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Sociological Abstracts vs. SocINDEX for Graduate Students in Sociology: Comprehensive Enough to Satisfy?

David C. Tyler
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dtyler2@unl.edu

Jeanne Cross
University of North Carolina Wilmington, crossj@uncw.edu

Erica DeFrain
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, edefrain2@unl.edu

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Comprehensive Enough to Satisfy?

ABSTRACT: In 2005, EBSCO introduced a comprehensive database for sociology that could be a competitor for *Sociological Abstracts*, *SocINDEX/SocINDEX with Full Text*. Library science quickly produced a product review, a few general comparative analyses of the two, and a few comparative analyses of the databases' utility for particular populations of researchers/students. The authors hope to add to this literature with an analysis of the databases' utility for graduate students in sociology completing their theses and dissertations. The citation checking variation of the checklist method was employed for four random samples of cited items, and the authors' sampling frame was theses and dissertations accepted at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the 2000-2010 interval. The authors found that neither database provided particularly good coverage of the literature cited, that *SocINDEX* provided superior coverage of cited peer-reviewed journal articles, that neither database provided impressive coverage of other sorts of literature, and that *SocINDEX*'s broader approach to indexing subjects of interest to sociologists could be beneficial to graduate students in sociology.

KEYWORDS: comparative analysis, comparative evaluation, online databases, electronic resources, sociology

INTRODUCTION

Since its conception, development, and launch in the early 1950s, ostensibly by slightly inebriated graduate students at Columbia University (Blaemers 2006, Chall 1969), *Sociological Abstracts* has sought "to document the world's sociological literature, irrespective of the country of publication or language of the source document" (Chall & Owen 1995, [83]). To this end, *Sociological Abstracts* initially indexed tens of thousands, and later hundreds of thousands, of journal articles and books (with conference papers, resource reviews, and dissertations being included at various dates after 1965), all of potential interest to researchers in the field and to colleagues from related fields (Chall 1969, Chall & Owen 1995). *Sociological Abstracts* eventually grew to become the primary comprehensive indexing/abstracting journal, and later online database, for sociology. In 2005, however, EBSCO debuted *SocINDEX* and *SocINDEX with Full Text* ("EBSCO Announces…" 2005, "EBSCO debuts…" 2005, "EBSCO Publishing…" 2005, Metcalf 2007), a new sociology database modestly marketed as the "world's most comprehensive and highest quality sociology research database" ("EBSCO Announces…" 2005, 8).

As Todd (2006) quipped in her early comparative analysis of the two databases, EBSCO's announcement "complicated librarians' lives by adding a competitor to CSA's Sociological Abstracts" ([1]), which she noted had been "a long-standing favorite in university libraries" ([1]). Library science's response to the sudden appearance of a competitor for *Sociological Abstracts* was, predictably enough, to produce a few reviews of the new product and a small flurry of comparative analyses of the two databases in general and as a resource for specific target audiences, the earliest of which appeared in 2006 and the last of which appeared in 2010. Thus, it has been more than ten years since *SocINDEX* was introduced and more than five years since there has been a published comparative analysis of the two databases. The authors of the study to come were quite surprised to discover that no one had yet published a study that compared the utility of the two databases for what one would presume would be one of their more frequent and motivated populations of users, graduate students in sociology undertaking their theses and dissertations. To the authors' way of thinking, the literature used by this population of users, with its need to produce comprehensive literature reviews and its anxiety not to overlook relevant literature, should provide an excellent opportunity to assess the utility of the two databases.

Given high subscription prices, stagnant or shrinking materials budgets, and librarians' natural desire to best meet the needs of the patron populations that they serve, comparative resource analyses of this kind can prove to be quite worthwhile. As Allison, McNeil, and Swanson (2000) affirmed in their article on database selection, "[l]ibraries share the common goals of enhancing learning and ensuring access to information" (56), but increasing costs and tight budgets have made it ever more difficult and ever more important for librarians to make sound purchasing decisions and to avoid adversely affecting the colleges and disciplines they were meant to serve (Allison et al. 2000; Tyler, Boudreau, & Leach 2005). To this end, Allison et al. recommended that librarians consider delivery methods, local conditions, pricing, feature options, hardware costs, and network availability, when possible, before making database subscription/purchasing decisions (2000). Of course, extensive as they may seem, the above criteria are not the only ones that could be brought to bear; the library science literature is replete with articles suggesting a myriad of criteria (for an excellent brief review, see Mellone [2010]). In fact, Sharma (2004) assembled the criteria she found employed in the library and information science literature into a composite table, within which there were nine main criteria—content, retrieval effectiveness, search capabilities, search output, costs, technical considerations, indexing and cataloging practices, vendor, and comparative analysis—and forty-two sub-criteria. Unfortunately, much of this information is not readily available and must be sometimes laboriously collected, so this sort of comprehensive, multifaceted review is not always feasible. As Jacsó (2009) has noted,

most vendors and database providers are content to advertise (although not always entirely accurately or completely) source coverage, database size, and retrospectivity. As breadth, depth, and coverage given to pertinent literature tend to be librarians' primary interests when first evaluating databases, this study will focus on these elements, which are readily available for accurate analysis, have wide interest for the field, and have great applicability for libraries and their patrons. To begin to remedy the aforementioned lack in the literature in a fashion that would be of some use to our academic colleagues elsewhere, the authors will perform a comparative content coverage evaluation of the two sociology databases that will retrospectively examine their usefulness to graduate students in sociology who completed their theses and dissertations at two public research universities in the Midwest, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale (SIUC) and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) from 2000 to 2010.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Roughly a year after EBSCO's announcement of *SocINDEX/SocINDEX with Full Text* (Note: the authors will be using *SocINDEX* throughout, even when the full-text product was referenced), Kathy Wheeler and Julia Todd penned comparative analyses of *Sociological Abstracts* and *SocINDEX* for *The Charleston Advisor* and *Online*, respectively. Wheeler (2006) noted that both databases covered primarily English-language journals devoted to sociology and related fields, with *Sociological Abstracts* covering about 2,000 journals and *SocINDEX* covering roughly 3,000, and she noted that both offered coverage of sources from other formats categories, such as conference papers, books, book chapters, and so forth. Wheeler also noted that *Sociological Abstracts*' coverage extended back to 1952, while *SocINDEX*'s extended back to 1895 for some journals. When considering completeness of coverage, Wheeler found *SocINDEX* to be superior at providing cover-to-cover indexing for "core" and "high priority" journals, whereas *Sociological Abstracts* focused on indexing just substantive articles. When comparing search results, Wheeler found that neither database was consistently superior in terms of the number of records returned. Wheeler also remarked that some of the records returned by searches of *SocINDEX* were from sources not typically associated with sociology, which she complained of as "clutter." Despite *SocINDEX*'s having indexed more titles, often over longer periods and to a greater extent, Wheeler gave the two databases equal composite ratings.

