

## A Critical Review of Theory in Social Work Journals: A Replication Study

Carolyn S. Gentle-Genitty

Virgil Gregory

Corey Pfahler

Misty Thomas

Lisa Lewis

Kim Campbell

Kathy Ballard

Kathy Compton

James G. Daley

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is multifold. Key aspects discussed include exploring the extent of theory discussion and progression in social work journals for the year 2004; discussing the necessity of theory in social work research and practice; reviewing previous research literature regarding evaluation of theory discussion and progression; proposing criteria for defining theory in social work journals; and presenting findings from the current study concerning theory discussion and progression in social work journals. Results: Of the 1,168 articles reviewed from 37 journals, 71 (approximately 6%) met the criteria for theory development with empirical base. Thus, a minimal number of articles (3 out of 71 or 4.2%) evaluated, based on the criteria in the theory quality scale (Table 1), received high quality ratings. Conclusion: Based on the results yielded by the analysis, we assert that social workers need to make a conscious effort to include theory in practice decisions.*

**Keywords:** *Theory, social work theory, empirical assessment of theory, social work practice, theory progression, human behavior, and the social environment (HBSE)*

Theories provide a lens to help us frame the complex interplay between humans and their environment. A large part of this understanding occurs within the context of practice, specifically social work practice. Bartlett (2003) and Pinderhughes (1996) define this practice as one that endeavors to define a roadmap of a myriad of methods, knowledge, sanctions, values, and purposes for social workers. This practice, the habitual actions of

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Carolyn S. Gentle-Genitty, Virgil Gregory, Corey Pfahler, Misty Thomas, Lisa Lewis, Kim Campbell, Kathy Ballard, and Kathy Compton are doctoral students, and James G. Daley, Ph.D. is associate professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work, Indianapolis, IN, 46202-5156.

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actors, and the rules that govern their field (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997), enables social workers, retrospectively and prospectively, to explain and forecast relationships and actions of human behavior (Thyer, 2001). Nestled neatly within the purposes of social work, social work practice provide skills “to identify, analyze, implement empirically based interventions to achieve client goals; apply empirical knowledge; evaluate program outcomes and provide leadership in the promotion of social and economic justice” (Schriver, 2004, p. 5). There are still questions about social work practice and what it is expected to do. For instance, what actually helps to frame social work practice? How do social workers justify practice approaches utilized to attain their goals? Answers to these questions help to shape the current discussion. The authors purport that theory and theory progression is what ties these questions together.

The question concerning how theory is disseminated among social work professionals is raised. Journals serve as a major source for theory dissemination (Lindsey & Kirk, 1992). For this reason, theory development and discussion is an important component for researchers to address, as well as for journals to publish. The purpose of this paper is multifold:

1. To explore the extent of theory discussion and progression in social work journals for the year 2004;
2. To discuss the necessity of theory in social work research and practice;
3. To review pertinent literature concerning previous research conducted regarding evaluation of theory discussion and progression in social work journals;
4. To propose criteria for defining theory in social work journals;
5. To present findings from the current study concerning theory discussion and progression in social work journals.

### DEFINING THEORY

Social work practice is framed by theory and its modus operandi. Theory, Turner (1996) outlines, “emerges from the process of ordering facts in a meaningful way” (p. 3). He highlights that theory spotlights notable patterns and relationships that bring homeostasis and stability to the intricacies of practice. Failure to do this leaves practice to “guesswork” and “impressionistic responses” to client situations (Turner, 1996). A key limitation of theory for practice, Turner (1996) warns, is when it becomes “overly cerebral and mechanistic, stressing labeling and classifying, rather than on the individuality of each client and situation it can become an end in itself” (p. 13). A great limitation of bridging theory to practice is that it has become too cerebral. On a whole, the result is that direct and indirect practitioners do not see its relevance to their daily work (Rosen, Proctor, & Staudt, 2003; Thyer, 2001).

