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Robert Fisher  
*University of Houston*

Phillip Dybicz  
*University of Houston*

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# The Place of Historical Research in Social Work

ROBERT FISHER  
PHILLIP DYBICZ

University of Houston  
Graduate School of Social Work

*This study addresses the incidence, persistence, decline, and marginalization of historical research in social work by examining one indicator of that research, social work dissertations. This study reveals that despite the dominance of other research methods, historical research was a legitimate method for doctoral research in social work, but its use has declined over time. Before World War II historical dissertations were common. Through the 1950s almost 13% of all social work dissertations were historical. In the 1960s and 1970s interest in history as a research method declined, but social welfare history was still a legitimate option for doctoral research. By the 1990s historical research in social work dissertations was almost non-existent. The current state of historical research seems terribly myopic, especially given developments in other social science disciplines and challenges to contemporary social work research.*

Because contemporary social work neglects and marginalizes historical research, there is little study of history as a research method in social work. Nevertheless, historical research has a more significant place in social work than the literature reveals. This article examines the place of historical research in social work by studying one indicator of that research: social work dissertations. This study of doctoral dissertations in social work, including both theses written for the Ph.D. and D.S.W. degrees, illustrates a number of central points about historical research. One in particular stands out. Despite the dominance of other research methods, historical research was an accepted method for doctoral research in social work, but its use has declined over time. Before World War II historical dissertations were common, especially at schools with a policy orientation such as the University

of Chicago. Through the 1950s almost 13% of all social work dissertations were historical. In the 1960s and 1970s interest in history as a research method declined, but social welfare history was still an option for doctoral research. Now this is much less the case. In the 1990s fewer than 2% of all doctoral dissertations in social work are historical. The importance, persistence, and decline of historical research in social work are the focus of this study.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Reisch (1995) and others are correct about the integration of historical knowledge in social work education. Social workers do learn some history, especially in courses on social policy and values and ethics. Books written by both social work academics and historians on the history of social policy and the professional development of social work are part of the education of most students. But social work students rarely learn about history as a method of research and evaluation (Fauri, 1988). Historian Michael Stanford (1994) draws a helpful distinction between "history-as-event" and "history-as-account." History-as-event is the events that happen in the world, whereas history-as-account is "the ordered arrangement of words and ideas that give more or less coherent account of those happenings" (Stanford, 2). In social work terms, it would be best described as "history as knowledge" versus "history as research method". Social work is more comfortable with history-as-knowledge. This is what the CSWE curriculum mandate on history emphasizes, that social workers should know about the history of social welfare, social policy, and the profession. Much less common is history as a research method in social work education and practice.

The prevailing literature suggests that history as a research method has little, if any, place in social work research. William Reid's (1987) excellent overview of the history of research in social work for the 18th edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* makes no mention of history as a research method. He emphasizes that "the methods of social work research, reflecting its diverse content, run the full gamut of the methodology of the behavioral sciences" (Reid, 1987, p. 478). Reid (1987) divides social work

research into four categories: (1) studies concerned with the behavior, personality, and problems of individuals, families, and small groups; (2) studies that look at the utilization and outcomes of social services; (3) research studies that focus on the social work profession, including training and education; and (4) macro research studies whose foci are organizations, communities, and social policy. Even though historical research covers all these categories, it is not included.

Even a cursory tour of some of the most important and widely-used research texts, among them Tripoldi, Fellin and Meyer (1969),<sup>1</sup> Kerlinger (1986), Bloom, Fischer, and Orme (1995), Orenstein and Phillips (1978), Marlow (1993), and Monette, Sullivan, and Dijong (1986) reveal no reference to historical research as a valid method for social work practitioners. A recent text on qualitative research, *Qualitative Research for Social Workers* (Tutty, Rothery, and Grinnell, 1996) includes no mention of historical research. When history does appear in social work research texts it most often does so as the "threat of history." Grinnell (1993, 128) reduces history to "unaccounted for events that may affect the dependent variable" and thereby pose a "threat to internal validity." This point overstates; social work researchers are not actually viewing history as a threat. They are simply warning researchers about controlling for variables in the contemporary context, not in the past. But to turn to an Index in a social work research text and find "history" listed solely as "the threat of history" illustrates more than an unfortunate choice of words. It reflects that history has little place in social work research, except perhaps as a problem for researchers.