Todd's (2006) comparative analysis for *Online* assessed *Sociological Abstracts* and *SocINDEX* in terms of quality and quantity and in terms of their ability to meet the needs of Baker University's undergraduate and graduate population (approximately 2,700 students). To facilitate her review, Todd focused on the number of journals indexed, on the quality of search results, and so forth. With respect to journal coverage, Todd reported that

SocINDEX initially claimed to cover 2,908 journals, while *Sociological Abstracts* claimed to cover 1,858. Todd also reported that, as of 2006, much of *SocINDEX*'s claimed total coverage (3,379 journals at that time) was projected, whereas *Sociological Abstracts* actually provided at least some indexing to all of the journals that it claimed to cover. With respect to quality of search results, Todd found that *Sociological Abstracts* returned more records for a search of a typical topic in sociology. In fact, it returned more than double the number of results returned by *SocINDEX*. For a search of a more business-oriented topic of some interest to sociologists, Todd found the reverse, with *SocINDEX* returning almost three-times as many results. Interestingly, while searching *Sociological Abstracts*, Todd also discovered "surprise" citations (i.e., citations to journals not included in the list of currently indexed serials), and she noted that *SocINDEX*, to its advantage, provided a searchable index for all of its contents. To *SocINDEX*'s disadvantage, however, she found that its claims of comprehensive coverage for some journals were not always entirely accurate, although she did allow that information on these occasional lapses was discoverable upon closer inspection of the title list. Without a similarly detailed and comprehensive title list, *Sociological Abstracts*' actual coverage proved to be something of a black box. Todd, like Wheeler, noted that *SocINDEX* returned records from sources not typically associated with sociology, such as human resources journals, and from non-scholarly sources, such as newspapers. Todd also was surprised to find that, despite having over 500 indexed journals in common, the results returned by the two databases showed little overlap. Unlike Wheeler above, who gave the two roughly equal marks, Todd recommended subscribing to *Sociological Abstracts* for its superior focus on sociology journals and for its exclusion of general-interest sources. In 2007, Karbach published a translation of Todd's article in the Hungarian library and information science journal *Tudomanyos es Muszaki Tajekoztatas* (*Scientific and Technical Information*).

In 2008, Stoddart, Spencer, and McPhaul published a survey of selected resources in criminal justice administration and criminology for collection development purposes, a portion of which was devoted to reviewing several subscription databases, including *Sociological Abstracts* and *SocINDEX*, in *Reference & User Services Quarterly*. The authors provided a general comparison of the available databases "by number of publications indexed, number of full-text titles available, number of records in each database, and earliest coverage" (14). The authors also provided search results for three common searches. Where information for the general comparisons was available, the authors reported that the two sociology publications indexed more publications than did the criminal justice administrations/criminology databases reviewed, contained greater numbers of records, and covered longer time periods. With respect to the general comparison of *Sociological Abstracts* to *SocINDEX*, the latter was

found to index roughly 1,100 more journals, to provide access to 1,073,425 more records, and to provide coverage

extending back fifty-seven more years. The three keyword searches conducted by the authors produced some

interesting results. *SocINDEX* consistently returned more records than all of the other databases. *Sociological*

Abstracts outperformed the criminology/criminal justice administration for the first keyword search, but its

performance was otherwise undistinguished. It was actually outperformed in a few instances. Unfortunately, unlike

Wheeler and Todd above and Mellone below, the authors did not delve into whether the results returned by the

myriad databases were more or less pertinent to researchers in criminal justice administration and criminology.

Finally, in 2010, Mellone established criteria for the pre-selection analysis and evaluation of databases that

address content, functionality, and performance and then employed them to critically analyze *Sociological Abstracts*

and *SocINIDEX* for their ability to meet the needs of undergraduate sociology majors at Queens College, City

University of New York. For the purposes of this study, Mellone's findings regarding content coverage and search

results would be the most apropos to recount. In the first portion of his evaluation, Mellone found that *SocINDEX*

reported more journals given "core" and "selective" coverage, while *Sociological Abstracts* reported more journals

given "priority" coverage, and he also found that *Sociological Abstracts* reported a higher percentage of covered

journals given "core" or "priority" status. Also, he found no appreciable differences between the databases when he

compared their reported coverage of core sociology and sociology-related journals as indexed by *JSTOR* and *Social*

Sciences Citation Index. Moreover, Mellone found *SocINDEX* to provide coverage to journals and magazines from

fields that he felt were of only peripheral interest to sociology, and he found much of that coverage to have been

given to journals not likely to be considered social science titles. *Sociological Abstracts*, by way of contrast,

Mellone found to index fewer journals from fields of peripheral interest, and he found the indexed journals from

peripheral fields to be, in his opinion, more focused on the social aspects of their subjects of study. Mellone

concluded, as was mentioned above, that *SocINDEX*'s approach to indexing has the effect of cluttering the database

with content "not specifically germane to sociology" (144).

In the second portion of his evaluation, Mellone simulated a multi-stage search procedure taught to

undergraduate sociology majors at Queens College, using a topic formulated by a sociology professor and used in

sociology research courses. In general, Mellone found that *SocINDEX* tended to return more records, but Mellone

felt that its results were cluttered with trivial items, such as conference papers and magazine articles, and plagued

with records from magazines and journals of little or no interest to sociology. Mellone felt that the sociology and

pertinent social sciences literature was better represented by *Sociological Abstracts*. *SocINDEX*, in Mellone's

opinion, should be considered more analogous to a general social science database that "would better serve a general audience in a public library, a community college library, or a small college library that offers only selected arts and sciences programs" (156).