Theory may also be defined as “a reasoned set of propositions, derived from and supported by established evidence, which serves to explain a group of phenomena” (Schriver, 2001, p. 119). On the other hand, Robbins and colleagues suggest

that theories “consist of a series of relatively abstract and general statements that collectively purport to explain (answer the question “why?”) some aspect of the empirical world (the “reality” known to us directly or indirectly through our senses)” (p. 5). Theory provides practitioners with a systematic method to conceptualize information about individuals, their behavior, and the contexts in which they interact and live. The importance of theory is often emphasized (Payne, 2005; Robbins et al., 1999; Schriver, 2001; Turner, 1996) and, realizing that social work is at a critical juncture (Finn & Jacobson, 2003), there is a current call for theory to play a more integral part in practice—a part that takes the “guesswork” from practice, allowing relationships to be defined via patterns and a specific theoretical lens (Turner, 1996), while also empowering social workers to validate their chosen methods of intervention.

### IMPORTANCE OF THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Rightly so, there has been much debate about the importance of theory in social work practice (Gomory, 2001; Thyer, 1994). The preceding paragraphs give a brief overview of such a debate. For instance, Thyer adopts the stance that teaching and the utilization of theory among undergraduate and master’s level social work students is “largely a waste of time” (p. 148). Thyer provides the following three explanations for this stance. First, social work educators lack skills to adequately teach social work theory. Second, the majority of theories taught in the social work profession are incorrect. Teaching incorrect theories may lead to ineffective methods used in social work. Third, while theory attempts to explain outcomes for treatment effectiveness, many outcomes may be explained by other theories or factors. Thyer asserts that, recognizing that outcomes may be explained by various theoretical explanations, is unnecessarily complicated.

Conversely, Gomory (2001) refutes Thyer’s (1994) stance regarding the importance of teaching theory in social work, as he feels that the use of theory to guide social work research and practice is of major importance. Gomory emphasizes the use of “trial and error” among social work professionals (p. 47) to develop educated and autonomous opinions of how theory should guide research and be applied to practice interventions.

Specifically, the use of theory in social work practice is essential; it provides many more reasons, irrespective of the debate. These reasons may include but are not be limited to the provision of guidelines for practice and policy, treatment and intervention development, and direct social work research. General guidelines provided by social work theory may be useful in providing information about what policies are necessary to change conditions for target groups and vulnerable populations (Robbins et al., 1999). The framework provided by theory may be useful by social workers to develop treatment and intervention plans to enhance the functioning of individuals and society (Robbins et al., 1999; Schriver, 2001). Lastly, theory may be used to direct social work research (Robbins et al., 1999). Research provides a foundation to explain how and why certain conditions and behaviors occur and provides an approach to effectively guide interventions.

### EVALUATION OF THEORY QUALITY AND PROGRESSION

While there is debate as to whether the use of theory is essential in the profession of social work (Gomory, 2001; Robbins et al., 1999; Thyer, 1994), it may be asserted that theory is important to knowledge development. The use of theory to guide research and inform practice is not infallible. However, when examined under a critical lens, theory provides social workers with guidelines to explain and predict outcomes (Schraver, 2001).

Journals are one of the primary means of knowledge development and dissemination among social work professionals. Because journals are the primary means through which knowledge of theory is disseminated, these questions are posed: How do social work professionals define the value and credibility of a particular theory? How does one evaluate the quality of a particular journal in which a theory is published? When evaluating the value and credibility of a theory, it is necessary to discuss two topics: theory discussion and theory progression. Theory discussion may be simply stated as that discussion of theory within the context of a journal article. Discussion of theory may range from merely mentioning a particular theory to discussing the basic premises of that theoretical construct. Including discussion of theory in a journal article does not indicate an in-depth examination of the theory. Rather, theory discussion may be defined as a superficial description of the theory that does not include exploration of the components or empirical base of the theory. Theory progression takes theory discussion further—to explore the components of the theory, examine the empirical basis and supporting arguments, and provide knowledge concerning future development of the theory.

