evaluation framework that would encompass macro, mezzo, or micro-focused theories. Table 1 shows our proposed framework for assessing the quality of theory discussion. We decided upon eight criteria that we thought built upon the strongest aspects of existing frameworks. The content areas of the criteria include a clear description of the theory including the variables within the theory, how each variable is operationalized, the goals or outcome of the theory, and what specific data has been produced that tests the theory. Further, we felt that the article should describe previous studies focusing on the theory and what next steps were recommended to improve the theory.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

Thirty different social work journals were reviewed. This list of journals was from a colleague's syllabus who had taught a similar course. The students and faculty felt that the list was acceptable but it was not a comprehensive list such as the *Author's Guide to Social Work Journals* (Mendelsohn, 1997). Each journal was reviewed by a social work doctoral student or faculty member for all articles published in each journal during 2002. This review occurred after several class periods of discussion and critique of different models of theory evaluation (Berger, 1986; Brown, 1999; Fischer, 1973; Gorey, Thyer, Pawluck, 1998; Kettner, 1975; Klein & Bloom, 1995; Parton, 2000; Payne 1997; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1999; Simon, 1994; Thyer, 1994; Turner, 1996; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). The class developed a list of criteria for evaluating the quality of theory discussion and divided the 30 journals so that one reviewer rated all articles in a journal. Each article within the journal was evaluated to determine if there was any discussion or focus on theory within the article. Articles were rated from 1-5 based on how much theory and empirical analysis was described in the article. An article was rated 5 if there was *Theory development with empirical base as the focus of article (TDE)*. A TDE article would have a clear focus on theory and some data reported in the findings. An article was rated 4 if there was *Theory development/explanation as focus of article (TDF)* but no empirical findings reported. An article was rated 3 if there was an *empirical study that has theory links (ET)*. We felt "theory link" reflected an article

that had some discussion of theory but theory was not the focus of the article. Further, the theory was discussed more extensively than just a scant reference to theory. An article was rated 2 if there was an *empirical study with brief theory links (EBT)*. Articles that were primarily empirical studies and only superficially had a reference to a theory would be rated as a "2". An article was rated 1 if there was an *empirical study with no theory links (ENT)*. Articles that were primarily empirical studies and had no theory discussion at all were given a "1" rating. Finally, an article was rated 0 if there was *no empirical or theory links (NET)*. An article that was conceptual or a practice discussion that had no theory or data were given a "0" rating. We felt that, from a theory progression standpoint, articles discussing theory with data to support the theory should be rated higher than either theory without data or data without theory. And, neither theory nor data should be rated lowest. Figure 1 shows the steps in the review process. The rating system allowed us to sort the articles to glean the theory articles for closer critique. Articles that were rated at 4 or 5 were further evaluated using the rating scale shown in Table 1. Scores of 4 or 5 (i.e., theory focused with or without data) were seen as the cutoff for further analysis. Scores below 4 were excluded as the articles just superficially mentioned a theory or did not mention theory at all.

This procedure allowed us to rank journals by the degree that theory was being discussed and the quality of that theory discussion when it was the focus of the article. We openly designed the evaluation process to weigh heaviest those articles that were seeking to empirically test the components of a theory. Our belief is that theory progression best occurs with cumulative testing of theory and modification according to the results of empirical testing (Fischer, 1973; Mithaug, 2000; Turner, 1996).