Thus, it would seem from the above that there remain several opportunities to increase the field's understanding of the utility/nonutility of the two databases. In summary, the first two published articles, by Wheeler and by Todd, used the databases' indexed serials lists to compare the avowed coverage provided by the two databases and then analyzed the results of a few keyword/subject searches that were of the sort that sociology researchers presumably would use. Both offered opinions as to the suitability of the indexes, and both called into question the utility of the non-sociology and non-academic articles indexed by *SocINDEX*.   The third analysis, by Stoddart et al., used roughly similar methods to address the ability of several databases, including *Sociological Abstracts* and *SocINDEX*, to meet the needs of researcher in criminology and criminal justice administration. The authors looked into the numbers of publications indexed, the number of publications with full-text access, the number of records in each database, and the earliest coverage available, and they performed three keyword searches and compared the numbers of records returned. Lastly, the final article, by Mellone, assessed the databases once again in terms of their avowed coverage as detailed by their indexed serials lists, and it assessed the databases' ability to meet the needs of hypothetical undergraduate students in sociology completing a class assignment. Studies to come that take different approaches or that attempt to ascertain how well the databases fill the needs of other populations of researchers would certainly complement the studies above and provide for a more extensive understanding of the worth of the two databases.

THE DATABASES

As was noted above, for several decades *Sociological Abstracts* was the primary discipline-specific indexing and abstracting journal, and later online database, for the field, but the introduction of *SocINDEX* in 2005 provided sociology researchers with an additional, potentially equivalent or even superior, option. Below, for the reader unfamiliar with the two databases, the authors have compiled brief profiles drawn from the database providers' Web pages and Web brochures that include claimed coverage, the database provider(s), topics covered, range of years covered, and other salient attributes:

[INSERT TABLE 1]

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study to come will attempt to address three questions. First, do either, both, or neither of the sociology databases adequately cover the literature cited by graduate students in sociology for their dissertations and theses, either in general or for one or the other of the universities? Second, do one or another of the databases outperform the other, either in general or for one or the other of the universities? Should this last prove to be the case, the results may suggest that observed differences resulted in part from local effects rather than from differences between the databases. Regarding the universities, it may be worth noting here that SIUC students had access to *Sociological Abstracts* and, subsequently, to *SocINDEX* for at least a portion of the interval under study and that the students at UNL had access only to *Sociological Abstracts* over the course of the entire interval, so one would expect that this access should have had a noticeable impact upon the literature cited by both groups of students and that sizeable portions of the cited literature should be indexed by one or another, if not both, of the databases. This assumes, of course, that the students utilized *Sociological Abstracts* and/or *SocINDEX* when assembling their works cited pages.

The third and final question to be addressed by the study was prompted by several of the prior comparative analyses of the databases. Wheeler (2006) and Todd (2006) both remarked that searches of *SocINDEX* returned articles from journals not normally associated with sociology, from non-academic journals, and from magazines and newspapers. In his later article comparing the utility of the databases for undergraduate students in sociology completing an assignment, Mellone (2010) also criticized *SocINDEX*'s search results as having been cluttered with non-sociological literature that, he argued, introduced unnecessary confusion into his hypothetical students' assignments. Thus, the third question to be addressed will be whether the same would hold true for graduate students in sociology. Does *SocINDEX*'s approach produce unwanted noise, or would graduate students in sociology benefit from a database that samples from a wide variety of sociology-adjacent and/or non-sociological fields of study?

METHODS

For the comparative coverage analysis, the authors employed the versions of the databases that were available at each campus when the project was started: *SocINDEX with Full Text* (SIUC) and *Sociological Abstracts* (UNL). To accomplish the study's aims, the authors have elected to employ a variation of the checklist method, which, "dating to the mid-nineteenth century, is one of the oldest and among the most often used approaches to library collection evaluation" (Nisonger 2004, 4), and which is an approach that may readily be turned to the evaluation of other library resources, such as databases (Nisonger 2004). Not infrequently in current practice,

librarians employing this method have compiled lists of subject terms and/or keywords to use in searches of the database(s) under review in order to establish how well particular topics have been covered (Tyler et al. 2005). However, historically, the method, as Nisonger details, has usually involved employing specialized bibliographies or lists of recommended resources, course syllabi, publishers' catalogs and lists of current publications, bestseller lists, the holdings of important libraries, reference works, and so forth, although there has been a recent increase in interest in the employment of lists of cited items (Nisonger 1983, 2004). In this instance, the authors intend to employ citation checking. Citation checking also has historically been one of the major methods of collection evaluation in library science (American Library Association 1979), and as longstanding methods in the field, the checklist method and citation checking have a number of well-known and understood advantages and disadvantages. Those interested are invited to peruse the excellent articles on the topic by Locket (1989), Lundin (1989), and Nisonger (1983, 2004).

The authors have chosen to employ the citation checking variant of the checklist method for three reasons: first, some, if not all, of the more general analysis advocated by Allison et al. has already been performed and has been published; second, the historically more commonly employed method of using lists of core and/or pertinent peripheral resources has also been performed to some extent and has been published, and this method suffers from a shortcoming that, in the authors' eyes, the citation checking approach remedies; and, third and last, the citation checking method ensures that the items included in the checklist were actually used by researchers. As Nisonger states, "[t]he technique is based on the assumption that the cited sources were used by researchers and thus should be contained in a library collection supporting research" (2004, 5-6), or, in this case, indexed in the databases under examination. The use of a checklist of cited items provides what the authors believe to be a vital and necessary complement to the standard checklist study in that such an approach will show whether the evaluated library contained or the analyzed databases indexed items that researchers actually found useful for their research, rather than those resources merely recommended by outside experts as ones that researchers ought to find useful.

To compile the citation checklists employed in this study, the authors gathered the theses and dissertations completed by graduate students in sociology and accepted by the two universities during the 2000-2010 interval. The theses' and dissertations' bibliographies/works cited pages were copied, items cited were numbered by the authors, and a random number generator was used to generate a random sequences of citations to be included in the study (i.e., random sampling without replacement). Since, in the authors' experience, graduate students requesting assistance with the databases were usually looking for assistance in finding articles from the periodical literature, the

authors repeated the above process but limited the population of eligible citations to citations to articles that had appeared in numbered periodicals. Thus, four random samples were drawn, one of each for each campus: two format-blind samples from all of the cited literature and two samples from citations to periodical articles. Further information about the sampling frames for the study may be found below in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

For the first, format-blind/all-cited-sources pair of samples (Samples 1 and 2), from the sociology theses and dissertation that had been accepted at SIUC (see note in Table 1) and at UNL during the selected interval (2000-2010), the authors drew four hundred cited items each. The eight hundred cited items were then reviewed by the authors and assigned to categories and subcategories on the basis of their apparent formats. As a quick glance at the format categories in Table 3a reveals, 56% of the total was comprised of citations to "Periodicals" (53.5% for SIUC and 58.5% for UNL), with cited items from "Book Matter" comprising the bulk of the rest of the samples (35.5% total, 38.3% for SIUC, and 32.8% for UNL).[1] Items fitting under the "Other" category comprised just 8.5% of the total (8.3% and 8.8% for the two universities, respectively).