A number of authors have developed criteria for evaluating theory quality and development (Fischer, 1973; Payne, 2005; Robbins et al., 1999; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). These authors propose a set of criteria that they believe is adequate for evaluating theory quality and development. Payne (2005) provides a critique of five authors' framework for evaluating theory quality and development. However, he does not propose a synthesizing rating system to evaluate theory, but merely a critique (Payne, 2005).

Fischer (1973) proposed a framework for analysis of theories of therapy. Fischer's main goals for the development of this framework were twofold. One goal of the framework was to serve as a guide for addressing questions raised by clinical therapies. A second goal was to provide guidance in evaluating these theories based upon the questions raised. Fischer provided five basic areas in which clinical theories may be analyzed: 1) structural characteristics, 2) characteristics as a theory of therapy, 3) empirical status, 4) assumptions about the nature of man and moral implications, and 5) applicability to social work. Fischer also provided a four-point criterion scale for theory rating.

Robbins and others (1999) proposed criteria for evaluating theory in social work practice. These authors offer three criteria for theory evaluation: 1) theories for social work practice should be consistent with social work values and ethics; 2) theories for social work practice should be subjected to scientific scrutiny, methodologically sound research, and be verifiable, and 3) theories for social

work practice should do no harm. Each criterion and the application of the criterion to social work practice are discussed in detail.

Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) state that the traditional criteria often utilized to evaluate social work theory are inadequate. The authors propose the utilization of four additional criteria for theory evaluation. Criterion one states that theory should be explicitly critical. Criterion two states that the theory should recognize humans as active agents. Criterion three states that the theory should account for the life experiences of the client. Criterion four states that the theory should promote social justice. The authors provide an explanation for each criterion and its application. Using this framework, the authors assert that theories that correspond to these criteria are preferable to theories that do not meet them.

While several authors (Fischer, 1973; Payne, 2005; Robbins et al., 1999; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988) have proposed criteria for theory evaluation, the researchers have found these criteria to be inadequate. The researchers developed criteria to ensure that the journals selected for review would reflect social work content. After selecting journals for review, the researchers reviewed articles in the selected journals based on criteria to determine if the article contained theory discussion. If theory discussion was present to a certain extent, the researchers further evaluated the theory discussion in that article against a second set of criteria. The following methods section provides an explication of the procedures that guided our inquiry. Admittedly, this statement could also use some work.

## METHOD

Two-hundred and sixty-eight social work journals from 2004 were selected for review. These journals were selected based on social work journals available at the Indiana University Purdue University (IUPUI) University Library and from the website <http://cosw.sc.edu/swan/media.html>. These journals were considered "social work" journals by the IUPUI library. Seventeen theory progression team members reviewed the two lists for repetition and condensed the list to 220 journals. These 220 journals were cross-referenced with *The Authors Guide to Social Work Journals* (NASW, 1997) for congruence with the social work profession. This process further narrowed the list to 54 social work journals. Theory progression team members developed a list of criteria to ensure that the journals would reflect social work content. The criteria were as follows: the journal must be peer-reviewed and meet at least one of the following criteria:

1. Published by a school of social work or a professional social work organization.
2. The mission statement places primary emphasis on social work or social workers.
3. "Social Work" appears in title of the journal.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, team members independently reviewed three articles for theory quality. An inter-rater reliability (kappa) of .85 was obtained from all raters prior to starting the review process. The Theory Quality Scale included nine criteria. Each criterion was a statement regarding the article's fulfillment of a specific characteristic and received a rating from 1 to 5 (Table 1). If the article fully satisfied the purpose of the specific criterion in question, that arti-

