Exploring Journal Use in Graduate Research in the Sociology of Religion

Informing Collections, Instruction, and Reference

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ABSTRACT Analyzing citations in doctoral dissertations provides important insight for the library subject specialist into research patterns in their discipline. One of those patterns, journal usage, is an important signpost for understanding the scholarly scope and shifting trends within a discipline. This study explores journal use patterns in graduate research in the sociology of religion. Using journal clusters, the study examines journal use from 64 dissertations from a population of 516 dissertations in sociology awarded from 2016-2020 from 16 institutions in the Big Ten Academic Alliance. This study provides librarians with an initial framework around the importance of studying journal use. A description of a clustering method of journal use to identify research of religion in sociology dissertations is followed by an introduction of an empirical method for exploring the nuances of journal use based on citation and dissertation counts. This analytical method is explored further by demonstrating three approaches: identifying thematic journal clusters, exploring journal cluster strength, and exploring institutional comparisons. Finally, the study briefly explores how the findings can inform library collection development, instruction, and reference.

INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY JOURNAL USE?

It is essential for libraries to understand unique journal usage within the local context of their institution's programs and departments. Exploring journals used by graduate students in their dissertations offers a deeper understanding of the nuances within a discipline offering a complementary approach to curriculum evaluation. The use of bibliometrics to explore journal use within the disciplines has a long and storied past (Hoffmann and Doucette 2012; Hérubel 1994).Consequently, a brief explanation of why the study of journal use is important is in order.

Most studies focus on creating a core list of journals within a discipline to inform collection development decisions. I suggest that the study of journal use has a much richer untapped value for growth in librarianship. First, journal use shapes our social understanding of the research ethos. Simply put, each journal title represents a scholarly community and ethos that is attempting to: shape emerging research paradigms, provide long-term research stability around a purpose and focus, and provide some form of authority for regulation and control of the authenticity of the research.

Second, studying journal use offers librarians an opportunity to expand our understanding of the shifting combination of themes and emerging areas of research. Each journal represents nuanced subjects and themes inadequately described in library catalog records or popular databases like Ulrich's. Library research in journal use must expand beyond simply identifying a core set of journals in a single discipline. These core lists need to be examined to consider research questions that help us apply meaningful clusters of journal themes such as research methodology, subject clusters, or journals with applied and/or theoretical foci. In sum, we need better taxonomies. This is essential if we are to have a better understanding of journal use within the social sciences.

Finally, the study of journal use can increase our understanding of the interconnectivity of journals, programs, and institutions. Social science research is typically interdisciplinary, a point reaffirmed by the 1,775 journal titles from multiple disciplines identified in our study. Consequently, traditional bibliometrics and journal use by graduate students will differ in local programs, disciplines, and institutions. However, further study of matching pairs of journals or comparisons of disciplinary and institutional journal use lists may come closer to identifying core journals. Furthermore, journal use differences can assist librarians in understanding unique focuses.

FINDING A UNIVERSE: RELIGION IN SOCIOLOGY

Our first challenge is to identify dissertations with a focus on religion within 517 dissertations in sociology from the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) from 2016–2020. One approach could be to simply examine the keywords provided by the authors or read the abstracts and identify religious-themed dissertations. However, this study takes a different approach focusing on dissertations that cite three important journals in the sociology of religion.

Sociology of Religion Journals

Possamai and Blasi identify *The Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* (JSSR) and the Review of Religious Research (RRR) along with the journal Sociology of Religion (SR) as important contemporary sociology communities of academic scholarship (2020b). Each journal has a unique and intriguing history that has shaped the focus of scholarship from church leaders trying to understand cultural shifts from rural to urban areas, Catholic sociologists discussing ways to teach sociology, and interdisciplinary social and behavioral scholars creating forums for scholarship focusing on the sociology of religion (Possamai and Blasi 2020b; 2020a).

Based on Possamai and Blasi's (2020b) observation, 64 dissertations were identified that cited at least one of these three journals (see table 1). Pennsylvania State University (PSU), University of Chicago, Minnesota, and Indiana had between 8-6 dissertations represented in the sample. There were five dissertations each from Northwestern, Ohio State, and the University of Nebraska: four dissertations from the University of Illinois Chicago, Purdue University, the University of Maryland, College Park, and the University of Michigan. Rutgers University, the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana, the University of Wisconsin, and Michigan State University all contributed one dissertation to the sample.