With respect to the format subcategories, it would appear that 44.8% of the total was comprised of citations to articles that had appeared in peer reviewed journals, with the sample skewing lower for SIUC (36.5%) than for UNL (53.0%). This imbalance was somewhat inverted in the "Books" subcategory, which comprises 26.8% of the total (29.5% SIUC and 24.0% UNL), so it would appear that SIUC may have favored books a bit more than did UNL and that UNL favored articles from peer reviewed journals a bit more than did SIUC. Among the less-cited sorts of items, SIUC seemed to favor magazines, news sources, and Web pages more than did UNL, and UNL tended to favor government documents more than did SIUC.

[INSERT TABLE 3a]

For the second pair of samples, the periodicals-only samples (Samples 3 and 4), the authors repeated the procedures above, but, again, limited themselves to citations made to articles in periodicals. As a quick glance at Table 3b shows, almost the entirety of the second set of samples (just under 87.9%) was comprised of citations to articles from peer reviewed journals. As was the case with Sample 1, SIUC showed a preference for news sources, as well as for commercial and trade magazines. These three subcategories make up 10.5% of SIUC's Sample 3, but just 1.3% of UNL's Sample 4. One could speculate that this may indicate a slight bias in favor of writing about current events and/or popular culture at SIUC. Regardless, in this second pair of samples, the composition of the

universities' portions of the samples appears to be slightly better balanced where peer reviewed journals were concerned (81.8% SIUC and 94.0% UNL), as compared to Samples 1 and 2.

For all four samples, duplicate citations were not eliminated from the draw. Thus, if either database indexed or failed to index a cited item that had proven itself to be useful to multiple graduate students, the database was more greatly rewarded or penalized accordingly.

[INSERT TABLE 3b]

Having prepared the four samples, the authors then searched the two databases for the cited items. Each item was searched for up to three times using, in various combinations, authors' last names, key terms from cited items' titles, and in the case of articles appearing periodicals, the source periodicals' titles. All terms were searched initially as they were found in the bibliographies/works cited pages.[2] If a search returned a record for the cited item, a "hit" was recorded. If three searches failed to return a result containing a record for the cited item, a "miss" was recorded. In several instances, there were discrepancies between the item as cited and the record returned by one of the databases. In such cases, the original source cited was consulted, its publishers' Web site was consulted, and/or *WorldCat* (OCLC 2001-2016) or *Ulrichsweb: Global Serials Directory* (ProQuest 2016) was consulted, depending upon the nature of the error, and the error was then corrected and a "hit" recorded where appropriate. Also, because the authors' interest had been piqued by Wheeler's, Todd's, and Mellone's assertion that *SocINDEX* had undesirably cluttered its search results by including materials from outside of sociology's purview, the authors consulted the same sources and recorded the Library of Congress (LC) classification system subclasses assigned to the cited periodicals. In instances where only a Dewey Decimal number or a National Library of Medicine classification was assigned, the authors consulted the online public access catalogs of university libraries that held the periodicals in question and that used the LC classification system.

RESULTS

Was coverage adequate, and whose coverage was superior?

Samples 1 and 2: All Formats.

With respect to Samples 1 and 2, and to Samples 3 and 4 in the next section, the authors required several answers of the results observed: 1) Did the databases provided adequate coverage of the cited literature in general and/or for each university? 2) Did either database provide superior coverage of the cited literature in general and/or for either university? and 3) Are these observed results replicated at all levels (i.e., in general, at the format category,

and at the format subcategory levels)? To proceed, the authors will first look into these questions for the samples in their entirety and then for the several format categories and subcategories, where possible.

As Table 4 shows, the authors' first, most rudimentary question could be answered in the negative for both databases. *Sociological Abstracts* provided coverage for just 34.1% of the total cited literature (i.e., combined samples), and *SocINDEX* provided coverage for just 42.3%. At the institutional level, where SIUC (Sample 1) was concerned *Sociological Abstracts* covered just 31.3% of the cited literature, and *SocINDEX* covered just 36%. For UNL (Sample 2), the results were somewhat better (37% and 48.5%, respectively), but both databases covered less than 50% of the cited literature (combined samples). Thus, coverage of items cited would seem to have been less than adequate, although it is interesting here to note that for UNL, the school without access, *SocINDEX* would appear to have been the more potentially useful database.

The second question, concerning superiority of coverage, can be answered in favor of *SocINDEX*. If one looks at total cited items (Samples 1 and 2 combined), one can see that *SocINDEX* covered far more than did *Sociological Abstracts*, and it covered more than twice as many unique items.[3] In fact, the difference in coverage proved to be statistically significant for the combined samples' totals for "Coverage Failure," "Unique Coverage," and "Shared Coverage" (Total χ^2 [2, n=1,600] = 28.415, p < 0.000). However, comparison at the institutional level shows this result may be somewhat misleading in that the difference in coverage was not quite significant for Sample 1 (SIUC χ^2 [2, n=800] = 4.829, p > 0.0894). More of the difference could be attributed to Sample 2 (UNL χ^2 [2, n=800] = 28.666, p < 0.000), which, again, struck the authors as somewhat odd in that UNL's graduate students in sociology only had access to *Sociological Abstracts*, while SIUC's had access to one or the other database for portions of the interval. But, again, what ought to be of particular interest to librarians is how very little of Samples 1 and 2 was covered by either database. In fact, if one were to subscribe to both databases, the two would still have left slightly more than 50% of the total cited literature unindexed.