Figure 1. Sequence of Article Rating Process
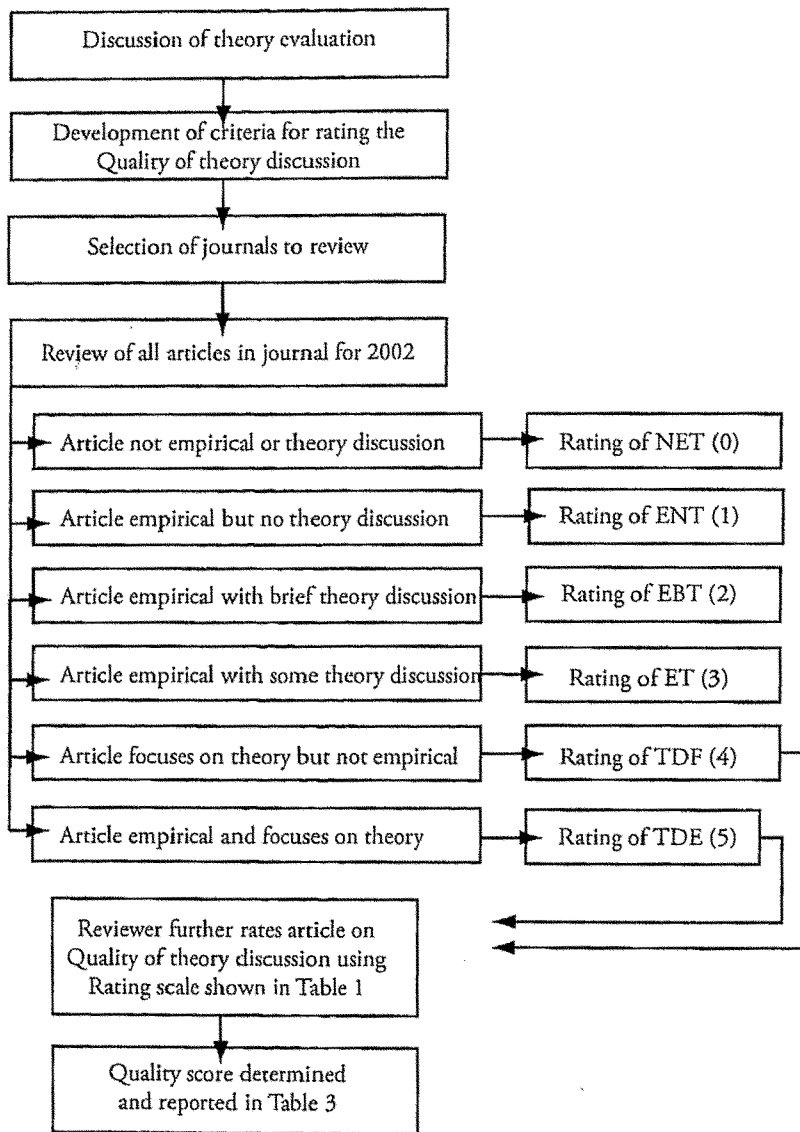
RESULTS

Table 2 represents the 30 journals' scores based on the 5-point rating scale. We have purposefully hidden the names of the journals as this is a pilot study and thus any findings are tentative. The primary goal was to reflect how well or poorly social work journals reflected theory discussion overall. Regarding our results, we recognize that journals differ in their editorial policy or practice regarding the importance of theory discussion. Therefore, our results may be biased by journal policy as, within the field,

there is likely a continuum of prioritization of theory progression.

Table 1: Proposed Model for Assessing Quality of Theory Discussion in Social Work Journal Articles

CRITERIA	SCORE
1. Clearly describes components of theory with a tight, internally consistent framework	
2. Clearly describes each variable within the theory	
3. Clearly operationalizes the relationship between the variables within the theory	
4. Clearly describes goals or outcomes intended with theory	
5. Clearly describes the boundaries or limitations of the theory	
6. Clearly describes the empirical data that tests the premises of theory	
7. Clearly builds upon previous studies that demonstrate the efficacy of the theory	
8. Clearly concludes with specific next steps for theory progression	
SCORE (Total divided by 8)	

Scoring: 5= strongly agree 4= moderately agree 3= slightly agree 2= moderately disagree 1= strongly disagree

Overall, the results indicate very little focus on theory in the social work literature. The largest category of articles (41%) were rated 1 indicating they were empirical studies with no theory link. The second biggest category were articles with no empirical or theory links (30.7%). Only 84 out of the 885 articles (9.5%) were rated 4 or 5 meaning they had theory development with empirical base as the focus (TDE) or theory development/explanation as the focus of the article (TDF). Six out of 30 journals had no theory development with empirical base (TDE) or theory development/explanation (TDF) as the focus of the article (see Table 2). Only five of the journals had 30% or more of their articles with TDE or TDF.