The neglect of historical research persists even in histories of social work research. Zimbalist's (1977) history of themes and landmarks in social welfare research makes no mention of historical research. Klein and Bloom (1994) wax eloquent about the virtues of history: "It is only when we step back to understand and appreciate the entire tapestry of this process that we gain a truer understanding of the nature of the applied scientific endeavor" (Klein and Bloom, 430). But their content analysis of research methods in social work publications over 120 years, from 1870–1990, reveals little mention of historical research. The irony of histories of social work research ignoring historical research in

social work illustrates the divide between history-as-knowledge and history-as-research method.

There are a few noteworthy exceptions (Chambers, 1973; Leashore and Cates, 1985; Stuart, 1997; Reisch, 1988). Tyson's (1995) history of social work research, surveying the literature from 1920–1989, identified and tracked seven categories of research design heuristics: reviews and commentaries, histories, case studies-qualitative, large scale analysis-qualitative, case studies-quantitative, large scale analysis-quantitative, and experimental designs. Tyson suggests that historical, as well as qualitative dissertations, were more common in social work prior to World War II—a period characterized by methodological pluralism—after which social work research was almost completely dominated by “logical positivist” research which eliminated most qualitative work, including historical research. This study supports her call for methodological pluralism. Certainly in the earlier years, historical research was more common in social work. There was an earlier era characterized by greater methodological pluralism in research, but even then historical research was limited to certain schools and faculty. But the following study reveals that the truly dramatic decline in historical research comes during the past decade, not simply the past generation.

### SAMPLE SELECTION

Three sets of data are used in this study. First, the collection of doctoral dissertation data began with the utilization of ProQuest CD ROM Dissertation-Abstracts. ProQuest advertises a data base for doctoral dissertations starting from 1861 to present, but its listings, almost exclusively dependent on the *Dissertation Abstract Index (DAI)*, begin to approach reliability as a source only in the late 1960s and become very reliable after 1973 when almost all doctoral dissertations were being sent as regular practice to *DAI*. Pro-Quest data was investigated annually from 1952–1980. After 1980, over 200 dissertations in social work are listed per year. To overcome the problem of data overload due to the rapidly increasing number of dissertations, data was sampled for ease of interpretation, focusing on *DAI* titles every five years, including the years 1985, 1990, and 1995.

Second, because very limited data was obtained from ProQuest for the earlier years, especially prior to 1967, we consulted another source, *Social Service Review* (SSR). SSR annually printed a listing of social work doctoral dissertations submitted to the journal from 1952 to 1973. The listing was designed to meet the dearth of knowledge regarding social work doctoral research.

Third, because no organized inclusive listing was found of doctoral dissertations granted prior to 1952, we decided to examine another source, one of the handful of schools which granted Ph.D.s in social work prior to 1952. We selected the University of Chicago School of Social Administration for two reasons. It was a leading institution of social work during that time period, granting a significant percentage of the Ph.D.s in social work prior to 1952. Also, it had a reputation, which we sought to investigate, as a program which once encouraged historical research. We theorized that if this was not true for Chicago, if there were few or no historical dissertations, it would be unlikely other places. The data bases used at the University of Chicago included a list of early dissertations at the school (Abbott, 1943) and a catalog review of social work dissertation titles.

## PROCEDURES

The same criteria were utilized for all searches. A dissertation was considered historical if within its title it contained the words "history" or "historical" (e.g. "Social Work Practice: An Historical Comparison"); it was a biography (e.g. "Jane Addams as Social Worker, the Early Years at Hull House"); it longitudinally addressed the subject over a time span of ten years or more (e.g. "Safeguarding Adoption in California: 1870-1969, a Study in Public Policy Formulation"); or it addressed a subject in a time span at least ten years in the past (e.g. "The Charity Organizational Societies, the Settlements, and National Minorities in the Progressive Era"). To the extent that we have erred, we have sought to do so on the less inclusionary side; doctoral dissertations judged historical are, if anything, undercounted. Where there was doubt, the availability of a dissertation abstract was a key factor in determining whether a dissertation was historical.