[INSERT TABLE 4]

Of course, a percentage of Samples 1 and 2 is comprised of formats from the "Other" category, which includes numerous sorts of items not necessarily covered by either database, so a closer look at the databases' results at the format category level may be warranted. To this end, the authors disaggregated the databases' results by format category and analyzed them again. As a quick review of Table 5 shows, both databases' coverage of items that appeared in the "Other" format category was, indeed, abysmal, and the authors will from this point forward drop the category and its format subcategories from the analysis.

This leaves the databases' coverage of cited items that appeared in the "Book Matter" and in the "Periodicals" categories. The coverage given to total cited items (combined samples) in the "Book Matter" category by both databases appears to be quite poor. *Sociological Abstracts* indexed just 15.1% of the cited items in the category, and *SocINDEX* indexed just 21.1%. The coverage provided by both databases at the institutional level, also, appears to be quite poor. For SIUC, both databases covered just 21.0% of cited "Book Matter" from Sample 1. For UNL, *Sociological Abstracts* covered a mere 10.7% of cited "Book Matter" from Sample 2, and *SocINDEX* covered just 23.7%.

SocINDEX would, at first glance, appear to have provided superior coverage to the category total, but a quick statistical analysis—again employing the "Coverage Failure," "Unique Coverage," and "Shared Coverage" cells of the table's totals—would suggest that there was no significant difference between the two databases (Total Book Matter χ^2 [2, n=568] = 4.810, p > 0.090). This near equivalence in poor coverage fails to speak in either database's favor, however. Again, *Sociological Abstracts* failed to cover almost 85% of the total cited books and book chapters, and *SocINDEX* failed to cover almost 79% of them. Were the two databases both subscribed to, they would still have failed to cover almost 70% of the total cited items in the "Book Matter" category. Where the question of the superiority of the databases' coverage at the institutional level is concerned, SIUC's results were identical for the two databases. Despite the poor coverage provided by both databases, *SocINDEX*'s "Book Matter" coverage for UNL (Sample 2) was, bafflingly, once again superior to a statistically significant degree (UNL Book Matter χ^2 [2, n=262] = 11.297, p < 0.004).

[INSERT TABLE 5]

The two databases' coverage of the cited articles in the "Periodicals" category was noticeably better, although perhaps not entirely adequate. *Sociological Abstracts* indexed 51.5% of the total cited periodical articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 61.4% (combined samples). Compared to the numbers reported thus far, these would be high points, but compared to librarians' likely expectations for the databases, these numbers may well be further indicators of inadequacy. In fact, were one to subscribe to both databases, the two would have provided coverage to just slightly more than 67.6% of the total cited periodical articles. The authors feel that that would likely be quite a bit to pay in subscription costs for just two-thirds coverage of the cited periodical literature.

For the individual institutions, the results were a bit puzzling. For SIUC (Sample 1), *Sociological Abstracts* covered 44.4% of the cited periodical articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 53.3%. The coverage provided UNL's cited periodical literature (Sample 2), by way of contrast, was 57.3% and 68.8%, respectively. Thus, either database was

a bit more adequate to UNL's needs, despite SIUC's having subscribed to both databases at one time or another during the interval under review.

When comparing the two databases' performance in the "Periodicals" category, a glance at the table would suggest that *SocINDEX* again outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* where total cited periodical articles (combined samples) was concerned, and in this instance that intuition would be borne out by statistical analysis (Total Periodicals χ^2 [2, n=896] = 26.143, p < 0.000). In fact, unlike with the results in Table 4, both universities' results were statistically significantly different in *SocINDEX*'s favor when analyzed in isolation (SIUC Periodicals χ^2 [2, n=428] = 9.671, p < 0.008; UNL Periodicals χ^2 [2, n=468] = 26.143, p < 0.000), although UNL's results were, once again, more pronounced. What may be heartening about these results, from a librarian's perspective, was how much better each of the databases performed in this format category. Again, these results are considerably better than the databases' results for Table 4 or for the "Book Matter" category. It would seem that the databases do, indeed, index something, and that something would appear to be periodical articles. On the other hand, it is still troubling, especially where *Sociological Abstracts* is concerned, that so very many of the cited periodical articles went unindexed. The authors are still inclined to see both databases' coverage as poor to middling, even if *SocINDEX*'s would seem to be the better of the two.

Lastly for Samples 1 and 2, the authors wished to attempt analysis of the two databases at the format subcategory level, but in most of the several format subcategories, either the graduate students cited too few items or neither of the databases covered enough of the cited items to support analysis. As a result, the authors have of necessity limited their analysis, as shown in Table 6, to the following format subcategories: "Books," "Chapters," "Annuals, Monographic Series, and Yearbooks," and "Journals (peer reviewed)."

[INSERT TABLE 6]

As Table 6 shows, the coverage provided by both databases was a bit hit-or-miss for the format subcategories. Coverage of both "Books" and "Chapters" by *Sociological Abstracts* was quite poor (14% and 18.6%, respectively, of the combined samples). Coverage of the same by *SocINDEX* was little better (22.4% and 17.1%, respectively, of the same). For SIUC (Sample 1), coverage provided books and chapters by both databases was identical (18.6% and 20%, respectively) and quite poor. For UNL (Sample 2), coverage provided books and chapters by *Sociological Abstracts* was very poor (8.3% and 17%), and coverage of the same provided by *SocINDEX* was little better (27% and 14.3%).

Concerning coverage superiority, for total cited items in the subcategories (combined samples), *SocINDEX* would appear to have just barely outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* where "Books" was concerned (Total Books χ^2 [2, n= 428] = 6.512, p < 0.039), but both databases' performance for "Chapters" was statistically nearly identical. At the institutional level, both databases' performance for SIUC (Sample 1) in both of these subcategories actually was identical. For UNL (Sample 2), for "Books," once again *SocINDEX* provided superior coverage (UNL Books χ^2 [2, n=192] = 15.551, p < 0.000), but the two databases' performance for "Chapters" was statistically nearly identical. A point of some interest to librarians would be how little overlap there was between the two databases' coverage, as there were just ten books and just seven chapters indexed by both ("Shared Coverage" totals, combined samples). However, what is most noteworthy, still, is how poor both databases' coverage for these subcategories was, despite both having claimed to index books and chapters. The coverage failure for both databases for these Book Matter format subcategories was between 77% and 86% percent, depending.

