

The value of sourcing social work journals for critical discourse analysis

Qualitative Social Work
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–15
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DOI: 10.1177/14733250231178259

journals.sagepub.com/home/qsw



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Abstract

Using the contents of journals has been an underutilized research approach in social work. Journal archives represent what has been legitimated in the discipline as well as what forms the dominant social work canon. To theorize about journal archival sourcing as a research method, we cite the limited extant examples, drawing out from these the methodology used. We then make a case for the value of journal mining and in particular from the vantage point of critical social work and critical discourse analysis, position the Foucauldian history of the present as an appropriate tool for analysis. We draw this article together by describing how to employ this research method and argue that this might be an exceptionally useful tool at this point of the discipline's history.

Keywords

Critical social work, historiography, critical discourse analysis, journal archives, social work knowledge

We are grateful to have been able to conduct our research on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation and the unceded land of the Snuneymuxw. We trust that we honor the teachings of these peoples in our work, by respecting various forms of knowing, doing, and being and by reflecting on our accountability as allies.

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In this article, we aim to present critical discourse analysis based on social work journals as the data source as a valuable research method. Approaches to research and to gathering data, especially in qualitative research, seem to consistently expand. This occurs both as researchers find novel ways of accessing, presenting, and interpreting data (such as in the case of testimonio or of autoethnography), refine what constitutes a method (such as the distinctions of analytic and performative autoethnography), develop new methods by combining existing approaches (such as combining testimonio and feminist oral histories to capture the meaning making of both collective and individual experiences (see [Morgenshtern, 2012](#)), and recognize Indigenous research approaches. We have recently come to appreciate the value of (exa)mining journal archives through critical discourse analysis. In social work, the analysis of journals as data sets seems to be relatively rare and an articulation of how to approach such research as (a) method is absent ([Shaw et al., 2013](#)). Social work scholars have neglected using journals as a data source for critical social work exploration and we suggest here should be considered as a further research approach.

In our discussion, we center the Foucauldian analysis of “the history of the present” as a tool that facilitates critical exploration of historical events and trends. Citing an older but relevant text, we note that an understanding of what has gone before “provides an important perspective on today’s disagreements and uncertainties by showing how previous generations of social work scholars and educators defined the role of their profession in the quest for social welfare” ([Diner, 1977](#): 1). We therefore argue that analyzing the contents of professional journals as data sets allows for the excavation of the history of professional scholarship in social work.

Our intention is then to identify how journals can be a source for critical discourse analysis and specifically for developing histories of the present. We first offer a rationale for using journals as a data source. We then offer a review of extant examples where journal archives have been explored and note the absence of the critical discourse analysis in this endeavor. Next, we discuss what constitutes critical discourse analysis and its benefits to social work, followed by an example of a critical history of the present based on exploring journal content. Finally, we offer a guide for applying critical discourse analysis when using journal archives and a discussion of advantages and limitations of this method.

Potential value of sourcing journal archives

In qualitative research, data might come from the systematic analyses and meta-syntheses of the literature ([Sandelowski et al., 1997](#)), and from interviews, focus groups, self-review, or document analysis ([Creswell, 2013](#)). Document analysis does not seem to have commonly included an examination of the bodies of knowledge reflected in journals as a whole archive or data set. In other words, researchers have not typically viewed the journal, across an individual issue, a particular period, or across all its publication as a knowledge product that can be (exa)mined.

Journals curate publications that have been subject to peer review. Additionally, Staller (2010, as cited by [Shaw, 2019](#): 208) observed that “the way we collect, retrieve, store and

manage data will always be shaped by context including the historic moment, and our relationship to it.” Taken together, these facts suggest that journals provide an archive of the knowledges that are valued by the social work discipline over time; offer an indication of what might be disciplinary priorities at specific points in time; and reflect the discipline’s identity (Schmid and Bois, 2022; Shaw, 2019; Yu, 2019). Journal archives therefore provide a potentially rich source of information about diverse social work practices and knowledges.