*I. All Schools 1952–1995 (ProQuest and SSR data sets)*

Table 1 reflects doctoral dissertations in social work (appearing in ProQuest and/or SSR) granted among all schools for the years 1952–1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995. The total number of doctoral dissertations found solely in ProQuest are listed within “( )”; after 1973 only one total is given as ProQuest was the only data source for these years. The number of historical dissertations are converted into a percentage for the decades 1952–1960, 1961–1970, and 1971–1980. The above data is presented in Figure 1 as aggregate data per decade.

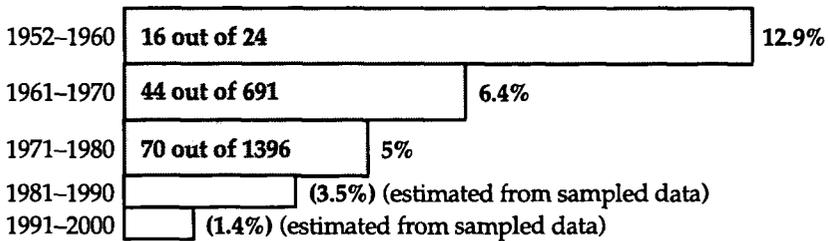
We can see that there has been a steady increase in the total number of social work doctoral dissertations per decade. Moreover, the data demonstrate an important place for historical research in social work, at least through the 1980s. It also details a steady decline in the percentage of dissertations utilizing

Table 1

*Historical Dissertations 1952–1980, 1985, 1990, 1995*

Year	# of total dissertations		# of historical dissertations	% historical dissertations
	(ProQuest only)	ProQuest + SSR		
1952–1955	(4)	33	3	9.1
1956–1960	(5)	92	13	14.1
<b>1952–1960</b>		<b>124</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>12.9%</b>
1961–1965	(74)	218	17	7.7
1966–1970	(338)	473	27	5.6
<b>1961–1970</b>		<b>691</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>6.4%</b>
1971–1975	(394)	581	34	5.8
1976–1980		815	36	4.4
<b>1971–1980</b>		<b>1396</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>5.0%</b>
1985		203	10	4.9%
1990		257	6	2.3%
1995		291	4	1.4%

Figure 1  
% of Historical Doctoral Dissertations



historical research. In the 1950s over 1 in 10 dissertations utilized historical research. Through the 1960s and 1970s it decreased to 1 in 20. And in the 1990s, even a liberal estimate puts the number at no more than 1 in 50.

## II. University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration data set

Table 2 includes data pertaining solely to the University of Chicago from 1921 to 1995 gathered from local sources as well as the ProQuest and SSR data sets. Concerning the data, there are a number of inherent limitations,<sup>2</sup> but the data set serves as a good, if rudimentary, measure of the place of social welfare history in dissertation research at Chicago.

*Change in Total # of Dissertations* : From the 1930s onward there is a steady increase of roughly 5–10 dissertations per decade, equaling a 20–25% increase per decade. From the 1970s to the 1980s there is an increase of approximately 20 dissertations, equaling roughly a 50% in the total. Looking at the data for the first five years of the 1990s, the total seems to have peaked in the 1980s, leveling off thereafter to approximately 60–70 dissertations per decade.

*Change in Total # of Historical Dissertations*: The output of historical dissertations remained steady from the 1930s to the 1960s at roughly 7–9 dissertations per decade. (Except for the 1940s, whose total, as discussed in footnote 4, reflects an extremely conservative bias). In the 1970s there is a considerable decline, with a total of

Table 2

*Dissertations by Decade at The University of Chicago, 1921–1995*

<i>Year</i>	<i># of total dissertations</i>	<i># of historical dissertations</i>	<i>% historical dissertations</i>
1921–1930	6	2	33%
1931–1940	21	9	43%
1941–1950	(20–25)	3	14%*
1951–1960	(25–30)	7	25%*
1961–1970	(30–35)	8	25%*
1971–1980	44	2	5%
1981–1990	68	5	7%
1991–1995	27	2	7%

\* approximate percentage

only 2. From the 1970s to 1980s the total jumps back up to 5 and seems to be maintaining this rate for the 1990s.