In the "Periodicals" subcategories, the databases' coverage of "Annuals, monographic series, and yearbooks," a minor point, was nearly identical, with both covering approximately 50-60% of the cited items (combined samples). A closer look at the raw data by the authors discovered that this could largely be credited to the attention paid by both databases to *Annual Review of Sociology*. Further analysis of this subcategory would hardly seem warranted.

Of primary interest, then, would be the coverage provided by the two databases to the peer reviewed journal literature, the format subcategory usually of greatest interest to our corps of graduate students. With "Journals (peer reviewed)," the two databases may have approached adequacy, with *Sociological Abstracts* having covered 60.9% of the total cited articles and *SocINDEX* having covered 73.2% (combined samples). For the individual universities, the databases also performed well, with *Sociological Abstracts* having covered 61% of SIUC's cited articles and *SocINDEX* having covered 71.2% (Sample 1). For UNL's cited articles (Sample 2), the percentages covered were 60.8% and 74.5%, respectively. Of particular note to the librarian looking to subscribe are the sizeable overlap in the two databases' coverage and the 2.76:1 advantage that *SocINDEX* had over *Sociological Abstracts* where uniquely indexed content was concerned (combined samples). Subscribing to both databases would improve a library's coverage of the cited journal literature to just over 80%, but that would hardly seem to be worth the additional subscription costs.

Concerning the question of which database provided the superior coverage, a quick glance at the final row of Table 6 reveals *SocINDEX's* coverage of the total cited peer reviewed journal literature (combined samples) to

have been considerably superior to *Sociological Abstracts*' (Total J(pr) χ^2 [2, n=716] = 28.799, p < 0.000). As was noted above, *Sociological Abstracts*' coverage was not necessarily bad; it just was not in the same league as *SocINDEX*'s. When the databases' performance was reviewed for the individual institutions, *SocINDEX* (Sample 1) maintained its advantage over *Sociological Abstracts*, and, again, UNL's results (Sample 2) were more pronounced: SUIC J(pr) χ^2 (2, n=292) = 8.042, p < 0.018 and UNL J(pr) χ^2 (2, n=424) = 21.430, p < 0.000. Thus, where the peer reviewed journal literature was concerned, it would seem that *SocINDEX* decisively outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* and that *Sociological Abstracts* offered very little unique content coverage to temper *SocINDEX*'s advantage.

Samples 3 and 4: Periodicals Only.

In light of the clear importance of periodical literature to the graduate students that penned the selected theses and dissertations and given the authors' experience in assisting graduate students in sociology with the preparation of their comprehensive literature reviews, the authors elected to draw a second pair of random samples devoted solely to cited periodical articles so as to further test the two databases' performance with respect to this crucial format. For these subsequent samples, the authors will repeat much of analysis performed above.

As Table 7 shows, with the larger samples of citations to periodicals, both databases indexed more than half of the total articles cited (*Sociological Abstracts* 55.6% and *SocINDEX* 65.8%, combined samples). The databases' performance for the individual universities hewed close to their performance for the total, combined samples. For SIUC (Sample 3), *Sociological Abstracts* indexed 54.0% of the cited articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 65.3%. For UNL (Sample 4), *Sociological Abstracts* indexed 57.3% of the cited articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 66.3%. Thus, the databases covered somewhere between one half and two thirds of the cited periodical articles, with *SocINDEX* having consistently indexed a greater percentage.

Although the differences in performance reported for Samples 3 and 4 seem slightly smaller than those reported for periodicals cited in Samples 1 and 2, *SocINDEX* once again handily outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* where the total, combined samples were concerned (Total Periodicals χ^2 [2, n=1,600] = 43.735, p < 0.000). The two databases had a sizeable overlap in coverage, but *SocINDEX* once again had a noteworthy amount of unique coverage as compared to *Sociological Abstracts* (approximately a 2.4:1 ratio). When the results for the individual universities were treated separately, *SocINDEX* outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* for each institution's graduate students, as well. In a slight reversal of the results reported above for Samples 1 and 2, SIUC had the more pronounced difference in performance (SIUC Periodicals χ^2 [2, n=800] = 29.022, p < 0.000), although UNL

experienced a difference in performance that was still handily statistically significant (UNL Periodicals χ^2 [2,

n=800] = 16.235, p < 0.000).

[INSERT TABLE 7]

With respect to the format subcategories, the authors had hoped that increasing the size of the samples of

periodical literature would have increased the number of cited items in all of the subcategories so that analyses of all

subcategories could have been performable. Unfortunately, as was the case in the section above, there were either

too few cited items or too few instances of indexing having been given to the cited commercial magazines, trade

magazines, and so forth. Thus, the authors were once again limited to comparing the databases' performance for

"Annuals, Monographic Series, and Yearbooks" and "Journals (peer reviewed)."

As Table 8 shows, the two databases indexed approximately one half of the articles from cited annuals,

monographic series, and yearbooks, and the coverage provided to each university's citations to these items is nearly

identical. No further analysis should be necessary, once again.

[INSERT TABLE 8]

The coverage given to cited articles from peer reviewed journals was more varied and more interesting. Of

the total cited articles in this subcategory (combined samples), *Sociological Abstracts* indexed 61.0% of the cited

articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 71.1%. At the level of the individual institutions, *Sociological Abstracts* indexed

63.0% of the cited articles from SIUC (Sample 3), and *SocINDEX* covered 74.3%. For UNL (Sample 4),

Sociological Abstracts indexed 59.3% of the cited articles, and *SocINDEX* covered 68.4%. Thus, the coverage from

both databases was roughly in the 60%-75% range. As was the case with this format subcategory for the combined

Samples 1 and 2, this format subcategory showed a sizeable overlap in coverage, but *SocINDEX*'s unique coverage

was better than *Sociological Abstracts'* by roughly a 2.3:1 ratio.

Concerning superiority of coverage given, *SocINDEX* handily outperformed *Sociological Abstracts* where

total coverage of the combined samples was concerned (Total J(pr) χ^2 [2, n=1,406] = 38.730, p < 0.000). When the

universities' results were analyzed separately, *SocINDEX* once again outperformed *Sociological Abstracts*, with

SIUC (J[pr] χ^2 [2, n=654] = 24.931, p < 0.000) once again showing a somewhat more pronounced difference in

performance than did UNL (J[pr] χ^2 [2, n=752] = 15.365, p < 0.000). Thus, the conclusion that the authors drew

from their analyses of Samples 1 and 2 would appear to have held true here, at least where the peer reviewed journal

literature was concerned: *SocINDEX* decisively outperformed *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Sociological Abstracts*

offered comparatively little in the way of unique content coverage that would mitigate *SocINDEX*'s performance advantage.