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Score</b>
Components of theory are described in a tight, internally consistent framework	
Clearly describes each variable within the theory	
Clearly operationalizes the relationship between the variables within the theory	
Clearly describes goals or outcomes intended with theory	
Clearly describes the boundaries or limitations of the theory	
Clearly describes the empirical data that support the premises of theory	
Clearly builds upon previous studies that demonstrate the efficacy of the theory	
Clearly concludes with specific next steps for theory progression	
Clearly expresses the framework for exploring and/or responding to issues of social justice	
<i>Scoring: 5 = strongly agree 4 = moderately agree 3 = slightly agree 2 = moderately disagree 1 = strongly disagree</i>	

cle received a score of 5, which indicates full credit for that criterion. If an article completely failed to satisfy the criterion in question, that article was given a score of 1. Subsequent to determining inter-rater reliability, team members reviewed the 54 journals against criteria put forth by the theory progression team. This narrowed the list to 41 journals. These 41 journals were divided among seven team members. The team members reviewed each journal and its respective articles for the year 2004. Due to pragmatic reasons such as inability to access journals electronically or manually, and due to some journals no longer being in publication, four journals could not be accessed.

One-thousand one-hundred and sixty-eight articles were reviewed for inclusion of theory. All of the articles in each of the journals were rated according to the Journal Inclusion of Theories Scale. The articles were searched via online databases, including Ebso Host, Expanded Academic, ASAP, and via the library of IUPUI catalog of electronic journals. When journals were not available for review electronically but were accessible manually, hard copies of the journals were obtained and their subsequent articles reviewed. Articles were evaluated according to the overall role that theory played in the article, the extent to which the theory was included in the article, and the presence or absence of empirical evidence in the article. This rating scale ranged from 0 to 6 to indicate articles that had no empirical or theoretical links all the way to articles whose purpose was theory development and analyzed empirical data to support its development (Table 2). Articles that received a rating of 5 or 6 on the Journal Inclusion of Theories Scale were further reviewed utilizing the Theory Quality Scale. Subsequent to reviewing each article, a sum score for the number of articles that received a particular score on the Inclusion of Theories Scale was calculated.

All of the journals with articles that were included in the final analysis were classified according to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)

Score	Rating	# of Articles	Sum Score	% of Total
6	Theory development with empirical base as the focus of the article (TDE)			
5	Theory development/explanation as the focus of the article (TDF)			
4	Empirical study that has theory links (ET)			
3	non-empirical article with theory links (NETL)			
2	Empirical study with brief theory links (EBT)			
1	Empirical study with no theory links (ENT)			
0	Studies with no empirical or theory links (NET)			
TOTAL				100%
<i>Scoring: Sum score divided by the number of articles</i>				

content areas. These content areas include Values and Ethics, Diversity, Populations-at-Risk and Social and Economic Justice, Human Behavior and Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy and Services, Social Work Practice, Research, and Field Education. The publishers' descriptions of their respective journals were used to classify the journals according to the EPAS content areas. The descriptions of each of the respective journals were found online, most via publisher websites. The journal classification process involved treating the content areas as if they were mutually exclusive and exhaustive; therefore, all of the journals were classified according to only one of the eight content areas. All journal descriptions referenced more than one EPAS content area; therefore, the content area classification was based on the journal's primary purpose and title. Admittedly, due to each journal referencing several of the EPAS content areas, the process of classification was somewhat subjective. This subjectivity was decreased by using the journals' mission and other key descriptive traits as the primary determinants that guided the classification process. The results suggest, however, that practice journals are much more theory-driven than any other journal, despite the fact that the number one rated article was a research journal.

## RESULTS

Of the 1,168 articles that were reviewed, 71 (approximately 6%) met the criteria for theory development with empirical base (TDE) or theory development/explanation as the focus of the article (TDF). Table 3 includes a breakdown of journal ratings by degree of discussion of theory (based on journal and theory evaluation criteria, Table 2) for each of the 1,168 articles reviewed. Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the extent of overall theory discussion and progression in social work journals for the year 2004, the names of the journals that were reviewed are not disclosed, rather, the journals are represented by numerical codes, as it was not our intent to identify which journals support the importance of theory discussion as indicated by articles chosen for publication. Overall, the results illustrate minimal focus on theory within the 37 journals selected for