*Change in % of Historical Dissertations:* The data can be described as representing three eras at the University of Chicago's School of Social Administration (SSA). For the first era, the 1920s and the 1930s, historical dissertations were considerable at SSA, accounting for approximately 40% of the total number of dissertations. During the second era, the 1940s to the 1960s, historical dissertations held an important niche in research at SSA, accounting for approximately 25% of dissertations (the 1940's figure of 12% is considered extremely conservative, and hence this decade is assumed as similar to the 1950s and 1960s). In the present era, the 1970s to the 1990s, historical research could no longer be described as holding an important niche at SSA. It still, however, maintained a presence, accounting for 5–7% of social work dissertations.

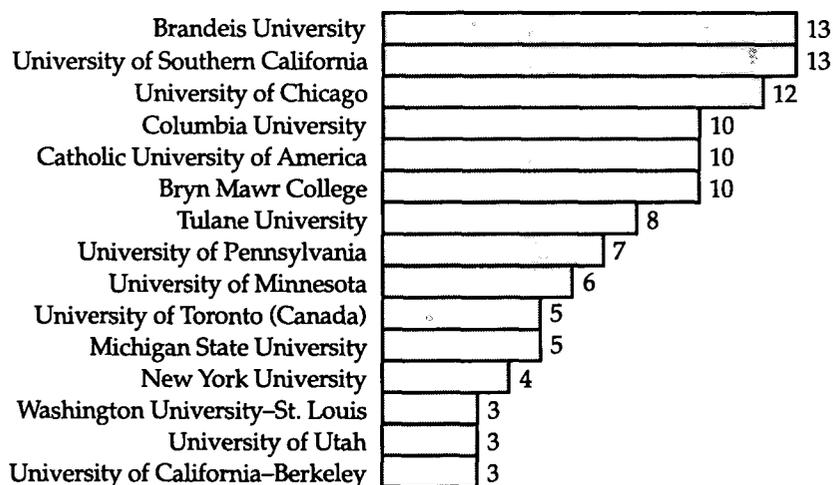
### *III. Historical Dissertations by school only from ProQuest and SSR data sets*

The University of Chicago data, combining both local and more universal data sets, encouraged the examination of historical dissertations by school to determine range and concentration. Figure 2 lists the historical dissertations granted at individual schools for the years 1952–1980 as derived from the ProQuest/

SSR data set, the most reliable and generalizable data base for this study. Figure 2 records the number of historical dissertations at schools which granted at least three historical dissertations during the years 1952–1980.

One hundred thirty historical dissertations were granted during the years 1952–1980. The top 6 schools account for 68 of the 130 or just over one-half the total. The top 8 schools account for 83 of the 130 or just under two-thirds of the total. And the top 11 schools account for 99 of the 130 or over three-quarters of the total. These schools represent a small cadre of the schools granting doctorates in social work. This cadre quality is equally evident when examining schools by decade. In some decades a few schools were very dominant. For example, for the 1950s, a total of 11 schools appeared in the data source. However, two schools (University of Chicago and New York University) accounted for 9 of the 16, or over 50% of the historical dissertations in our data base for that decade. For the 1960s, the base broadens somewhat. A total of 17 schools appeared in the data source. Of these, 6 schools (Columbia, Chicago, Catholic, Brandeis, Southern California, and Pennsylvania) accounted for 28 of the 44, or 64% of the historical

Figure 2  
# of Historical Dissertations '52-'80—By Schools



dissertations in our data base for the decade. For the 1970s, a total of 40 schools appeared in the data source. Of these, 4 schools (Bryn Mawr, Brandeis, Southern California, and Tulane), a more concentrated cadre than the previous decade, accounted for 33 of the 70, or almost 50%, of the historical dissertations that decade. This information is summarized in Table 3 below.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study offers a relative estimate of the incidence, time, and place of historical dissertations in social work. The sample was limited for the earlier years, especially prior to 1952, and makes no claim to account for all dissertations, historical or otherwise, either before or after that date. However, since these limitations can be assumed to have affected historical and non-historical dissertations equally, the study provides a relative data set which yields some interesting and informative results about historical research in social work.

