The Types of Scholarly Publications Produced by Australian Social Work Researchers

Title Page

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Abstract

The publication of social work research and scholarship is integral to generating and disseminating knowledge for the profession and the human services field. Previous research has found a large proportion of non-research papers in social work journals, but there has been little exploration of the nature of this scholarship. Using a scoping review method supplemented by analysis of national research assessment output data, this study examined the quantity, format, and characteristics of scholarly publications between 2010 and 2020 by Australian social workers. It found they produced proportionately more journal articles than other disciplines and relatively fewer books and book chapters. Of 1389 Australian social work articles published in top-cited social work journals, 821 (59.1%) were research articles. Of the non-research papers, almost half provided an analysis of policy or practice without stating a method. Understanding the scope of social work research provides a foundation for reflection on the discipline's research endeavours.

Key words: research, knowledge production, social work

Implications

- Information about the scope of social work research is useful for developing both individual and disciplinary research strategy.
- A clear statement of method that describes the processes used for observation and analysis would enhance the quality of non-research social work publications.

Research is an essential element of the social work profession (Orme & Shemmings, 2010). It generates knowledge to support social work practice and human services, as well as to further social justice agendas (Shaw, 2007; Strandberg & Simpson, 2020). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) recognises that conducting research and using knowledge generated from research is a core practice standard (AASW, 2013). Given the importance of research, it is useful to understand the scope and nature of current social work research. This will help inform future Australian social work research priorities to meet the needs and objectives of the discipline and more broadly to support goals of addressing disadvantage, personal hardship, inequalities, and social exclusion.

Critiques of social work scholarship have centred on the comparatively limited empirical research base and a narrow theoretical and methodological range, hampering capacity to address the big challenges the field faces (Sharland, 2013). Some draw attention to the under-developed research culture of social work (Bywaters, 2008; Fortune, McCallion, & Briar-Lawson, 2010). Recent studies have explored the quality and quantity of Australian social work research in specific fields (e.g., Bigby, Tilbury & Hughes, 2018) and the academic and non-academic impact of Australian social work researchers, finding that on most criteria the discipline performs in the middle range when benchmarked internationally and with related fields (Tilbury, Hughes, Bigby, Fisher, & Vogel, 2017; Tilbury, Bigby, Fisher, & Hughes, 2021). Previous studies have investigated the characteristics of research in Australia's flagship social work journal *Australian Social Work*. Ryan and Sheehan (2009) found that between 1998 and 2007 only 45 per cent of articles published in *Australian Social Work* could be considered empirical research. This had increased to 79 per cent of papers in 2014 (Simpson & Lord, 2015). Also encouraging is the finding by Strandberg and Simpson (2020) that there were signs of a growing methodological pluralism within the journal.

Outside of Australia, Kreisberg and Marsh (2016) analysed highly cited USA and European social work articles and found a high level of discursive commentary and non-empirical publications, with 65% of European and 42% of USA articles considered "non-research". They identified that conceptual knowledge, including work on theory development, was frequently cited in both the USA and Europe (Kreisberg & Marsh, 2016). Hodge and colleagues (2012) found a substantial number of the most highly-cited social work papers in Google Scholar were conceptually or theoretically oriented, indicating all types of knowledge - not only empirical research - influence the field. Consideration of non-empirical publications is needed to understand the full contribution social work makes to academic and practice realms.

A limitation of prior studies examining social work research (and of many systematic reviews of literature) is the exclusion of diverse types of scholarly publications such as books, book chapters, and research reports, as well as non-research papers published in journals. Systematic reviews frequently rely solely on searches of journal databases, and include empirical research only, omitting other scholarly outputs with potentially high value and relevance. An important reason to examine the full scope of social work scholarship is to make the field's contribution visible and understood, and then to identify knowledge gaps. This type of "research about research" can inform strategies to advance, develop and expand social work research in Australia. It can also assist in the development of high-quality research that responds to local needs and improves the productivity of the profession. It is vital to ensure social work's responsivity to the social problems that it attempts to address, on a day-to-day basis, where evidence, ideas, and theories are utilised and put into practice (Barner, Holosko & Thyer, 2014). Highlighting the strengths, deficits, and characteristics of the field's scholarly work provides a knowledge foundation to support the profession, its social justice agenda, and its contribution to solving social problems. The aim of this study

was to assist the Australian social work research community to meet future challenges by examining the scope of scholarly outputs over the past decade, 2010 to 2020.