Accordingly, the combined work represented in journals may provide various axes for understanding data. Historical trends and how an issue has been conceptualized over time might be illuminated if the journal has existed over several decades. There might be contemporary insights regarding who is being published and why, and who is writing about what and why—thus highlighting debates on issues pertinent to social work or indicating current trends. Further, investigation of a journal might offer disciplinary insights regarding how social work constructs a particular issue, or how the discipline aims to generate and curate knowledge (e.g., through a critical social work lens, or an evidence-based lens). The interrogation of journal archives may also facilitate comparative social work, for example, around international practices and conceptualizations.

Shaw (2019) in considering Diner’s (1977) exploration of the curated works of journals concludes that “for its approach, [it] is of considerable interest for social work” (p.195). We wish to expand why sourcing social work journal archives especially can contribute to critical discourse analysis in social work and begin by examining available examples.

Examples of social work research using professional journals

To demonstrate not only the limited application of the use of journal archives as a data source but also the diverse ways in which this research approach has been used, we lift out examples in the literature. These examples provide some indication of the value of disciplinary journals as a data source. Further, for each illustration, we identify the study’s focus, analytic strategy, and the authors’ approach to the presentation of data (how the data are reflected or cited). The examples illustrate diverse ways in how researchers have approached the analysis of an issue reflected in a journal over time, thus offering initial direction on the use of the disciplinary journals as a data source.

In an early, but apparently isolated example, Diner (1977) examined the articles published in the 50 years of the *Social Service Review* journal (1927–1977) to reflect the history of social welfare scholarship in the journal. He provided counts and descriptions (in the increments of 5 years) of the authorship and classification of articles by type (such as descriptions of social welfare administrations, social conditions and problems, and social work activities and service delivery) and contextualized these within national and international developments, trends in social work profession and the academic world, as well as aspirations, visions, and ideologies of the journal’s editors.

A more recent example includes Feiring and Zelinski’s (2011) review of the journal *Child Maltreatment* from 1996 to 2010 which drew out the journal’s research agenda over this period through categorizing the articles. The authors offered tables to compare the

number of published articles in each of three 5-year tranches, to identify the types of maltreatment that these publications had examined, and to note the disciplines involved in these various studies. They also reported on study designs and types of outcomes. The authors presented the main themes in the data and supported them quantitatively by the number of articles writing about each theme.

In 2013, Shaw et al.(2013) explored the 6 years of publication of *Qualitative Social Work* as a case study, specifically investigating the methods, motivations, and purposes of qualitative social work research over this time span. In their research note, they asked critical questions about whether qualitative research could or should consistently deliver clear conclusions. These authors analyzed the articles and represented the findings tabularly around such questions as the research focus; citizen, user, and community populations as well as professional and policy communities investigated; domicile and gender of journal authors; and the main fieldwork method used. They repositioned quantitative assessments as “structured” data (p.743).

In 2014, Schmid (2014) used journal data mining as one aspect of a study to identify the South African research agenda regarding children in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* and *The Social Work Researcher Practitioner*. Schmid identified the child welfare topics raised in each journal from 2001 to 2010, across 131 relevant articles to understand post-apartheid priorities. Having used content analysis, the author tabulated the frequency of articles on various child welfare concerns, with the themes of sexual abuse, youth needs, and HIV/AIDS crisis effects being the top research priorities. The author also paid attention to the standpoint of South African child welfare research. This analysis provided evidence regarding the divergence between the research agenda, the child welfare academic curriculum, and practitioners’ practice priorities. The research further informed recommendations aligning the research priorities with the post-apartheid transformational agenda.

To review trends in Francophone social work research in Canada, Molgat and Trahan-Perrault (2015) explored the articles in *Reflets, Revue D’intervention Sociale et Communautaire* from 1990 to 2014, alongside other data sources. The authors identified a strong research emphasis on health and interventions with women and immigrants, as well as salient gaps in the areas of institutional social work settings and practice with Indigenous peoples. They offered recommendations to inform future research agenda. They cited each relevant article in the text as well as the references.