For those articles rated TDE or TDF, we further scrutinized for the quality of theory discussion using the eight criteria listed in Table 1. The "quality of theory discussion" criteria reflect factors blended from the models described previously. In other words, the first sort captured articles that were TDE or TDF (Table 2) and the next filter sifted by the quality of that theory discussion (e.g., a tight framework, operationalization of variables, or describing next steps for theory progression)(Table 1).

Table 2: Journal Ratings by Degree of Theory Discussion

JOURNAL	TDE	TDF	ET	EBT	ENT	NET	Total articles	% TDE or TDF
14	2	8	4	3	1	2	20	50.0
2	2	3	4	2	0	1	12	41.7
17	1	4	0	3	0	4	12	41.7
23	0	5	1	2	3	4	15	33.3
20	1	7	0	0	1	16	25	32.0
15	3	2	7	1	3	2	18	27.8
12	1	4	4	5	6	1	21	23.8
11	3	9	4	15	12	21	64	18.8
18	1	1	0	0	12	0	14	14.3
25	1	4	12	4	6	12	39	12.8
22	0	1	0	2	4	2	9	11.1
1	1	1	3	1	9	4	19	10.5
28	1	2	2	1	0	27	33	9.1
24	0	2	4	4	7	7	24	8.3
19	0	2	0	2	12	9	25	8.0
3	0	1	4	3	4	5	17	5.9
9	0	2	3	0	19	13	37	5.4
16	0	1	1	0	13	5	20	5.0
4	1	2	2	6	22	34	67	4.5
10	0	1	0	1	5	16	23	4.3
13	0	1	5	2	9	10	27	3.7
21	1	0	0	7	28	8	44	2.3
29	1	0	2	3	79	10	95	1.0
7	1	0	4	3	45	15	68	0.06
5	0	0	0	0	5	9	14	0.0
6	0	0	6	5	4	9	24	0.0
8	0	0	3	1	12	8	24	0.0
26	0	0	5	4	18	8	35	0.0
27	0	0	2	2	14	2	20	0.0
30	0	0	0	2	10	8	20	0.0
TOTAL	21	63	82	84	363	272	885	
% of total	2.4	7.1	9.3	9.5	41.0	30.7	100	

TDE=*Theory discussion with empirical base as focus of article*, **TDF**=*Theory discussion as focus of article*, **ET**=*Empirical study that has theory links*, **EBT**=*Empirical study with brief theory links*, **ENT**=*Empirical study with no theory links*, **NET**=*Studies with no empirical or theory links*.

Table 3. Theories reported by Quality of Discussion Score

THEORY	Quality Score	Author
Collaborative Model For Teaching	5.0	Anderson
Ecological Perspective/Systems Theory	5.0	Freund
Critical theory	5.0 ˙	Kondrat
Theory Of Power And Participation Community Practice Methodology	4.89	Castelloe et al
Resiliency theory	4.89	Greene
Conceptualizing Evidence-Based Groupwork	4.89	Polio
Cognitive Behavioral Theory	4.89	Yongseok
Feminism	4.78	Berwald & Houstra
Strengths Perspective/Brief Solution-Focused Therapy	4.78	Hall et al
Diffusion Theory	4.78	Herie & Martin
Theories Of Change/Family Center Model	4.78	Mulroy & Lauber
Systems Theory	4.78	Netting
Reitan's Interorganizational Relations Theory	4.67	Austin
Stakeholder Participatory Model	4.67	Balaswamy & Dabelko
Agency-Based Community Building Framework	4.67	Fabricant & Fisher
Service Learning Model-Human Functioning	4.67	Kropf & Tracey
Embodied Theoretical Framework	4.67	Tangenberg & Kemp
Symbolic Interactionism/Grounded Theory	4.56	Dupuis
Hunter's Epistemological Theory/Spiritual Strengths	4.56	Hodge
Tichy's Model For Ongoing Management Of Change	4.56	Poindexter
Critical Theory/Practice	4.44	Dewees
Model Of Successful Adaptation In Life In The Aftermath Of Traumatic Life Events	4.44	Fournier
Grounded Theory	4.44	Sanders & McFarland
Activity, Disengagement and Continuity theories	4.44	Utz et al
Experiential learning model	4.44	Koob & Funk