Method

The research question guiding the present study was: What is the range, quantity, type, and characteristics of scholarly publications produced by Australian social workers? We defined scholarly publications as including journal articles, chapters, books, and research reports. To obtain a broad view of scholarship, a two-part method was developed. In part 1, an analysis of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) output reports was undertaken. ERA is the national research evaluation conducted approximately every three years by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to assess the quality of research produced by universities. In part 2, a scoping review of social work journals was conducted.

Part 1 – Analysis of ERA Output Reports

Part 1 compares the types of research outputs produced according to field of research in the disciplines categorised as "Studies in Human Society" by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2020) and submitted for the ERA assessment. There are nine fields of research in this category, including social work (code 4409, previously 1607). Output types submitted are firstly, traditional research outputs of books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, and full paper refereed conference papers (ARC, 2018). All the outputs in this category must be research and must have been independently peer reviewed prior to publication. The second category is non-traditional research outputs which includes research reports for an external body, original creative works, performances of creative works, recorded creative works, curated public exhibitions and events, and portfolios (ARC, 2018). Non-traditional outputs must also be research-based. Research is defined broadly by the ARC as "the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings.

This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative" (ARC, 2018, n.p.). Outputs assessed in the past four ERA exercises (in 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2018) were examined. Output reports are available from a searchable database at www.arc.gov.au/era-reports. The data analysis involved comparing the proportion of research outputs across the five output types, for each field of research, over time.

Part 2 - Scoping Review of Social Work Journals

Part 2 focuses on publications in journals. It draws on the scoping review methodology outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 22) involving identifying relevant studies; study selection; charting the data; and collating, summarising, and reporting the results.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was devised to identify the sample of relevant outputs. These were defined as any published output in a social work journal that was authored or co-authored by an Australian social worker. The outputs had to be published between January 2010 and September to November 2020, almost 11 years. 2010 was chosen as the starting point to allow for analysis of recent publication trends from the first full round of ERA, for which publication data collection occurred in 2010. Searches commenced in December 2020, so November 2020 was the most recent data available at the start time.

We defined a social worker as holding a bachelor or masters-level social work qualification. Authors were categorised as Australian if their primary author affiliation was to an institution or organisation located in Australia at the time of publication. In cases where qualifications or author affiliation details were not provided on the publication, an internet search for the information was conducted. Information about qualifications was commonly located through searches of university staff profiles or online researcher information sources such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, LinkedIn or ORCID.

Search strategy and data sources

Journals categorised under the social work subject category by the Scimago academic journal ranking database were searched (www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php). The journals listed on this database must be published regularly and meet ethics and publication standards, including peer review (Elsevier, 2020). The list represents the most widely indexed and highly cited social work journals. It has a larger number of social work journals (N=57) than the comparable Web of Science Journal Citation Report (N=44). A list of the social work journals that were searched and the number of Australian social work outputs and authors is set out in Supplementary Table A.

Charting the data

Each journal was searched separately. Four journals from the Scimago list were excluded due to publication ceasing in 2018 (n=1), search facility only available from 2012 (n=1), being in a language other than English (n=1) and having no institutional access (n=1), which impeded searches. Depending on the search functions available, searches involved: a manual search for author affiliations; a full field key term search using "Austral*", or an "affiliation" or "author affiliation" key term search using "Austral*". All outputs with an Australian affiliation were recorded in Endnote and PDF versions were downloaded. This process initially identified 2414 outputs with an Australian affiliation across 53 social work journals. See Figure 2 for a summary of the journal search process. After exclusions, a total of 1389 publications with an Australian social work author was identified.

Analysis

A data extraction sheet was devised to categorise the characteristics of the outputs reviewed. Characteristics included author affiliation, affiliation type (university or industry), research or non-research paper, method, and field of research. Based on perusal of the contents, journal articles were categorised as either research or non-research utilising the

definition from Kreisberg and Marsh (2016), which defined research articles as including standard elements such as a literature review or study rationale, research questions, methodology and procedure, and findings. Most but not all elements had to be included. Methods for research outputs were categorised as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. Conversely, non-research outputs were defined as those that did not set out a systematic approach or offer a methods section or research findings. Non-research outputs could include non-systematic reviews of the literature or policy critiques with no stated research question or method, theoretical work with no systematic method, program descriptions, practice reflections, or outputs such as book reviews, letters, or opinion pieces. The main topic or human services field as described in the paper was recorded, and later grouped with similar topics.