Is There Value in Broad Subject Coverage?

As was noted in the review of literature above, Wheeler, Todd, and Mellone were all unhappy with the indexing coverage that *SocINDEX* provided to fields of peripheral interest to sociology, and Mellone argued that this wider coverage actually made *SocINDEX* a less useful database for undergraduate students in sociology as its search results were cluttered with non-sociological literature. As an appurtenant question to the study above, the authors wondered whether the same could be said for graduate students in sociology. To address this question, as was elucidated above, the authors consulted *WorldCat* and *Ulrichsweb: Global Serials Directory* and collected the Library of Congress (LC) sub-classes assigned to the periodicals cited in all four samples. Again, in instances where only a Dewey Decimal number or a National Library of Medicine classification was assigned, the authors consulted the online public access catalogs of subscribing university libraries using the LC classification system. Ninety-nine of the 538 cited periodical titles had two LC subclasses assigned to them, and these were given equal fractional values.

So would providing broader coverage unnecessarily clutter a database's search results where graduate students in sociology were concerned? Table 9 would suggest not. Roughly 53.6% of the LC subclasses assigned to the periodical titles cited in the four combined samples were from the range traditionally associated with sociology (HM-HX). The rest of the cited periodicals had LC subclasses that were fairly evenly scattered throughout the LC classification system. Thus, one could hazard that EBSCO's decision to cast a wider net with *SocINDEX* would likely be of some benefit to graduate students in sociology.

[INSERT TABLE 9]

A quick review of the cited periodicals would seem to bear out the notion that providing indexing beyond the bounds of sociology proper, at least as defined by LC subclass, was to *SocINDEX*'s advantage. Again, most of the cited periodicals that comprise Table 9 had a single LC subclass assigned that fell within the traditional boundaries of sociology (HM-HX) or outside of them (A-HJ and J-ZA). A number of the periodicals also had two LC subclasses assigned to them. For these "mixed" periodicals, either one of the LC subclasses fell within the sociology range and one did not (e.g., periodicals that straddled the line between sociology and some related field like psychology or anthropology) or neither did (i.e., periodicals that serve the interests of two fields, neither of which was sociology).

For the sociology periodicals, *Sociological Abstracts* indexed just over 78% of the cited articles, while *SocINDEX* indexed just over 85%. For the second group of periodicals, the single-discipline non-sociology periodicals, *Sociological Abstracts* indexed just over 25% of the cited articles, while *SocINDEX* covered slightly more than 37%. For the third group, periodicals that straddled the line between sociology and another, related discipline, *Sociological Abstracts* indexed just over 67% of the cited articles, while *SocINDEX* covered slightly more than 75%. For the multidisciplinary periodicals whose assigned LC subclasses were unrelated to sociology, *Sociological Abstracts* indexed just over 18% of the cited articles, while *SocINDEX* covered slightly more than 36%. So, as one can see, both databases covered sociology and sociology-related periodicals rather well, although *SocINDEX* had a small advantage with these periodicals. But *SocINDEX* had a sizeable advantage with cited articles from the single-discipline, non-sociology periodicals and with cited articles from the multidisciplinary, non-sociology periodicals, as well. So, for these two groups of graduate students in sociology, given that 43.5% of their citations to articles were to ones that had appeared in periodicals that presumably had nothing to do with sociology, *SocINDEX*'s broader coverage would seem to have proven itself to be worthwhile.

DISCUSSION

After a short, sharp avalanche of numbers such as was provided above, it would be worthwhile to pause for a moment and ask, "So … what does it all mean?" Fairly obviously, it would seem that neither database did a particularly adequate job of indexing the literature that this group of users cited in their theses and dissertations. From this study's results, there would appear to be something of a disconnect between what the providers of the two databases and what librarians – as represented by Wheeler, Todd, and Mellone – believe that sociologists ought to be citing and what they actually have been citing, at least at the graduate level. In particular, both databases' coverage of the cited books and book chapters was remarkably poor. Their coverage of the cited annuals, monographic series, and yearbooks seemed nearly adequate, but as was noted before, this could largely be attributed to their having indexed *Annual Review of Sociology*. The only format subcategory where the databases' coverage shone was "Journals (peer reviewed)," which was to the good as the graduate students heavily cited peer reviewed journal articles, but both databases' promotional literature paints the databases as being so much more than avenues merely to the peer reviewed journal literature of sociology. Both are supposed to cover more than just journals and more than just sociology.

A second area of disconnect between presumed and actual needs would be breadth of subject coverage. Wheeler, Todd, and Mellone all praised *Sociological Abstracts* for the depth of its coverage of the sociology

literature and for the narrowness and specificity of its focus. All three were critical of *SocINDEX* for cluttering itself with records from literature from outside of sociology, but the citation behavior of the graduate students in this study would seem to belie the desirability of such a narrow focus. Many of the cited periodicals had assigned LC subclasses outside of the range traditionally associated with sociology, and a sizeable percentage of the cited articles came from entirely other fields. Thus, it would seem that graduate students would certainly benefit from a database that samples widely and gathers together pertinent articles from other fields, even if these fields, according to the lore of library science, have little or nothing to do with sociology proper.

Of course, the question of most interest to librarians looking to make collection development decisions would be, "To which database should I subscribe?" If one is concerned with serving graduate students in the field, it would seem that *SocINDEX* covered the cited literature of sociology and the pertinent cited literature of other fields better than did *Sociological Abstracts*, often to a statistically significant degree. It would also seem, from the "Unique Coverage" columns of the several tables presented above, that *Sociological Abstracts* provided little in the way of unique coverage that would mitigate *SocINDEX*'s advantages.