Massing (2017) reviewed historical articles in *Canadian Social Work* (previously known as *The Social Worker*), to identify what this archive revealed regarding Canadian social work ethics, particularly in the early years of the profession. He cited all relevant articles by author and title. Massing adopted a narrative approach, interweaving the various examples lifted out from the journal into a discussion about the historical arc of ethics. While recognizing that there may have been limited information available to them, Massing concluded that social workers seldom took an ethical stance regarding key issues in Canadian history.

In a further example, applying a Foucauldian history of the present, Johnstone and Lee (2019) used various journals (*Social Case Work, Social Casework, and The Social Worker*) in addition to archived documentation to explore the role of the social work

profession in defining, sustaining, and resisting the construction of Canadian national identities throughout the 20th century. The authors highlighted “historical social work blind spots” (p. 71) in the profession’s treatment of cultural diversity. Additionally, they identified and documented the alternative constructions that some social workers offered of the Canadian national identity which they challenged for its assimilationist character. They revised social work history and used the identified journal articles and archival data to support their argument. They cited the relevant articles and documents in their reference list.

Yu (2019) reviewed whether the “Stolen Generations” (Indigenous Australian children forcibly removed from their families and communities) were discussed in *Australian Social Work* in the period 1948 to 1969, the time when social work was developing formally into a profession, and when such forcible removal was at its peak. Guided by the journal index, Yu found 331 substantive articles pertaining to this timespan, but only one that spoke to Indigenous child welfare and a further single article that was critical of the practice. He cited both by author in the text and by author and title in the references.

Also, that year, Shaw (2019) considered journal practices by examining the first 40 years of *The British Journal of Social Work* (BJSW), first exploring British predecessor journals and then as of 1971 the BJSW. Only the final issue for each year was studied. These data were considered as background to Editorial Board meeting notes and interviews with key informants, and it was these perspectives that Shaw focusses on rather than the articles read. Reviewing aspects such as processes regarding editorial appointments, editors’ visions, the work of reviewers, and the infrastructure of technology, Shaw concluded that these were all located close to the journal’s day-to-day practice.

Finally, in 2022, Schmid and Bois (2022) examined a decade of the *Canadian Social Work Review* to assess what the items published revealed about the Canadian nature of social work by exploring the types of issues reflected, what research paradigms were favored, and what regions and universities the authors represented. The resulting narrative primarily identified the themes highlighted through content analysis and frequency of issues and sometimes theme-specific tables. The individual articles and their authorship were not highlighted or formally cited.

The examples we have been able to identify are scarce, even as we recognize that there may be illustrations we missed. In considering both historical trends and current thinking, and making visible unseen debates and issues, these articles do though signify the value of using journal archives to lift out disciplinary discourses. On a methodological level, the research exemplified here sometimes complemented journal content with other data sources; and in some instances, cited the publications that formed the data in the text and/or the reference list, and in others, focused only on emergent themes. We observe that the majority of the existing articles are descriptive and tend not to employ critical analysis regarding histories of the social work profession (Shaw, 2019). Neither do they specifically articulate their methods as ones using journals as a source of data. In the following sections, we attend to such gaps by briefly describing critical discourse analysis before demonstrating its application to examining journal contents.

Critical discourse analysis, critical social work, historiography, and histories of the present

In this section, we define critical discourse analysis, relating it to critical social work, and because of our focus on historical archives, to the need for historiography and the development of “histories of the present” as part of the critical social work project.