Findings

Part One: ERA Output Reports

Table 1 provides a comparison of research outputs submitted to the Australian Research Council in the nine fields of research categorised as Studies in Human Society since 2010. It details the proportion of different types of research outputs across each field in each reporting period, to allow a comparison between fields. Journal articles were the largest proportion of research outputs for all reporting years and disciplines except for Political Science in 2010. From 2010 to 2018, the percentage of journal articles increased on average across all fields from 55.9% to 62.2%. Across all fields, since 2010, there was a small downward trend in books, and a larger decline in conference papers, from an average of 11.4% in 2010 to 3.2% in 2018. The publication of non-traditional research outputs increased from 0.3 to 3.6%, while the relative proportion of journal articles also increased.

Publications coded social work largely reflected the overall trends, although the proportion of book chapters and journal articles remained relatively unchanged over the

reporting periods. Journal articles were by far the largest research output type for the field of social work, and in every reporting period, social work recorded a higher proportion of journal articles than every other discipline. In 2018, the proportion of journal articles for social work was 73.0% compared to the average across all fields of 62.2%. The number of reported outputs for social work almost doubled from 1,265 in 2010 (ARC, 2011) to 2,254 outputs in 2018 (reporting period 2011-2016; 266 full time equivalent staff; average of 1.41 outputs per annum) (ARC, 2019). This increase is consistent with other fields: the average number of outputs for all Studies in Human Society rose from 16,479 in 2010 (ARC, 2011) to 25,016 in 2018 (ARC, 2019).

Part Two: Scoping Review

Of the 53 journals searched, two had no Australian authors at all (*Social Work* and *Siglo Cero*) and another three had no Australian social work authors (*Families in Society, Journal of Marriage & Family, Family Relations.*). In the remaining 48 journals, there were 1389 articles with at least one Australian social work author published between 2010 and 2020, an average of 126 per annum. Some journals, such as the *British Journal of Social Work* and *Social Work Education* published over one hundred Australian social work research outputs. There were 216 international collaborations in the 1389 articles (15.6%), identified by the international affiliation of the co-author/s stated in the journal article. There were 47 of 1389 articles (3.4%) which were authored by Australian social workers with no university affiliation; for these authors affiliations included community-based health or welfare organisations, government agencies, and non-university-based research centres. There were 198 of 1389 articles (14.3%) authored by a university and industry collaboration.

Research articles comprised 821 of the 1389 articles (59.1%). As set out in Table 2, 568 of the research articles (69.2%) used qualitative methods; 145 (17.7%) used quantitative methods, and 108 (13.2%) used mixed methods. This included 74 articles that used a

systematic literature review methodology: 60 of these were qualitative (using mainly thematic analysis); 7 were quantitative reviews; and 7 systematic reviews used mixed methods to analyse data. Of the 821 papers, 153 (18.6%) were sole authored.

There were 568 papers (of 1389) that were non-research outputs, of these 212 (15.3%) were book reviews (159), editorials (49) or letters to editors (4). When categorising the type of outputs published, we excluded those 212 outputs as not constituting articles, leaving 356 non-research articles (25.6% of all articles). As set out in Table 2, the largest category of those was practice or policy analyses (n=176; 49.4%) followed by conceptual or theoretical papers (n=91; 26.1%). The categories were defined as follows:

- The policy or practice analyses were critiques or commentaries with no stated method or framework for analysis, usually about topical issues, for example, child protection reforms, international adoption, working with marginalised groups.
- The category of conceptual or theoretical was applied where authors considered how an existing theory or concept applied to a topic or a population group. Articles generally included a brief literature review but did not include a method. Examples included understanding the cultural dimensions of neglect and trauma, models for supervising students on placement, and adapting social work education to contemporary challenges.
- Narrative literature review was used when authors overviewed prior knowledge on a topic without stating a systematic search strategy to select the reviewed literature. Examples included the needs of certain population cohorts in the child protection system, targeted service delivery in health care settings, and engaging hard-to-reach service users.
- Where authors critically reflected on or provided commentary about the intersection of social work or being a social worker or social work educator with their personal experiences, the article was categorised as a reflection or commentary. Examples

included reflections on childhood trauma, teaching about child welfare, and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The category of program description was used for non-evaluative articles about the development or evolution of a formalised model, service delivery mode, or teaching program, for example, a parenting program, an international social work program, or ways of responding to child abuse in non-traditional settings.

The main topics or human services fields that were the focus for papers were grouped – see Table 3. The largest topic was child protection and family support (25.6%), followed by research about the social work discipline (23.4%). This was followed by papers about social work education (15.7%) and health or mental health (14.9%). All other fields were small in comparison to the top four, each with fewer than 100 papers.