THEORY	Quality Score	Author
Theory Of Structural Cognitive Modifiability	4.33	Lifshitz
Cognitive Model Of Coping With Stress	4.22	McCleary
Social exchange theory	4.22	Hopkins
Episode Of Purposive Change	4.11	Daley
Domestic Violence Theory	4.11	Winstok et al
Self-efficacy theory	4.11	Williams, King, Koob
Ecological theory	3.89	Besthorn
Social Justice	3.89	Chatterjee & D'Aprix
Paradigm Of Pluralism	3.89	Irving & Young
Conspiracy Theories/Strengths-Based/ Empowerment	3.89	Moore
Poetry Therapy/Strengths Perspective	3.78	Furman
Heuristic Paradigm	3.78	Heineman-Pieper et al
Strengths Perspective	3.78	Itzhaky & Bustin
On-Line Therapy Framework	3.78	Menon et al
Social Justice	3.78	Morris
Critical Theory/Practice	3.78	Pearlmutter
Strengths theory?	3.78	VanWormer & Bednar
Mainstream Model Flexibility Of Conception	3.78	Wright
Power theory	3.78	Bar-on
General, Social relation, and Age-graded Integration theory	3.7	Benda
Ecosystems Theory	3.67	James & Meezan
Cognitive Behavioral Theory	3.67	Walsh
Liberal, radical and Socialist Feminism	3.56	Berg
Ecofeminism	3.56	Besthorn & McMillen
Spirituality	3.56	Hodge & Williams
Personal Safety Theory	3.56	Twemlow et al
Positivism	3.44	Bolland & Atherton
Social Justice	3.44	Caputo
Constructivism	3.44	Northcut & Heller
Ecological theory	3.44	Ungar
Critical Theory	3.33	Andrews & Reisch
Feminist theory	3.33	Walter & Peterson

THEORY	Quality Score	Author
Disability theory	3.22	Gilson & DePoy
Mental Health Recovery Paradigm	3.11	Carpenter
Attachment theory	3.11	Ornstein & Moses
Postmodernism	3.0	Atherton & Bolland
Trauma Theory	3.0	Basham & Miehls
Social learning Theory	3.0	Burton, Miller, & Shill
Political theory?	3.0	Myles & Quadagno
Family Reunification Theory	2.89	Mapps
Family Preservation	2.8	Staudt and Drake
Feminist theory	2.78	Gorey, et al.
Social Justice	2.78	Reisch
Eco-developmental theory	2.7	Scannapieco et al
Constructivism	2.67	Heller & Northcut
Dynamic theory	2.67	Montgomery
Family Preservation	2.6	Coleman, et al
Gender relations	2.56	Scourfield
Ecological theory	2.44	Besthorn & Canda
Critical Theory of Education	2.33	Perkinson
Knowledge ecology	2.33	Schoech et sl
Postmodernism	2.22	Gross
Psychodynamic theory	2.00	Dean
Relational/cultural theory	2.00	Edwards & Richards
Relational theory	1.89	Ganzer, Ornstein
Social constructionism	1.78 S	olomon
Virtue theory	1.44	McBeath, Webb
Developmental theory	1.33	Ai
Critical theory, feminism, post-positivism	1.00	Calderwood
MEAN SCORE	3.63	