Critical discourse analysis

Research employing critical discourse analysis involves studying and analyzing the use of language in an array of data sources, including conversations, interview or focus group transcripts, media, and web-based materials as well as published literature (Leotti et al., 2022; Moffat, 2019). As a postmodern method, such analysis identifies discursive regimes and draws out the meaning and constructs conveyed through language to illustrate how discourses legitimate various phenomena in the social world (Moffat, 2019). Hence, discourses shape social reality and the world while reflecting how issues are conceptualized or constructed (Leotti et al., 2022). Critical discourse analysis attends to power and examines how it functions to reinforce or silence particular discourses. Such analysis therefore “ventures past considering what the text says to questioning what the text *does*” (Leotti et al., 2022: 261). Critical discourse analysis is thus (1) grounded in broad socio-political and historical contexts; (2) concerned with the issues of dominance and subordination, privilege and oppression, power, and social inequality; and (3) cognizant of the discursive function to both construct and reflect social reality (Leotti et al., 2022).

Critical social work and critical discourse

Critical social work has a close relationship to critical discourse analysis (Webb, 2019). Critical social work claims different ontological and epistemological roots to mainstream Western social work (Webb, 2019). As such, critical social work recognizes macro social process, emphasizes a collaborative approach, and aims for transformation in the experience of those oppressed (Webb, 2019). As an emancipatory and rights-based approach, critical social work adopts a political stance that embraces justice and empowerment regarding social issues, geographies, and local ecologies (Shaik et al., 2022; Webb, 2019). In addition, critical social work promotes self-reflexivity and the notion of praxis, a dialogical process of action and reflection and of theory and practice (Shaik et al., 2022; Webb, 2019). Critical social work thus positions social work practice as discursive practice and interprets mainstream social work as reinforcing and replicating dominant societal discourses (Chapman and Withers, 2019). The analysis of discourse not only illuminates silenced or forgotten discourses but also, through a focus on language, makes “the familiar visible” (Chambon, 1999: 51; Harris and Shergill, 2020; Hoppstadius, 2020; Leigh et al., 2020; Patrick, 2020). Research centered on critical discourse analysis is thus an essential tool in revealing relations of power in social work. Leotti et al. (2022) suggest critical discourse analysis can be used for “research on direct social work practice and practice contexts, policy analysis, and research on social work as

a discipline and a profession” (p.265). Healy (2000) similarly argues that critical discourse analysis “can enrich progressive social work practices by demonstrating how the language practices through which organizations, theorists, practitioners and service users express their understanding of social work also shape the kinds of practices that occur...” (p. 67).

Historiography and histories of the present

Consequently, a critical social work approach suggests that social work research should consider the prevailing context and social factors impacting social work policies and practices at any historical point. However, researchers and practitioners often focus on the here and now, social work being characterized as a “present-centered profession” (Danto, 2008: 8). Indeed, despite historical review of the young profession of social work being common in the 1950s, this dwindled through the 1960s and 1970s becoming almost absent by the 1990s—mainly due to the increasing emphasis on statistics and quantification in social work research (Fisher and Dybicz, 1999). Existing historical accounts often are descriptive, and outside of social welfare and policy discussions, typically overlook the social forces operating at the time or suggest that how people acted was simply a reflection of their time (Massing, 2017), thus potentially straying into apologist territory. Shaw (2019) has though observed that “[t]here has been a recent interest in a more critical approach to social work history, partly through some interest in applying emerging research methods from the humanities and social sciences (e.g., archival research, visual methods), partly through developments in technology, and partly through the general influence of social theorists such as Foucault and Marx” (p.195).

Hence, from a critical social work perspective, a historiographic approach is important. Historiography explores historical events for the ways in which these have been written and represented, by whom the account has been offered, and what has been said about a situation (Danto, 2008; Gregory, 2021). Historiography further assumes that “historiographical analysis proceeds with sensitivity to the fact that no single social work text should bear the burden of providing a comprehensive history, but each can still be held accountable for its social, cultural, and political implications” (Gregory, 2021: 32). Earlier academics suggested that such an approach provided a wider lens of understanding and contextualization of a subject in its time and place; was critical for self-understanding of a profession; and expanded the profession’s knowledge base (Reisch, 1988; Fisher and Dybicz, 1999).