Journal	Journal Type	TDE	TDF	ET	NETL	EBT	ENT	Net	Total Articles	% TDE or TDF
22	Research	1	3	0	0	2	3	0	9	44.44
7	Practice	10	7	5	1	9	14	1	46	36.96
36	Social Service & Social Welfare Policy	0	2	0	1	2	0	1	6	33.33
6	Practice	0	6	1	11	1	2	3	24	25.00
12	Population At-risk	0	3	0	0	5	2	5	15	20.00
15	HBSE	2	4	8	3	8	7	3	35	20.00
30	HBSE	5	2	0	4	1	11	15	38	18.42
26	Practice	0	2	0	2	1	9	7	21	9.52
20	Practice	0	2	1	0	3	16	1	23	8.70
33	Field Education	0	2	1	3	2	5	11	24	8.33
3	Practice	0	4	3	14	16	18	7	62	6.45
14	Practice	1	0	1	2	0	8	4	16	6.25
13	Practice	1	1	1	3	4	17	6	33	6.06
2	HBSE	0	1	0	6	3	5	3	18	5.55
10	Practice	0	2	0	0	1	14	21	38	5.26
24	Practice	0	3	4	8	11	22	10	58	5.17
5	Research	0	1	1	14	0	0	4	20	5.0
4	Research	1	0	3	2	7	8	2	23	4.35
11	Practice	1	0	3	0	2	18	0	24	4.17
29	Practice	1	0	4	7	2	10	5	29	3.45
25	Social Services & Social Welfare Policy	0	1	1	0	4	17	7	30	3.33
23	Practice	0	1	2	1	7	30	2	43	2.33
32	Social Services & Social Welfare Policy	1	0	3	3	2	37	23	69	1.45
1	HBSE	0	0	4	9	0	2	63	78	0.0
19	Practice	0	0	0	1	4	10	0	15	0.0
21	Diversity	0	0	0	0	3	9	0	12	0.0
27	Practice	0	0	0	10	2	2	20	34	0.0

Journal	Journal Type	TDE	TDF	ET	NETL	EBT	ENT	Net	Total Articles	% TDE or TDF
28	Social Services & Social Welfare Policy	0	0	1	4	1	13	14	33	0.0
17	Field Education	0	0	0	1	1	3	9	14	0.0
8	HBSE	0	0	0	11	0	0	13	24	0.0
31	Field Education	0	0	0	5	1	11	26	43	0.0
9	Social Services & Welfare Social Policy	0	0	0	6	9	9	13	37	0.0
16	Social Services & Welfare Social Policy	0	0	0	5	0	4	10	19	0.0
34	Practice	0	0	0	1	1	0	13	15	0.0
35	Field Education	0	0	2	1	2	4	15	24	0.0
18	Practice	0	0	1	1	0	21	10	33	0.0
37	Practice	0	0	3	5	27	22	26	83	0.0
<b>TOTAL:</b>		<b>24</b>	<b>47</b>						<b>1,168</b>	
<p><i>TDE=Theory discussion with empirical base as the focus of the article; TDF=Theory discussion as the focus of the article; ET=Empirical study that has theory links; NETL=Non-Empirical article with theory links; EBT=Empirical study with brief theory links; ENT=Empirical study with no theory links; NET=Studies with no empirical or theory links.</i></p>										

review. Twelve of the 37 journals, or 32%, contained no articles with TDE or TDF, while three of the 37 journals, or 8%, contained 30% or more articles with TDE or TDF.

Articles containing TDE or TDF were further evaluated for theory quality using the criteria in the theory quality scale (Table 1). The purpose of this two-step evaluation process was to identify articles that focused on theory development with empirical base or theory development/explanation (TDE or TDF) as a first step followed by a second assessment of the quality of theory discussion. Factors considered in assessing the quality of theory discussion, included a tight internally consistent framework, operationalization of variables, limitations of theory, identification of steps for theory progression, or consideration of theory with regard to social justice. The theory quality scale (Table 1) was developed based on the work of Daley and others (2005) and factors blended from the models described

in the “evaluation of theory quality and progression” section. Table 2 presents the discussion of theory quality scores for those articles containing TDE or TDF.