INSTITUTION	# DISSERTATIONS SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION CLUSTER	# SOCIOLOGY DISSERTATIONS
Indiana University	6	43
Michigan State University	1	31
Northwestern University	5	47
Ohio State University	5	33
Pennsylvania State University	8	41
Purdue University	4	16
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey — New Brunswick	2	15
University of Chicago	7	57
University of Illinois at Chicago	4	29
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	2	14
University of Iowa	0	9
University of Maryland, College Park	4	30
University of Michigan	4	48
University of Minnesota	6	27

INSTITUTION	# DISSERTATIONS SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION CLUSTER	# SOCIOLOGY DISSERTATIONS
University of Nebraska — Lincoln	5	21
University of Wisconsin — Madison	1	55
Total	**64**	**516**

TABLE 1. ICD-11 burnout terminology and corresponding synonyms from the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Collecting & Coding the Data [Citation & Journal Title Counts (SR, JSSR, RRR)]

A spreadsheet was created for each dissertation that includes: the title, author, graduate program, core areas, date of defense, dissertation advisor, committee members, keywords, abstract, and ETD_ID. The ETD_ID serves as the key variable between spreadsheets.

A second spreadsheet was created from the citations in the dissertations. This was done by deriving Word documents from the PDFs so that their bibliographies could be copied into a text file without unnecessary coding. The text files were coded to identify the parts of a citation so that they could be exported into the spreadsheet for further analysis and coding. Dissertations that included multiple bibliographies or used footnotes were copied into a single text file and pulled into Excel to remove duplicate citations. The second spreadsheet contained 14,551 records that were identified and coded: journal, book or other.

A third spreadsheet was created from 8,126 journal citations (see table 2). Each citation was coded to include ETD_ID, author, year, article title, journal, ISSN, DOI/URL. The ISSN was included to control any journal title variation used by the researcher. The DOI/URL were left blank if the journal citation did not include them. NA was used for journal citations where the ISSN could not be identified.

CITATION TYPES	COUNTS	PERCENTAGE
Journal	8,126	55.84
Monograph	4,778	32.83
Other	1,647	11.33
Total	**14,551**	**100**
Journal Titles	**1,775**	

TABLE 2. Citation and journal title counts (SR, JSSR, RRR)

In sum, the study identified a list of 1,775 unique journal titles. The challenge is how to make sense of this list of titles.

OUTLINING AN EMPIRICAL METHOD

Journals were ranked using three different methods. Cit Rank identifies and ranks the journal titles based on citation counts. The second method, Diss Rank, identifies and ranks the journal titles based on the number of dissertations cited by a particular journal. The third method, CD Rank, takes the average rank score of Cit Rank and Diss Rank.

The bar chart shows the top 17 ranked journal titles based on CD Rank (see chart 1). If you look at the spread of *Sociological Quarterly*, you will notice that the title has a higher Dissertation rank (spread) than Citation Rank. This means that although there are fewer citation counts than other journals there is a broader use of the journal in set of dissertations. In contrast, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* has a higher citation count but is concentrated in few dissertations. CD rank attempts to normalize or weight the differences. In sum, the trendline of the CD Rank shows the variations of ranking corrections occurring by taking the average of Diss Rank and Cit Rank.
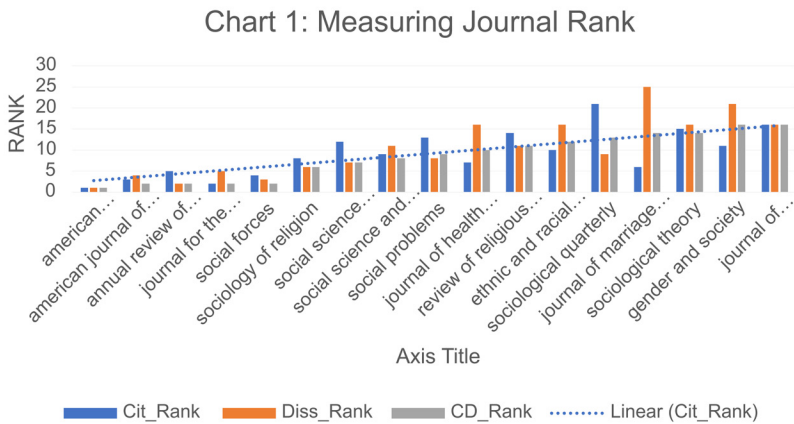