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

As is always the case with this sort of study, the issues of generalizability and local utility apply. The authors would contend that the use of randomized samples and of source material from two different campuses should be somewhat reassuring to the studies' readers concerning its generalizability, but there still remains the possibility that the two universities' departments of sociology are sufficiently idiosyncratic that the study's results will not apply universally. Conversely, it is entirely possible that the readers' departments of sociology are sufficiently idiosyncratic that the hopefully widely applicable results of this study do not apply to the readers' more unique situations. The study's results may also not apply to other sociology-specific audiences, such as sociology faculty or undergraduate students, or to audiences from other fields with an interest in the literature of sociology.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the four articles in the review of literature above provided a quick entrée into an understanding of the potential utility of the two databases, all of them, as does the current study, suffered from shortcomings that should be ameliorated by further research. Firstly, and quite obviously, one could usefully add to the literature by replicating and validating the results of this study and of the earlier studies reported on in the review of literature. Secondly, and also quite obviously, one could usefully add to the literature by examining the utility of the databases for other populations of researchers. Wheeler's audience, presumably, was sociologists in general. Todd's

population of interest was undergraduate and graduate students in sociology at her institution. Stoddart et al. focused their evaluation on the presumed needs of criminologists and researchers in criminal justice administration. Mellone addressed both the presumed needs of sociologists in general and the needs of hypothetical undergraduate students in sociology completing an assignment at his institution in particular. This study attempted to address the actual needs of graduate students in sociology that had completed their theses and dissertations at two universities in the Midwest. There are, of course, other potential audiences for *Sociological Abstracts* and for *SocINDEX*. Thirdly, of the studies published so far that compare the utility of the two databases, only this study has looked into how well the literature that has actually been cited by patrons has been indexed by the databases in question. Fourthly, no study, to our knowledge, has employed the indexed serials lists of the two databases to perform an in-depth analysis of just how much coverage the two databases provide for the sources they claim to cover. That is to say, no one has compared the databases in terms of the numbers of articles indexed for each listed periodical, so no one really knows, when the database providers claim to have indexed a journal, just how much of that journal has actually been indexed. Lastly, given what this study discovered concerning sociology graduate students' citation behaviors, especially where citation to articles from sociology-adjacent fields and from unconnected fields is concerned, it certainly may be worthwhile to examine whether sociologists' needs might not better be met by a large, multi-subject database than by a smaller, discipline-specific one. Previous research on other fields that have a strong interdisciplinary character and/or porous disciplinary boundaries suggests that this may well be the case (Lasda Bergman 2011, Tyler et al. 2005, Walters 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions to be drawn from this study should be fairly obvious to the reader. For these graduate students in sociology, neither database was, on its own, entirely adequate to their needs. *SocINDEX* provided much better coverage of the cited articles from peer reviewed journals than did *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Sociological Abstracts* provided comparatively little in the way of unique coverage to mitigate *SocINDEX*'s advantage. Where other sorts of cited items—books, book chapters, commercial and trade magazines, law reviews, conference papers, etc.— were concerned, it is difficult to say which database provided the superior coverage, either because the graduate students cited too few items or because the databases provided too little coverage to support analysis. Both databases claim to cover sources other than peer-reviewed journal articles, but their performance in this study with respect to these other sorts of sources would lead one to question whether they have not been indexing enough of them or whether they have simply not been indexing the right ones. With respect to the breadth of *SocINDEX*'s

subject coverage, as compared to *Sociological Abstracts'* more narrowly focused coverage, the authors are inclined to conclude that prior authors' assertions concerning the unwanted clutter in *SocINDEX* would be incorrect for graduate students in sociology. Where graduate students in sociology are concerned, more was decidedly better.

Concerning studies of this type, the authors are inclined to conclude that the prior studies, in their approach, were not entirely adequate to the needs of the field. First, in employing the databases' indexed serials lists, all relied too uncritically on the databases' avowed coverage. They, in essence, compared the vendors' title lists rather than analyzing the databases. None of these articles provided in-depth, comparative analyses of the extent of the indexing given to the journals in the indexed serials lists, and while Todd did note the presence of "surprise" citations in *Sociological Abstracts*, none provided in-depth analysis of the indexing given to journals not appearing on the lists, either.

Additionally, in our opinion, the authors of the previous studies also appear to have been too quick to exercise their own expert opinions. Three of the four criticized *SocINDEX* for the breadth of its coverage, yet none examined whether the results of their mock searches contained items that sociology researchers have cited in their research. They simply praised or cast aspersions based upon attitudes that they appear to have brought to, rather than derived from, their analyses. Last, none of the prior authors made an attempt, as did this study, to ascertain whether items that had actually been cited by an actual population of sociology researchers had been indexed by either or both of the databases. They relied, instead, on their sense of the needs of the field and of its hypothetical researchers and students.

In short, the approach of all four previous articles toward assessing whether the needs of their several populations of researchers would be met by the databases was largely assumptive and relied heavily on information published by the database providers and on their own attitudes and professional judgments. While articles of this sort are obviously quite useful and while it is frequently necessary to rely on vendor information, expert opinion, and professional judgment, future articles that examine whether databases have met the real needs of real researchers would certainly serve to complement articles of the other sort and to validate or invalidate the accuracy of their assumptions and conclusions. It would, of course, be impossible to perform a study such has just been completed prior to making every collection development and collection management decision, but when one considers the thousands, if not tens or hundreds of thousands, of dollars that academic libraries spend on online databases, it would certainly seem to be worthwhile to perform a study of this sort occasionally, just to reassure oneself that one

is indeed spending money on resources that meet actual patrons' actual needs. As the Russian proverb would have,

librarians should trust, but verify.

ENDNOTES

1. Percentages have been rounded throughout.

2. The authors' approach, which employs what may seem to be redundant searches, was necessary to avoid false negatives in the results due to error, both database error and author error. *Sociological Abstracts'* hits had just twenty-eight content errors, and *SocINDEX* had only fourteen content errors. The authors of the theses and dissertations provided at least 245 pieces of erroneous information. Error is, of course, inescapable, and both databases performed well in the authors' opinion. The graduate students, on the other hand, potentially could have greatly tainted the results of the study.

3. Of course, were one to combine the two paired samples into a single larger sample as the authors will be doing throughout, one would no longer be dealing with a sample created with a purely equal probability selection method. SIUC's cited items had a 1/8,920 chance of being selected (1/9,521 if one were to forgive the citations missing from the initial draw) and UNL's cited items had a 1/9,425 chance of being included in the draw (1/4,069 and 1/5,395, respectively, for the periodicals-only samples). The authors are inclined to believe that each item's chances of being chosen were sufficiently close to being equal that a discussion of the samples as larger, combined samples would not be amiss.

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