Discussion

This study affirms the ongoing use and importance of journals as the preferred medium to publish social work research in Australia. There were 1389 Australian social work authored articles published in Scimago-indexed international journals between 2010 and 2020, an average of 126 per annum, and journal articles were the predominant type of publication produced in the analysis of ERA research outputs. This is a positive finding, showing that Australian social work researchers are publishing their scholarly work in the forums that are most likely to have academic impact.

The relatively low number of books and book chapters reported for ERA was somewhat surprising. It is possible that some books or book chapters that were published did not meet the definition of research used for ERA, such as textbooks that compile existing knowledge for the benefit of students and practitioners, or chapters that are not research-based. It may also reflect that universities reward publications in high impact, top-quartile journals (journal impact factors are used to rank journals into quartiles and most universities

encourage publication in “Q1” and “Q2” journals). Nevertheless, book chapters remain important in the academy because they often consolidate or synthesise knowledge about the state of the field or point to new directions. Books are an important vehicle for long form reporting on an entire research project or theoretical enquiry or critique without the word limit or format restrictions of journals.

Research reports are the most likely type of non-traditional research output to be produced by social workers (although they may collaborate on arts-based projects producing music, performances, or visual works), so it is not surprising this was a small category. It is also possible that more research reports were produced, but they did not meet the ARC guidelines so cannot be counted as research outputs. We know from a previous study (Tilbury et al., 2017) that social work performs well in obtaining grants with industry funding, so it follows that research reports would be produced for industry partners. However, it is desirable that such projects meet the ARC definition of research and their findings are also reported in journals. The peer review process of journals is a quality review mechanism, journals have different audiences, and papers are more searchable and have longevity. A report for an industry partner that is not peer-reviewed or publicly released does not add to the evidence base in the way that a journal publication does. Publication may take longer, but journal articles place more importance on the methodological and theoretical framework of a study, which are vital to consider along with empirical findings.

Shortcomings of the Scimago social work journal category

The Scimago journal list is small, at 57 journals, and excludes publications without an impact factor such as *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, as well as journals relevant to social work but categorised elsewhere such as *Critical Social Policy* (categorised in political science), *Disability and Society* (categorised in health professions) and *Violence Against Women* (categorised in gender studies). In contrast, the more extensive ERA list of

social work journals has 105 titles (ARC, 2018). The academic journals included in the Scimago social work category attract publications from a wide variety of academic disciplines. Reflecting the heterogeneous nature of social work, most of the journals are multi-coded; for example, *Australian Social Work* is coded as Health (Social Science), Social Sciences (Miscellaneous) and Sociology and Political Science, as well as Social Work. For several social work categorised journals, social work is in the minority of disciplines publishing research within them. For example, publications in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* are mainly from authors in the disciplines of educational psychology and sociology. Academics from disciplinary backgrounds other than social work, such as occupational therapy, sociology, youth work, public health, psychology, general welfare research, publish heavily in some of the journals. This may also explain why some journals published no, or very few, Australian social work articles. Some journals may hold less relevance to the Australian social work professional or disciplinary context. While most journals are international, some have a particular geographical bias, and work that is not based in that location may be decided by editors to not be relevant to their readership. The journal *Siglo Cero* accepts publications in English but prefers Spanish. The scope of some journals is limited methodologically, for example, *Qualitative Social Work* publishes papers focused on qualitative research and *Research on Social Work Practice* publishes empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative).

The most common topics in the Scimago list were child welfare, health, and mental health. This may be more a reflection of the journals indexed than research agendas of Australian social work because of the bias towards child welfare in the journals listed: 12 of the 57 journals, and 8 of the 14 Q1 journals, have the words “child/ren”, “youth” or “family” in the title. This leaves only a small selection of top-cited social work journals for those who publish in other fields. So, if researchers in sub-fields of major interest to social work such as

disability, domestic violence or ageing want to publish in Q1 journals they often do so in journals outside the social work category. Many social workers publish in non-social work journals, both field-based and specialist, including criminology, disability, higher education, and interdisciplinary journals, such as *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disability*, *Brain Injury, Journal of Aging & Health*. A USA study estimated half of the articles by social work academics were published in non-social work journals (Green & Baskind, 2007). Mantell and colleagues (2018) found that social work research on the topic of brain injury received more citations when published in rehabilitation journals compared with social work journals. Bigby and colleagues (2018) found that 62% of papers published by Australian social workers were in multidisciplinary journals with a disability focus, rather than a social work focus. While publication in non-social work journals may obscure the complete picture of social work research to some extent, it will continue to be important, because messages from social work research are relevant to a broad and multidisciplinary audience.