CHART 1. CIT Rank

Internal consistency based on correlations using Kendall's tau-b and Spearman's rho between all three of the ranked lists are high.

(See table 3 and table 4.) Kendall's tau-b is based on the positive and negative relationship of the pairs and Spearman's rho provides a popular and helpful analysis to determine if a congruency between the two ranks (Gibbons 1993).

	CD RANK	DISS RANK	CIT RANK
CD Rank	1	0.888	0.955
DISS Rank	0.888	1	0.835
CIT Rank	0.955	0.835	1

TABLE 3. Internal consistency Kendall's tau-b

	CD RANK	DISS RANK	CIT RANK
CD Rank	1	0.927	0.992
DISS Rank	0.927	1	0.878
CIT Rank	0.992	0.878	1

TABLE 4. Internal consistency Spearman's rho

There are numerous approaches to analyze our results. This study will briefly explore three approaches followed by a discussion about how these approaches can help inform our librarianship. The full data sets are available for download so that you can explore further these three approaches (Woods 2023).

Approach One: Identify Journal Clusters

Our first approach is to simply identify thematic clusters. Table 5 provides a list of the first eleven journal titles based on CD Rank List. From this list, there are four clusters of journals.

JOURNAL TITLE	CIT RANK	DISS RANK	CD RANK	CLUSTERS
American Sociological Review	1	1	1	Sociology
American Journal of Sociology	3	4	2	Sociology
Annual Review of Sociology	5	2	2	Sociology
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	2	5	2	Religion
Social Forces	4	3	2	Sociology
Sociology of Religion	8	6	6	Religion

JOURNAL TITLE	CIT RANK	DISS RANK	CD RANK	CLUSTERS
Social Science Research	12	7	7	Social Science Research
Social Science and Medicine	9	11	8	Medicine & Health
Social Problems	13	8	9	Sociology
Journal of Health and Social Behavior	7	16	10	Medicine & Health
Review of Religious Research	14	11	11	Religion

TABLE 5. CD Rank list of the first eleven journal titles from dissertations citing JSSR, RRR, and SR

The first cluster includes the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Sociology of Religion, and the Review of Religious Research*. This comes as no surprise since these journals represent the "sociology of religion" cluster used to create our analysis. In sum, this method explores the relationship of all the other journal clusters identified with these three core journal titles.

Our second cluster includes the *American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, Annual Review of Sociology*, and *Social Forces* considered by the academy as four important generalist journals in sociology (Woods 2024). Past studies done by researchers exploring journal prestige in sociology consistently identify these four journals as core to the discipline. That said, this study focuses on journal clustering rather than "prestige." Added to this list is the journal *Social Problems*, the official publication of the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

A third cluster focuses on health and medicine represented by the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior and Social Science & Medicine*. The study will demonstrate how to explore this cluster further in our next approach.

Finally, our fourth journal cluster is social science research methodology represented by *Social Science Research*, a journal illustrating the use of quantitative methods to empirically test social science theory ("Social Science Research," n.d.). Thus, creating a methods journal cluster that would also include the journal *Qualitative Sociology* further down on our CD Ranked list.

In sum, from the examination of our short of list of eleven titles the study shows a strong clustered connection between our three sociology of religion journals and five journals in sociology, two jour-

nals in health and medicine, and one focusing on research methodology. Other clusters can also be identified upon further examination of the complete CD Rank List such as: psychology, political science, life course, gender, ethnic studies (Woods 2023).