Each theory progression team member reviewed articles containing TDE or TDF using the nine criteria are listed in Table 4. Each of the 71 articles containing TDE or TDF were evaluated by one team member and was assigned a rating ranging from 5 to 1 (strongly agree to strongly disagree, respectively) for each of the nine criteria in Table 1. The rater then computed the mean score for the article (total divided by nine). The mean score for the 71 articles was 3.7, with three articles scoring 5, 21 articles scoring 4 or higher, and nine articles scoring 3 or less. Thus, a minimal number of articles (3 out of 71 or 4.2%), which were evaluated based on the criteria in Table 1, received high quality ratings.

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Author &amp; Year of Publication</b>
Queer Theory	45	McPhail, 2004
Housework Theory	45	Kroska, 2004
Feminist Theory	45	Chafetz, 2004a
ABCX Model and Resiliency	44	Vandsburger & Biggerstaff, 2004
Role Theory	44	Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004
Feminist Theory	43	Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004
Feminist Theory	43	Walker, 2004
Feminist Theory	43	Baber, 2004
Gender Construction Theory	43	Zuo, 2004
Feminist Theory	43	Chafetz, 2004b
Social Capital Theory	42	Anguiano, 2004
Feminist Theory	42	Allen, 2004
Nested Ecological Theory	41	Cottrell & Monk, 2004
Transtheoretical Model	40	Corden & Somerton, 2004
The Theory of Mindful Space	40	Burlae, 2004
Family Systems Theory	40	Vandervalk et al., 2004
Risk and Resilience	39	Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004
Feminist Theory		
- Queer Theory,	39	Wood, 2004
- Gender Theory		
- Social Theory,		
- Queer Body Theory		
- Disability Theory		
Responsive Regulation	39	Pennell, 2004
Teaching Family Life Cycle	38	Richman & Cook, 2004
Social-Psychological Attitude Theory	37	Kahng & Mowbray, 2004

Table 4: <i>Theory Listing of 2004 Journal Review (cont.)</i>		
<b>Theory</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Author &amp; Year of Publication</b>
Attachment Theory	37	Applegate, 2004
- Object Relations Theory		
- Psychoanalytic Theory		
- Cognitive Theory		
- Generalized Event Theory		
- Systems Theory		
- Non-linear Dynamic Systems Theory (also known as Complexity or Chaos Theory)		
Restorative Justice	36	Crampton, 2004
Decision-making Theory	36	Smith & Moen, 2004
Life Course Theory	36	Crosnoe & Elder, 2004
Marx Alienation Theory	35	Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004
Procedural Justice	35	Neff, 2004
Field Instruction	35	Fox, 2004
Trauma Theory	35	Mohr, 2004
Psychoanalytic	34	Jones, 2004
Transtheoretical Model of Change	34	McGuire, 2004
Capitol Theory	34	Ferguson, 2004
Psychoanalytic Theory	33	Bright, 2004
Family Stress Theory	33	Abbott et al., 2004
Responsive Regulation	33	Burford & Adams, 2004
Social Constructionism	33	Montgomery, 2004
Health Belief Model	33	Sullivan et al., 2004
Trauma	33	Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe & Chau, 2004
Attachment Theory	32	Bennett, 2004
Personal Authority in Family System	32	Lawson & Brossart, 2004
Relational Theory	32	Dietz & Thompson, 2004
Self-in-Relation Theory	31	Lesser, O'Neil, Burke, Scanlon, Hollis, & Miller, 2004
Stigma Theory, Feminist Theory	31	Lipton, 2004
Lacanian Analytic Theory	31	Baylis, 2004
Theory of Control Mastery	31	Nol, 2004
Social Learning Theory		
- Self-Psychological Theory	31	Dick, 2004
Psychodynamic Theory	31	Brandell & Ringol, 2004
Triangle of Political Space	31	Kelly, 2004
- Restorative Justice		