The Foucauldian “history of the present” is an example of critical discourse analysis and historiography because it focuses on issues of power, on discourse, and on the constitution of self and subjectivity (Moffat, 2019). It illuminates the historical forces that operate, the knowledge claims made, and the associated discursive regimes employed (Moffat, 2019). As such, a history of the present provides not only insight into what occurred and how this occurred but also considers where discourses have been reinforced over time, silenced, or ruptured, and how discourses echo into current practice (Skehill, 2007). This approach uncovers how disciplining discourses of governmentality—an implicit and explicit control of people to maintain order in society—construct subjectivities of individuals and groups (Foucault, 1994). Discourses are examined to

understand how they shape and discipline the ways that individuals and institutions think, speak, and/or conduct themselves. Understanding which discursive regimes exist and their interaction may identify where dominant discourses are fragile and can be challenged and resisted—and thus potentially creates opportunities for change (Moffat, 2019). Skehill (2007) suggests that for the social work profession, developing a history of the present is “a critical and effective methodology for problematizing the nature and form of social work in the present by recourse to its past” (p. 449). A history of the present names historical and contemporary discourses revealing what has allowed these to be sustained, interrupted, or disrupted. In particular, it illuminates the ways in which social work processes and practices reflect dominant belief systems and state-sanctioned ideologies and policies over time and consequently facilitates an understanding of social work’s practice with marginalized persons and communities and the mechanisms by which domination is exercised (Chapman and Withers, 2019; Gregory, 2021).

The value of a critical historical perspective

Developing critical historical analysis is especially important given the rising critique of mainstream social work, the need for critical self-reflection, and the challenging of ahistorical professional identities—what Gregory (2021) named the “necessity of reckoning with a suppressed history” (p.18) or Chambon (2003)—“making visible the historical tensions between the language and the profession’s overt claims” (p.225). Aspects of social work history have been made invisible in several ways. There is, for example, the tendency toward professional imperialism particularly toward the Global South (Midgley, 1981) and the dominance of Anglophone social work, which silences or marginalizes other social work accounts and experiences. Shaw (2019), for example, believes that archival research can support historical accounts of social work outside of the United States because American origin stories of the discipline often, for example, obscure European initiatives. A response is also timely in colonized contexts, where critical historical reflection is essential in identifying the “truth” in Truth and Reconciliation processes (TRCC, 2015). The example we offer next in this text highlights how a history of the present demonstrates how Indigenous knowledges have been both vilified and erased, and in the act of presenting this historiographic work, serves to remind social workers of the knowledges that have persisted.

Journals are usually produced over several years, if not decades. Unlike any other social work document (except perhaps for organizational annual reports), journal archives provide a perspective of systematic, legitimated disciplinary thinking over time. Such data are invaluable in developing critical historical analyses of social work discourses around a specific theme or topic.

Example: Interrogating settler social work practice with Indigenous persons in Canada—Canadian Social Work

We offer this example to illustrate not only the value of critical historical analysis in social work but also to illuminate and evaluate the methodology used. The content of the article is thus not pertinent to our argument here (for the article, see Morgenshtern et al. (2022)).

The intent of this study was to identify how Canadian social work positioned its engagement with Indigenous people in the country. Seeing ourselves as professionally accountable and wishing to contribute to decolonization, we therefore aimed to name “the strategies and styles used to capture and canonize particular versions of social work history” (Gregory, 2021: 32). *Canadian Social Work* (previously known as *The Social Worker*) was published from 1932 to 2019. Due to its publication history and acting as a forum for professional debate and information exchange (Novik and Schmidt, 2018), it provided an ideal repository of disciplinary knowledge for the creation of a history of the present on this topic.

To develop a history of the present, we first scoured all the issues, some of which were available digitally, but others only in print form. We developed a set of relevant search words and reviewing content pages, reading all abstracts, and then examining articles that contained the search terms, picked out appropriate articles, commentaries, and association branch reports.