Approach Two: Cluster Strength (digging deeper)

Our second approach is to explore journals that cluster with the *Journal of Health and Behavior* (JHB) and *Social Science & Medicine* (SSM). This is accomplished by creating another CD Rank list from the 29 dissertations that cite those two journals from our original universe of 64 dissertations. The reason for creating a new CD Rank is to measure cluster strength of other journals with these two journals. In sum, the higher the CD Rank the greater tendency for these journals to cluster in use.

As expected, our new data set has fewer journal citation counts (4,776) than our original count of 8,126 (see table 6). The is a higher percentage of journal cited in these 29 dissertations (68.77%) compared to (55.84%) from our original universe of 64 dissertations. There are also 1,160 unique journal titles from these dissertations, compared to the 1,775 from our original universe.

CITATION TYPES	COUNTS	PERCENTAGE
Journal	4,776	68.77
Monograph	1,659	23.89
Other	510	7.34
Total	**6,945**	**100**

TABLE 6. Citation Counts from dissertations citing the Journal of Health and Social Behavior and Social Science & Medicine

Generating a new CD Rank list from this data set identifies six health and medicine related journals from the 34 highest CD Rank journals (see table 7). These include our two base journals in our dataset SSM and JHS, as well as the *American Journal of Public Health*, *Sociology of Health and Wellness*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and JAMA (*Journal of the American Medical Association*). This approach provides a way to explore interdisciplinary journal use with finer granularity as well measure cluster strength for specific journals with other journals used by graduate students. Likewise, other clusters and journals can also be identified upon further examination of the complete CD Rank List for JHB and SSM (Woods 2023).

JOURNAL TITLE	CIT_RANK	DISS_RANK	CD_RANK
American Sociological Review	1	1	1
Social Science And Medicine	5	2	2
Journal Of Health And Social Behavior	2	6	3
Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion	4	5	4
Social Forces	7	2	4
Annual Review Of Sociology	8	2	6
American Journal Of Sociology	6	7	7
Journal Of Marriage And Family	3	11	8
Social Science Research	9	8	9
Sociology Of Religion	11	9	10
Demography	13	11	11
American Journal Of Public Health	17	11	12
Gender And Society	9	20	13
Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology	19	11	14
American Psychologist	20	11	15
Sociological Quarterly	22	9	15
Review Of Religious Research	13	21	17
Journal Of Gerontology Series B Psychological Sciences And Social Sciences	13	23	18
Social Problems	18	18	18
Social Psychology Quarterly	26	11	20
Gerontologist	22	23	21
Psychological Bulletin	28	18	22
Sociological Forum	35	11	22
Journal Of Family Issues	13	35	24
Child Development	26	23	25
Ethnic And Racial Studies	20	35	26
Social Indicators Research	24	35	27
Sociology Of Health And Illness	25	35	28
New England Journal Of Medicine	38	23	29
Jama: The Journal Of The American Medical Association	31	35	30
Sociological Theory	35	35	31
Social Science Quarterly	42	29	32
Journal Of Adolescent Health	38	35	33

TABLE 7. CD Rank list of the first 34 journal titles from dissertations citing JHB and SSM

Approach Three: Comparing Groups

I have discussed elsewhere and provided a more comprehensive explanation of using CD Rank and correlation to compare institutional collections in rural sociology (Woods and Russell 2023) and programs in Sociology (Woods 2024). For the sake of simplicity this third approach will only model comparisons of journal use of four institutions: Pennsylvania State, University of Chicago, Indiana University, and Minnesota (see table 1).

Penn State graduate students in our cluster for the study of religion in sociology cite a larger number of different journal titles (see table 8). The average number of journals cited per dissertation is higher for Penn State and the University of Chicago. Indiana University graduate students cited the fewest number of journal titles.

INSTITUTION	# DISSERTATIONS	JOURNAL CITATIONS	AVE. CIT/DISS	JOURNAL TITLES
PSU	8	1,263	157.9	404
Minnesota	7	842	120.3	311
IU	6	719	119.8	248
UC Chicago	6	895	149.2	313

TABLE 8. Citations and journal-title counts of dissertations from four BTAA institutions.