Table 4: *Theory Listing of 2004 Journal Review (cont.)*

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Author &amp; Year of Publication</b>
Community Family Therapy	31	Rojano, 2004
Meta-theory	30	Houston, 2004
Grief Theory	30	Brownlee & Oikonen, 2004
Psychoanalytic Theory	30	Alperin, 2004
Gender Entrapment Theory	30	Bent-Goodley, 2004
Ethnic Identity Theory	30	Margaret O'Donoghue
- Racial Identity Theory		
- Black Racial Identity Development (BRID)		
- *White Racial Identity Development (WRID)		
Gender-role Androgyny Theory	30	Utz et al., 2004
Imposter Phenomenon	29	Castro et al., 2004
Empowerment Theory) (Afrocentric Perspective)	28	Manning, Cornelius, & Okundaye, 2004
Political Economy Theory	28	Mulroy & Tamburo, 2004
Emancipatory Disability Theory	27	O'Connor et al., 2004
Attachment Theory	27	Wampler, Riggs & Kimball, 2004
Critical Theory	26	Keenan, 2004
Organization in Environment	26	Mulroy, 2004
Attachment Theory	26	Allen & Baucom, 2004
Attachment Theory	25	Gubman, 2004
Attachment Theory	25	Ringel, 2004
- Object Relations Theory		
- Intersubjective Theory		
Psychoanalytic Theory	24	Steger, 2004
Role Model Theory	24	Baum, 2004
Theory of Change	23	Little & Girvin, 2004
Ecosystemic	23	Coffey, 2004
Psychoanalytic Theory	22	Sanville, 2004
Feminist Theory	20	Blume, 2004

### LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations inherent to this type of study. It is necessary to consider differences in editorial policy and practice regarding the level of importance placed on theory discussion, which undoubtedly varies from journal to journal. These differences in editorial policy and practice represent numerous potential biases that would directly affect our results. One possibility to consider is that authors may limit their discussion of theory due to the restrictions placed on manuscript length, often 20 pages or less, by peer-reviewed journals. An alternative explanation is that authors are submitting articles that incorporate theory

discussion, and these articles are being rejected for publication. Consideration of articles that are rejected for publication would be an interesting addition to future studies of this nature.

Some additional limitations of this study that necessitate consideration prior to any conclusions drawn about theory progression based on our data are numerous. First, while the authors obtained inter-rater reliability scores at two points in this study, the ratings were subjective in nature. Thus, there is most likely some variability in scores assigned during TDE and TDF classification (Table 2), as well as during evaluation of theory quality (Table 1). Second, the criteria included in Tables 1 and 2 were developed by Daley and others (2005). Although these scales were developed based on the previous work of Daley et al., 2005 and factors blended from the models described in the "evaluation of theory quality and progression" section, it is necessary to recognize biases inherent to this type of process. Third, our data reports on only 37 journals reviewed for this study. There are numerous social work journals, as evidenced by the reduction process in this study, which decreased the original 268 journals selected for review to the 37 journals ultimately reviewed. Related to this limitation is the fact that we limited our review to peer-reviewed journal articles and did not consider other types of publications. Fourth, it is highly likely, given the interdisciplinary nature of the profession, that many social work theorists publish articles containing more extensive theoretical discussion in non-social work journals.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Studies of this nature are limited. While reviews of the literature resulted in the identification of articles relating studies of a similar nature (Cnaan, Caputo, & Shmueli, 1994; Furr, 1995; Gomory, 2001; Lindsey & Kirk, 1992; Sellers, Mathiesen, Perry, & Smith, 2004), these authors did not evaluate the quality of theory discussion or progression within social work journals. Rather, the focus of these authors was more relevant to the role of theory in social work research and practice (Gomory, 2001), prestige of journals (Cnaan et al., 1994), the role of social work journals in the development of the profession (Lindsey & Kirk, 1992) and assessing journal quality based on citation counts (Furr, 1995; Lindsey & Kirk, 1992). To the best of our knowledge, Daley and others' pilot study (2005) was the first of its kind; the current study is a follow-up to that work.