To identify dominant, marginalized, and silent discourses we used Foucault’s archaeology; and to generate themes and develop relationships of reinforcement or disruption between discourses, we utilized genealogy (Rabinow, 1984). These together created a history of the present regarding settler social work practice with Indigenous persons in Canada. We viewed the articles identified as units of data or artifacts, and as such chose not to identify these in the text or reference list by author or name—though we were then required to do so in the submission process.

Our history of the present allowed us to identify two clusters of articles (10 published in the period of 1932–1960 and 20 from 1976 to 2019), and to draw inferences on the period of silence. Our themes highlighted that professional discourses—in congruence with dominant societal discourses—tended to position Indigenous peoples as inherently inferior to settlers, these contrasting with some later discussion that identified the harms of colonization. We noted the individualized nature of discourses that accompanied deficit-based subjectivities. We were able to go beyond the discourses illuminated, to understanding how these acted to support paternalistic social work intervention and how social workers therefore justified particular actions, placing themselves at the center even where human rights and the impact of social conditions were understood. We concluded that while social work rhetoric may have shifted, the journal until 2019 offered only limited alternative understandings of Indigenous experience and positionality vis-a-vis social work.

Was there value in using this journal archive as our source of data? Having a publication available that had printed for almost 90 years allowed us to systematically track developments in legitimized disciplinary thinking and in the construction of Indigenous people as social work subjects. Such accessibility to data in a central repository tends to be rare. It proved invaluable in developing a critical historical analysis of social work discourses regarding practice with Indigenous persons. We could compare and contrast the emergent discourses with each other and with familiar dominant societal discourses to identify meaningful relationships. Such analysis made visible that in the more recent years of its publication a counter-narrative was beginning to be articulated, even as certain gaps in interrogating social work positionality

remained. By offering a further perspective, our analysis supported the critique put forward by Indigenous scholars (Blackstock, 2009).

The method behind the methodology

Research process

There are several steps in using journal archives as sources of data. These are not linear but loop back on each other in an iterative process. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) have emphasized the value of such a circular process that allows further finessing of the steps which in turn allows greater nuance and complexity to emerge at each level of the process.

A first step in this methodology is to choose a journal and to have a clear rationale for doing so. Then, as with other document analysis, systematic literature reviews, or literature scoping, it is important to identify clear search terms. Next, one might determine the period of publication to be examined, again with an appropriate motivation. In choosing critical discourse analysis and the particular method of a history of the present, researchers should also identify any assumptions and be reflexive about their social locations. A logical next step is then going through titles in the index with search words in mind, then proceeding to the abstracts, and then going on to looking more fully at the articles.

As with other qualitative methods, the intent is to analyze the content by lifting out categories and themes. We advocate for a critical approach that includes discourse analysis (Leotti et al., 2022; Moffat, 2019) with the intent of excavating predominant and more marginal discourses. Such information might be used toward constructing a history of the present (Foucault, 1994), where, as indicated previously, analysis is built around archaeology and genealogy (Rabinow, 1984).

As with other research processes, trustworthiness needs to be considered (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For dependability, it is important to ensure that the process of identifying relevant artifacts is systematic, that analysis and interpretation are consistent with a critical paradigm, and that what constitutes data-gathering under archaeology or genealogy is recorded. Discourse analysis as a heuristic process benefits from having more than one researcher so that interpretations can be checked against one another. This process of peer debriefing is helpful in ensuring the “truth” value of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Providing quotes from the chosen articles would speak to the accuracy of interpretations, linking findings to the data, further enhancing the credibility, as well as determining the reasonableness of the themes that have evolved (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These quotations would also serve the purposes of enabling readers to assess transferability of the findings—how identified discourses echo into current practice and shape the ways that individuals and institutions construct themselves (Skehill, 2007), and thus contextualizing the subject in the time and place and contributing to the self-understanding of the profession (Reisch, 1988). Finally, it is necessary to ensure that the analysis adheres to the critical tradition by identifying the nature/source of inequalities in historical and value contexts and increasing consciousness about injustice (Patton, 2002).