Despite the dominance of other research methods in social work, historical research has until recently been an accepted method for doctoral research in social work. While most of the contemporary literature on social work research ignores or excludes it, historical research has always had a place in social work. For the University of Chicago during its first two decades historical doctoral theses numbered one-third to nearly one-half of all dissertations. For all schools in the 1950s approximately one in eight dissertations were historical; in some years the rate was as high as one in three. Even from the 1960s through the early 1980s social welfare history accounted for approximately 5–6%

Table 3

### *Historical Dissertations at Cadre Schools*

<i>Years</i>	<i># of Cadre schools/ # of Total Schools</i>	<i># of Historical at Cadre schools/Total #</i>	<i>% Share for Cadre Schools</i>
1952–1960	2 of 11	9/16	56%
1961–1970	6 of 17	24/44	64%
1971–1980	4 of 40	33/70	47%

of all dissertations. Only since then has the percentage declined to an almost negligible amount.

The reasons for the decline of historical research are complex. Clearly historical research was more popular in earlier periods when history was more dominant in the social sciences, when social work research was more characterized by methodological pluralism, and before social work became so heavily tied to a narrow range of behavioral science methods (Tyson, 1995). Relatedly, Austin (1986) suggests that policy-oriented research began to decline by the end of the 1950s, resulting from a new emphasis in the research component in social work education on quantification and statistics. For example, the Social Welfare Research Group (SWRG), founded after World War II, emphasized the centrality of research methods from experimental psychology and sociology. Historical research was part of social work's problem, said William Gordon (1951), a leader of the SWHG, in a report on research to the Council on Social Work Education. "The large proportion of descriptive and history-tracing studies may be thought of as a natural consequence of the newness of social work and of a stage of development not yet characterized by sufficiently elaborate theoretical structures to stimulate many hypotheses testing studies. For the most part these are the same conclusions drawn from other evidences and only point up again the need for social work research to catch up with the advancing front of social work knowledge and to take its place in advancing that front through better-focused, more penetrating studies" (Gordon, 1951, 7) Over time such criticisms of historical, and qualitative, research won the day. The "social scientific culture" of social work research steered students away from historical research (Fisher and Karger, 1997; Karger and Fisher, 1998). Fewer and fewer faculty and schools even suggested that historical research was a valid option for doctoral social work research.

So how do we account for the persistence of social welfare history at least up until recently? Historical research has always had a local quality, being associated with specific schools and, more specifically, with a dean or faculty person trained in historical research or interested in it. At Chicago it was the personage and influence of Edith Abbott and later Rachel Marks. At USC it was Norris Class and Maurice Hamovitch (Tucker, 1998). At Bryn

Mawr Milton Speizman. At Minnesota Clarke Chambers and Gisela Konopka. Having an historian or someone interested in social welfare history on the social work faculty makes historical research "thinkable" for graduate students (Chandler, 1998). On the other hand, the presence of a "history person" on the faculty did not guarantee historical dissertations. Given pressure within the profession for other types of research, historical research dissertations were less common than expected at some schools. For example, both Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey were on the faculty at Washington University. He held a Ph.D. in history from Yale; both of them had done research and published in social welfare history. Nevertheless, there were fewer historical dissertations than expected at Washington University. Historical research persisted at some schools, such as Brandeis, because of their institutional focus. At most schools, given that historical research was usually tied to a specific individual, when the history-oriented faculty member departed, as when Karl deSchweinitz left UCLA, so did the interest in history. In the more contemporary period such individuals have not been able to reproduce to an equal extent the interest in historical research.

Another reason for the persistence of historical dissertations through the mid-1980s is their contribution to the profession. Historical research may not be encouraged for doctoral research, but social workers understand the value of historical knowledge and perspective. For example, historical dissertations cover a broad range of social welfare and social work issues. While organizational/institutional history, policy history, and biography dominate, the field of historical research includes an impressive diversity of social work fields and subjects. They cover practice methodologies: (Drew, 1972; Lloyd, 1965; White, 1980; Burns, 1958; Hartmann, 1972; Becker, 1960; Lewis, 1954; Bolen, 1972; McNair, 1970; and Connolly, 1976). They include varied fields of practice and special topics such as children and families (Compton, 1971; Lewis, 1973; Ripple, 1953); mental health (Poor, 1962); adoption (Brown, 1970), volunteers (Jones, 1968); policy (Marks, 1950; Patti, 1967; Blau, 1988 ); theory (Pumphrey, 1956; Lloyd, 1965; Joseph, 1986; Widroff, 1987); research (Zimbalist, 1955); radical social work (Whitaker, 1970; Spano, 1978;); comparative and international (Chatterjee, 1972; Dasbach, 1972; Carter, 1975);