General Comparisons

A general comparison using Spearman's rho of CD Rank list of dissertations of each institution provides an initial comparison of local differences and similarities of journal use (see table 9). CD Rank list of journals used by graduate students at the University of Minnesota and Indiana University have a high level of congruency (.628). Whereas there is little congruency between the CD Rank list of journals used by graduate students in sociology at Penn State and the University of Minnesota (.384). There is a weak congruency between the CD Rank List from Penn State and the University of Chicago (.501) and little congruency between PSU and Minnesota (.467).

	PSU	MINNESOTA	IU	UC CHICAGO
PSU	1	0.384	0.467	0.501
Minnesota	0.384	1	0.628	0.471
IU	0.467	0.628	1	0.501
UC Chicago	0.501	0.471	0.501	1

TABLE 9. Comparison of congruency of institutions' CD Rank list using Spearman's rho

Comparing Institutions: Shared Titles

Our findings reinforce the importance of understanding local journal use, but further examination and comparisons of the CD Rank lists can offer further insight. For example, there are 34 journal titles shared by all four institutions with clusters in Political Science and Psychology. Sixty titles are shared by at least three institutions and 137 by at least two programs. There are 686 titles cited by only one institution. Penn State and Indiana University share the most titles (102) whereas Penn State paired with Minnesota and University of Chicago have largest number of journal titles not shared (see table 10).

	PSU	MINNESOTA	IU	U CHICAGO
PSU	-	83 [shared]	102 [shared]	88 [shared]
Minnesota	549 [individual]	-	84 [shared]	84 [shared]
IU	448 [individual]	391 [individual]	-	80 [shared]
U **Chicago**	541 [individual]	456 [individual]	401 [individual]	-

TABLE 10. Comparison of journal titles shared between institutions based on CD Rank list

Comparing the Shared Clusters Themes

An examination of the CD Ranks list from each institution offers a further way to compare the dominate cluster themes between institutions (Woods 2023). Table 11 provides a breakdown of the cluster themes occurring in the top thirty journal titles from all four institutions CD Rank list. For example, journal use by graduate students at the University of Minnesota and Indiana University share clusters of journals around the theme gender and ethnicity, whereas Penn State has a unique focus on demography and family. A broader examination of journals beyond the top 30 may identify more thematic similarities, but this method still identifies differences in theme dominance. In sum, we can see the study of religion in sociology with all its nuances.

INSTITUTION	CLUSTER THEMES
Pennsylvania State University	Family, Demography, Medicine, Life Course, Quantitative Research, Psychology
University of Chicago	Culture, Media, Psychology, Qualitative Research, Economics, Political Science
University of Minnesota	Ethnicity, Race, Qualitative Research, Gender, Women, Ethnography, Culture
Indiana University	Political Science, Gender, Psychology, Public Opinion, Ethnicity, Race, Life Course

TABLE 11. Cluster themes based on CD Ranked list of institutions

This cluster analysis approach can also provide the librarian with a way to explore further the differences, cluster pairings and themes that may garner local interest in the future. For example, understanding graduate student journal use in gender research for Penn State graduate students from analysis of its use at Indiana University and the University of Minnesota.

Comparing Disciplines

For future research beyond this study, the emphasis in journal clusters in dissertations in psychology, political science and earlier in our exploration of health and medicine begs comparison of CD Rank lists between journal use from this study. In sum, how does journal use and ranking within dissertation from other the disciplines compare with our study?

INFORMING REFERENCE, COLLECTIONS & INSTRUCTION

It is essential for library subject specialists to understand unique journal usage within the local and global, and interdisciplinary context of their institution's programs and departments. As we have seen, the study of religion in sociology is a broad term that can be brought into focus by exploring the unique journal titles used by graduate students by examining journal clusters, exploring interdisciplinary journal pairings, and comparing institutional use. Thus, providing a complementary approach to curriculum evaluation. To conclude our discussion, we will turn our focus on the application of findings for our study to briefly discuss how these inform collections, reference, and instruction.

Collection Development

Journals are clearly the most heavily used format used by graduate students studying religion in sociology. Earlier we saw that journals were cited 56% whereas monographs 33%. Furthermore, the study identified 1,775 unique journal titles spanning numerous disciplines. The sheer volume of titles makes it necessary to explore integrative ways to identify core titles rather than simply coming up with a single local list based on "prestige."