The focus on inequity and inequality is important because these aspects of our society are often not explicitly discussed (Ziskin, 2019).

Considerations in data presentation

It is the article and the themes or discourse that are excavated from the journal contents that constitute the artifact or the unit of data. The artifacts in journal data mining are typically therefore the articles that make up each issue that is being reviewed and any quotes that might be drawn from the articles. This interpretation of what constitutes data does not entirely conform to typical social science research understandings and leads to ethical considerations. Conventionally, when citing articles, one is reflecting the knowledge that has been generated by the authors of such scholarly literature. Formal referencing acknowledges these knowledge sources. We offer several reasons why authorship is not considered in the same light when sourcing data in journal archives.

First, in journal data exploration the purpose in using the articles is not to develop a literature review or to support findings. Rather it is to make discursive meaning of these contents as a whole. Noting that therefore the articles and the discourses highlighted within each constitute the artifacts considered, the authors are not cited in the textual references made. Rather the articles, as collective units of data or artifacts, or in the cases of quotations as individual pieces of data, reflect patterns and do *not* represent what articles normally cited in research do. Additionally, it is the journal that stands in the foreground, and it must be made clear that this is the repository that is being examined. However, we rely extensively on quotes to reflect author voice and tenor.

Second, the author of any article in the journal that is selected for review is thus not equivalent to a research participant. Hence, any quotes or excerpts are associated with the article rather than the author. These should be acknowledged in a way that the reader is able to see patterns within individual articles in addition to larger patterns, and thus, should be designated, for example, as A1 and A2 and so on, just as an interview participant might be identified as P1 or P2.

A third consideration is practical. If the number of selected articles is small, these can conceivably be presented in a tabular form. This is, however, not possible where more than a handful of relevant articles have been identified. Trying to accommodate such a list of articles either in the text or reference list becomes particularly problematic where the list of selected articles then begins to substitute for analysis and discussion in the text. Further, including such articles and their authors in a reference list confuses the research artifacts/materials with scholarly work that is used to provide context or interpret findings.

Advantages and limitations

Sourcing journal archives presents a valuable repository of disciplinary knowledge, knowledge that is used to support and challenge subsequent knowledge generation. It is clear that because of the peer review process this knowledge is acclaimed as having been rigorously researched. It is also evident from journal mandates what type of knowledge is curated by the journal.

However, prospective journal data researchers may know the dominant canon, but cannot know which voices were excluded and why, and might be able only to speculate. Manuscripts that did not meet Western publication standards may have been actively excluded. In Anglophone publications, which are the most common, this might include those that did not reflect adequate facility and fluency in English (Politzer-Ahles et al., 2016) and who could not pay for the page fees or demonstrate English editing where this has been required. Further, prospective authors may have disqualified themselves. For example, Indigenous or African authors may not have submitted their work assuming that reviewers in dominant or Northern journals would not find it acceptable. An examination of journal content thus suggests a review of dominant perspectives, inferences needing to be made regarding what has been potentially omitted and an awareness of global inequalities being required.

The way forward

The sourcing of journal archival data opens up a less explored avenue for researching disciplinary knowledge. Journal archives can be important, valuable resources for critically identifying and analyzing social work trends in education and practice, even as researchers might only speculate about silenced or obscured discourses. Excavating journal archives through a lens of critical discourse analysis allows for a discussion of social work practice and knowledge in relation to its use of power in developing and legitimizing knowledge and practices and can facilitate critical understandings of current practice and insight into how contemporary discourses replicate and reproduce or disrupt historical discourses—and where the transformation of discourse is possible.

Social work has existed as a formal profession for around a hundred years. Many journals have been available for several decades. We thus are at a historical juncture that adds value to critical exploration and reflection. Examining journal archives allows us as social work researchers to understand quite systematically how our conceptualization of issues has shifted—within the discipline, within national contexts and inter-nationally, and accordingly where change is needed.

Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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