Non-research outputs

There were 212 outputs that were book reviews, editorials, and letters to editors, representing considerable labour and a contribution to the discipline. For example, book reviews are informative for the field and can provide an introduction to the publication process for postgraduate students and early career academics. Another 356 articles did not report research. While non-research papers that are conceptually or theoretically oriented may be influential (Hodge et al., 2012; Kreisberg & Marsh, 2016), in terms of building the research productivity of the profession, it would be a positive development to be more diligent about providing a clear methods section in articles such as policy and practice analyses and narrative literature reviews. It would also enhance academic impact to move away from general essays and reflective pieces to more empirical articles, including systematic reviews and scoping reviews – the standards in this area have been raised

dramatically and social work journals are setting clearer expectations of what should be produced (Crisp, 2015). Some argue that the rise of systematic reviews, and the subsequent marginalisation of narrative literature reviews, is problematic because narrative reviews often comprise expert-based interpretation and critique that goes beyond the defined focus of systematic reviews, contributing to deeper understandings of a topic (Greenhalgh, Thorne, & Malterud, 2018). Certainly, there are some research problems that do not require data collection to be addressed, but can be responded to with interpretation, clarification, and insight (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011). Narrative reviews generally include books, which scoping reviews typically ignore. However, narrative reviews that do not describe their method or a systematic search strategy are open to the criticism that literature has been selected to support a viewpoint and contradictory studies are left out, reducing their scientific value.

There is debate about what constitutes research in the social sciences, depending on the epistemological position that scholars take in understanding the processes of knowledge production (Crotty, 1998). It is argued that research does not necessarily need to rely on empirical data to be considered research, because theoretical, abstract, and conceptual reflection or observation also constitute knowledge production (Crotty, 1998; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). By using the ARC definition, we did not impose a requirement for data to categorise an output as research, but we do think an explicit and systematic approach to observation, analysis, and reporting (whether it is of theory or practice) improves the quality of the scholarly work. As we strive to increase the scope and recognition of social work research, we should also aim to maximise its quality, aiming for methodological excellence (Shaw, 2007).

There was a considerable research focus on the profession itself, rather than its practice applications. This may be due to ongoing debate around the role and objectives of

the social work profession, as well as the need for social work to adapt and remain relevant to the needs of individuals and communities as the landscape of service provision changes. However, given social work is an applied discipline, it is vital to its knowledge base that it is at the forefront of developing and evaluating policies, programs, and practice models that effectively respond to the needs of service users and clients within a social justice framework.

Limitations. There were some limitations with the methodology. The focus of the study on published social work outputs excluded theses, practice guides, discussion papers, working papers, advocacy papers, and public submissions, which may also contribute to knowledge development. The scoping review pertained only to outputs in journals listed as social work by Scimago, which does not fully represent social work publications, and did not cover books, book chapters, research reports, conference proceedings and other grey literature. For these reasons, we included ERA output data to capture the quantity of different output types. However, the ERA reports do not allow for analysis by individual publication to determine author qualifications, topic, or method. ERA data do not encompass publications from researchers whose university did not submit social work-coded outputs to ERA and it contains only research outputs generated by universities, whereas the journal scoping review incorporates research that was generated outside of universities. The two-part method sought to address the respective limitations of each data source.

The research agendas of Australian social workers are of increasing interest as academics, practitioners, and policy makers aim to enhance the impact of their research endeavours (Zuchowski, Miles, Gair & Tsey, 2019). It is important to note the contemporary conditions in which Australian social work research is undertaken, which may influence its format and nature. There is increasing scrutiny on the performance and impact of researchers based in universities and Australian social work research, just like other fields in the social sciences, is situated within the infrastructure of neoliberal states and an international

knowledge economy (Boden & Epstein, 2006; Roche & Flynn, 2020; Watson, 2016). As such, knowledge production is influenced by research agendas shaped by economic utility, focussed on achieving competitive research funding, discipline and university-based rankings, and publication in high-ranking journals that garner high citations (Boden & Epstein, 2006; Watson, 2016). These conditions favour traditional research outputs, which can be counted for performance assessment purposes.

Despite the limitations, the study revealed a wide range of social work research. The comprehensive overview of social work scholarship over the last ten years contributes a new and updated understanding of the form and nature of this contribution. A positive feature of the systematic methods used for the study is that they enable future replication of the results for further appraisal and update of the findings. In providing a broad view of social work research publications, the paper highlights avenues for future research strategy for the discipline.

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