Table 3 shows the quality of theory discussion scores for those articles that rated a 4 or 5 (TDE or TDF). Each rater reviewed articles using the eight criteria for quality of theory discussion. Each article was rated on each of the eight criteria with ratings ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The rater then calculated the mean score for the article (total of ratings divided by eight). The mean score for the 84 articles was 3.63 with 3 articles scoring 5, 28 articles scoring 4, 33 articles scoring 3, and 20 articles scoring 2 or less. In sum, there were very few articles (3 out of 84, or

3.6%) that received the highest quality rating for theory discussion.

The majority of the articles only mentioned the theories as part of the review of literature or as a brief context for the main premise of the article. Rarely were the basic concepts of the theory explained or operationalized. Even rarer were articles that operationalize the components of a theory and then empirically test the theory in an effort to progress the theory in the literature. Thus, the lower quality scores reflect the inattention to theory building even in articles that focus on theories.

Some examples may help to illustrate our evaluation of the quality of theory discussion. Gross (2002) was rated 2.22 in quality of theory discussion. Gross' article clearly sought to describe how a "postmodern art project" called "ScienZart" strives to deconstruct "social work text" (p. 7). There is an attempt to describe how this project is based on postmodernism but there is no data collected and no description of the components of postmodernism, what the variables of the theory are or how they are operationalized, how they build on previous studies of postmodernism, or what may be the next steps for progression of postmodernism. Thus, the article was evaluated using criteria in Table 1 as it was theory focused (TDF) but received a low quality rating because it did not meet most of the criteria in Table 1. By contrast, DeWees' article (2002) had no empirical data but was focused on postmodern theory, specifically the construct of a critical theory that offers an "alternative practice construction" to DSM-IV (p. 73). The article reviews previous models of mental health practice and explains "the interdependent paradigm" and "critical dialogue" as key components of the model of practice (p. 82). This article was rated 4.44. Finally, Anderson (2002) was a very highly rated article for quality of theory discussion (5.0) as the article describes a model for teaching that clearly outlines the components of the model, provides initial data to indicate the model's utility, and discusses next steps in theory progression.

There are some positive findings. Table 3 shows the vast diversity of theory discussion occurring in social work literature. Micro, mezzo, and macro theory discussion abounds. Some theories (e.g., ecosystems theory, cognitive theory, constructivist theory) are discussed in multiple articles. There are numerous highly focused theories that seek to explain specific phenomena (e.g., coping with stress, mental health recovery).

There are some limitations to any assertions about theory progression based on our data. First, the ratings were done by one individual and were not confirmed by interrater scoring. Students selected the journals that they wanted to review and the faculty member reviewed the remaining journals not selected by a student. Another rater might have decided on an alternative score. Though the class had extensive discussions when developing and deciding on the criteria, there was no formal inter-rater reliability training and reliability level achieved. Second, our data only reports on the journals reviewed. There are other social work journals we did not evaluate. As this project originated as a class assignment, we accepted the limitations as it was a preliminary study. Third, journals typically have a 20 page manuscript limit and authors could have restricted their discussion of theory due to arbitrary journal page limits. Fourth, our data does not reflect books that might have a more comprehensive theory discussion that would fully meet our theory quality criteria. Fifth, the criteria shown in Tables 1 and 2 were developed by the authors and, though we sought to succinctly

summarize the thinking of previous authors, we obviously prioritized issues that we felt were important. For example, our class had extensive discussions on whether the need for empirical data and operationalization of variables was a positivist bias and pushed a scientific bias. Finally, it is likely that many social work theorists published theoretical articles in non-social work journals. Thus, our findings should be considered as an initial attempt to reflect theory discussion in juried social work literature rather than a definitive guide to rating the quality of theory discussion. We invite alternative or enhanced theory criteria development.