African-American (Pollard, 1976; Carlton, 1982; Johnson, 1980; Chandler, 1993); immigration (Lane, 1932; Mostwin, 1971; Kuramoto, 1972; Chen, 1980), women (Zimmerman, 1977); social work education (Popple, 1977; Sikkema, 1964; Ozanne, 1985); and biography (Walsh, 1965; Cornelius, 1976; Freedberg, 1984). They include "big picture" studies of the profession (Leighninger, 1981; Karger, 1984; Siebold, 1987) as well as local social welfare history (Horovitz, 1969; Cohen, 1972; Levin, 1963; Leashore, 1979). The former get at the essence of social work and social problems, providing a wider lens of understanding for those within and without the profession; the latter closely contextualize a subject in its time and place and add to the knowledge of social welfare history in places like Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, and so forth. These examples illustrate both the breadth of these works as well as the contribution and potential of historical research. Moreover, many of these dissertations served as the basis for book-length studies (as well as articles), a phenomenon much more common in the discipline of history than in social work. See, for example, Zimbalist (1977), Blau (1992), Lyons (1982), Leighninger (1987), Karger (1987), and Stuart (1979). While most historical research done in social work dissertations has been "top down" and supportive of the profession—what historians call "institutional" and "contributionist" history—they have helped define the profession of social work and the field of social welfare.

Social workers also wrote historical dissertations due to what we would call a professional imperative. Social workers should research and write the history of their profession. Historical research is interesting in its own right, but it is also critical to the self-understanding of a profession. Currently there is a great deal of valuable work being done in the field of social welfare history, most of it by historians and social scientists outside of social work (Chandler, 1996). The "new social history" studies of social welfare and social work written by those outside of social work, brilliant as they sometimes are, often lack the insight and knowledge of those more familiar with the profession. To leave the history of social work and social welfare to historians outside of the social work profession limits the historical record. To leave the history of social work almost completely to others might challenge the very reproduction of the profession.

Of course, the value of any research depends in large measure on how well it is done. But given contemporary criticisms of social work research (Tyson, 1995; Heinemann, 1981; Karger, 1983; Reid, 1987; Fraser, 1994; Fraser, Jenson, and Lewis, 1993), given the contemporary debate in social work about expanding definitions and modes of research (Tyson, 1995), given that increasing methodological diversity will expand the profession's knowledge base (Fraser, 1994), and given the turn to history in other social science disciplines (Gould, 1989; Neuman, 1997), historical research deserves more of a place in social work education and practice. Abbott (1995) thinks we may well be in a period of critical reexamination in social work. As in the 1950s, another period of critical reexamination, the reflection, perspective, and contextualization inherent in good historical research could be invaluable in getting the profession to its next stage (Fisher, 1999). At the least we need to recognize that historical research had a place and value in the social work profession. Perhaps in doing so we may begin to acknowledge that it might still.

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#### NOTES

1. The second edition did have a chapter on "Assessing Historical Research," a well-informed appreciation of historical research, but one not geared to "doing" history.
2. Limitations of data by decades: 1) '21-30 and '31-40 benefitted from data being in a printed list in Abbott's book, thus dissertations could be examined more methodically; however, titles only were available—no abstracts available to consult for those possibly historical; (2) '41-50, '51-60, '61-70 decade totals were derived from the overall total of 101 dissertations for the years '41-72 as counted by the researcher from the card catalog search; thus, totals are reasonable estimations rather than exact totals; (3) '41-50 resulted solely from cursory card catalog search. In addition, titles only were available—no abstracts available to consult. Hence, the resulting total is a very conservative representation—maybe as much as half of the true total; (4) '51-60 had SSR as a data source in addition to card catalog search eg. to the initial total of 3 historical dissertations culled from the card catalog search, SSR adds 4

additional, making the total 7 for the decade; (5) '61-70 had ProQuest added to SSR and card catalog as a data source, offering opportunity to examine another printed listing. SSR and ProQuest contribute 5 dissertations to the overall total of 8. Abstracts only available for SSR data; (6) '71-80 and '81-90 had ProQuest as single data source (except for years '71 & '72); (6) '91-95: ProQuest was the sole data source.

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