   Collection development of journals in any discipline cannot be done within a vacuum of a single subject area or program. This study, rather than providing a single list of journals, demonstrates three

methods that are meant to provide creative ways to explore journal use across disciplines, programs, and institutions. In sum, it is essential for the subject specialist to be aware of core journal titles that span across programs and disciplines as part of their collection development responsibilities. A journal cluster approach can be an effective alternative to exploring the nuances of a particular discipline. This method can be an effective way for librarians at academic institutions that are not large enough to include programs to explore journal use within their disciplines.

Understanding journal clusters from other institutions can be equally useful for developing collections. For example, there is a journal cluster focusing on gender in dissertations by graduate students at the University of Minnesota and Indiana University. An examination of high use journals in the gender cluster can provide a better understanding of important journals for gender research that may have lower use within the local context. This can be important particularly for anticipating changing research trends or simply failing to see that gender is studied more heavily in another discipline not caught by a study in dissertations in sociology.

Finally, if journals are signposts of trends and focus of research within a discipline, then a deeper understanding of journal usage is important for the subject specialists to carry out effective collection development for all material types. A cluster analysis of citations from dissertations that cite this journal can be useful for understanding the other types of materials used by graduate students to better understand monographs and grey literature that may need to be considered in collection development efforts.

Instruction & Reference

Journals are a unique signpost for developing a subject specialist approach to library instruction and reference. Often there is considerable emphasis placed on the importance and understanding of scholarly articles and how to find them without providing a meta understanding of why journals exist and their interconnectivity in the creation of scholarship and discovery.

Our clustered approach to exploring journal use offers a context to help students think about the six concepts anchoring the ACRL Information Literacy Frameworks (ACRL Board 2015; Badke 2015). More importantly journal use offers an integrated approach to discussing the framework based on all the concepts: information authority, creation, value, inquiry, conversation, and exploration.

Often the graduate student's faculty advisor is the one directing the student to the relevant journals on their topics. Consequently, directing students in your instruction and reference to journals found in an analysis of journal citations in dissertations will often correspond to the subject expertise of the faculty advisor. In sum, citation analysis can build credibility not only with the students but with the teaching faculty. That said, the interdisciplinary nature of social science research offers the librarians who have studied journal use across the disciplines and institutions the opportunity to recommend journals outside the subject expertise of the teaching faculty.

A librarian's programmatic understanding of journal use in dissertations can potentially enhance instruction and reference interactions with students writing literature reviews. Particularly those looking for scholarly materials. Knowledge of the core journals in a program or clusters of journals within a subtopic such as aging, education, and gender can be useful for researchers who are trying to write comprehensively for a systematic review, dissertation, or thesis.

Library instruction usually includes a discussion of scholarly journal articles among other relevant topics. By examining the journal titles in dissertations, the subject specialist can build deeper relevancy around this topic. For example: Identify a list of core journal titles within the program that you would recommend browsing. Explain the value of setting up alert services for relevant journal titles cited in dissertations within their program. Inform the students that it is not unusual to cite journals in dissertations outside of the domain of sociology.

LIMITATIONS

The study focuses on the journal use of graduate students in sociology in the BTAA from 2016–2020. The findings do not necessarily translate to the journal use of sociology faculty whose motivations of publishing for tenure and journal prestige influence journal use. That said, the faculty often provide input into the journals that are used by graduate students.

Identifying the study of religion in sociology simply by selecting dissertations that cite three sociology of religion journals does not necessarily mean that all the dissertations' topics are congruent with the study of the sociology of religion. However, since the focus of this study is journal clusters, dissertations that are outside of the sociology of religion theme still offer useful insight.

Dissertations are a unique form of publication. For example, the average dissertation in this study from Penn State has 158 journal citations (see table 8), whereas scholarly articles published in *Social Forces* averaged 70.3 citations 2020 (Web of Science 2020). The overall structure of a dissertation contains approximately three chapters focusing on different and closely related issues.

Time is also an important limitation to consider. This study includes dissertations from 2016–2020. A journal started later in this time frame would not have the same opportunity of being cited as one that existed during this span of time. Further research could explore the average frequency for each year, but the number and nature of accepted dissertations each year creates a different type of limitation.

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