LESSONS LEARNED: THE NEXT STEP

The Theory Progression Project was a fascinating effort to glean the degree of theory focus in juried social work journals. There were many lessons learned.

First, we need to tighten up our raters' scoring. Though we read numerous authors on theory development, discussed the development of our criteria, and agreed as a group to use the criteria, we still need to take the next step. We need to collate articles of varying degree of theory discussion, have potential raters score them independently, and have an acceptable reliability of rating achieved before beginning the review process. Further, we should have any article that is initially rated as 4 or higher on quality of theory discussion be rated by at least two individuals to confirm the rating. This tightened procedure would enhance the credibility of our scores. We found no previous empirical studies that applied a design such as our project. Therefore, we cannot contrast our findings with other studies.

Second, we recommend that our initial screening process be modified. After reviewing the 885 articles, we found it difficult to find the proper place for articles that were non-empirical but had theory links (e.g., an article that discussed a topic and had a section that linked a theory to that topic but was not empirical). We acknowledged that the rating had an empirical bias and should be modified to balance the issue better. An alternative rating might be: Articles rated as **6** (*Theory development with empirical base as focus of article*), **5**(*Theory development/explanation as focus of article*), **4**(*Empirical study that has theory links*), **3** (*Non-empirical article with theory link*), **2**(*Empirical study with brief theory links*), **1**(*Empirical study with no theory links*), or **0**(*Articles with no empirical or theory links*). The team would still only select those articles with scores of 5 or 6 for further analysis but the revised rating would be useful in comparing journals on degree of theory discussion.

Third, we are still discussing how to best summarize the theories reported in Table 3. We are considering an additional analysis that might show the progression of particular theories by combining the findings of different articles that focus on that theory (e.g., discussing how the several articles on ecological theory reflect the progression of that theory). Our biggest concern was preventing our biases from slanting the discussion or our interpretations being flawed as we try to combine different authors' view of the theory.

Finally, it would be an interesting next step to compare social work journals with other professions' journals to see if our profession has more or less theory discussion

than other professions. Another concurrent step would be to replicate this study and see if journals are consistent in their degree of theory focus from one year to the next.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

This study is an initial step to better understand what kind of theory discussion occurs in social work journals. Ideally, both practitioners and educators strive to have the best state-of-art understanding of theories that can be applied to clients' problems and goals. Of course, there are advocates that assert that theory is not necessary for effective practice or that "theory" is one view of many and should not be given priority in the literature. The authors of this article advocate that theory, when well-developed and data-verified, adds a very useful conceptual tool that can help social workers provide better service to our clients. Journals are a logical source for discussing theory and its progression. But are the journals doing a good job of providing that information? Our findings indicate that few articles have theory discussion.

Despite the limitations of this preliminary study, this article does highlight some of the theory development occurring in social work. We encourage readers to delve into theories that interest them and critique them using our criteria. Research could be conducted that compares theories discussed in journals with theories discussed in social work textbooks. Are the theories discussed in our classes the same as those being discussed in our journals? Are there refinements in theories published in the journals that are not included in textbooks? Are there new theories that should be included when updating textbooks?

Educators can use this model of theory critique as a launching point for discussion of the value of theory and of the criteria used to judge the quality of theory discussion. Students can be challenged to rate the theory discussion and compare their ratings with others' ratings. We advocate that, when an article includes theory discussion, the editors and reviewers should expect that the articles be more precise, comprehensive, and progressive in their discussion of theory. Further, given that our findings indicate little attention to theories, editors of journals could encourage more emphasis on theory building through special issues and invitations for articles that focus on the "state of the art" for different theories. Given the asserted value of theory in practice, we as a profession have much we can contribute to advancing theoretical understanding. Such efforts can be valuable in helping the social work profession advance the theoretical understanding that forms the basis of practice.

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Author's Note

Address correspondence to: James G. Daley, PhD, associate professor, Indiana University School of Social Work, 902 West New York Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202-5156. e-mail: jgdaley@iupui.edu.