Considering this was a pilot study, there were many lessons learned, and the authors offer several suggestions for future studies of this nature. First, while Table 3 represents the immense diversity of theories identified within the articles reviewed and evaluated for this study, it is difficult to discern from our results the contribution that these articles make to the progression of a particular theory. A review of the theories listed in Table 3 indicate a discussion of micro, mezzo, and macro level theories, incorporating the inclusion of well-known theories (attachment theory, systems theory, feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory) as well as highly focused theories (gender-role androgyny theory, grief theory, queer theory, theory of mindful space). Thus, the development of methodology to ascertain the progression of a particular theory would be a beneficial addition to future studies of this nature.

Second, as noted in the “limitations” section, interpretations based on our results are limited to articles published in 2004 that appeared in the 37 journals reviewed for this study. Therefore, the consideration of alternative methods of journal/article selection represents the potential for increasing the knowledge base with regard to theory discussion and progression in social work journals. As mentioned previously, it would be interesting to obtain articles submitted and subsequently rejected for publication by various social work journals. Evaluating articles rejected for publication based on the criteria utilized in the current study would provide additional information pertaining to the level of importance placed on theory discussion and progression by social work journal editorial boards. An additional alternative method of selection would be to review journals classified by Baker (1992) as the “core of the social work journal network” (p. 160). Baker (1992) identified five journals considered the “core of the social work journal network,” including *Social Work*, *Social Service Review*, *Families in Society*, *the Journal of Social Work Education*, and *Social Work Research and Abstracts* (now two separate journals, *Social Work Research* and *Social Work Abstracts*) (p. 160). Future studies could compare theory discussion and progression as found in articles published in these journals and classified by Baker (1992) as central to the social work profession to other “non-core” social work journals.

Lastly, the authors recommend that follow-up to this study be conducted in a quasi longitudinal manner to assess the consistency or lack thereof of the degree of theory discussion and progression in social work journals from one year to the next. An alternative to considering undertaking concurrent with future studies that attempt to ascertain the degree of consistency of theoretical discussion in social work journals would be to add the component of comparing social work journals with other professions’ journals. The purpose of this additional component would be to determine whether social work journals contain more or less theory discussion than the profession chosen for the comparison.

## DISCUSSION

According to Sellers and colleagues (2004), for numerous reasons, evaluating the quality of social work journals is an important aspect of professional social work. Explanations offered by the authors (Sellers et al., 2004) in support of this contention include:

1. the tremendous increase in the number of social work journals makes it nearly impossible for professionals to read or evaluate all available publications.
2. as a multidisciplinary profession, social work professionals face the additional challenge of reading, evaluating, and writing for journals across diverse fields.
3. the assessment of journals that are considered to be of high quality offers guidance and direction to researchers, writers, and readers, because these publications would presumably model strong research methods, conceptual rigor, and valuable techniques of presentation.
4. for many faculty, being published in prestigious journals may increase the likelihood of pay raises, promotions, and recognition from colleagues (p. 143).

While Sellers and colleagues are referring to the quality of social work journals in general, rather than specifically addressing the quality of theory discussion within social work journals, we contend that evaluation of the quality of theory discussion is imperative for the same reason as well as additional reasons. Marsh (2002) suggests that the role and function of social work journals is a long-standing disparity among social work professionals, especially in consideration of those academic publications whose focus is limited with regard to practice application. Given that theory provides practitioners with a systematic method to conceptualize information about individuals, their behavior, and the contexts in which they interact and live, we assert that social workers need to make a conscious effort to critically analyze and consider the counterevidence to the theoretical assumptions upon which practitioners' base clinical decisions and actions (Lindsey & Kirk, 1992).

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**Author's Note:**

Address correspondence to: Carolyn S. Gentle-Genitty, MSW, doctoral student, School of Social Work, Indiana University, 902 West New York Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202-5156, USA. e-mail: cgentleg@iupui.edu.