

The decline and fall of book reviews in Psychology: A bibliometric analysis

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Abstract

Book reviews have been published in psychology journals since 1900 – and possibly before then. Approximately 200 such reviews were published each year until the 1950s and this number increased to nearly 600 before 1990. However, since then, the number of book reviews in psychology journals has reverted back to the current rate of approximately 200 a year.

Keywords: book reviews; impact factors, Web of Science

Introduction

Nicolaisen (2002) has provided a brief, but informative, survey of the scholarliness of book reviews in the social sciences, and Liu, Ding & Gu (in press) have more recently assessed the patterns and dynamics of book reviews published in the sciences, the arts and the social sciences. Liu et al found that the absolute numbers of book reviews in these different disciplines remained relatively stable but that their relative shares were changing. In addition, they found that book reviews were very common in the arts and humanities, common in the social sciences, but rarer in the natural sciences.

In this paper we report our findings using a similar methodology for a single subject-matter – that of Psychology – although this discipline in itself contains many different sub-disciplines - ranging from the soft (e.g., psychotherapy) to the hard sciences (e.g. neuropsychology). We carried out this research to substantiate - or not – the current view that printed book reviews are declining in this information age.

Method

In this study we used the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED) database of the Web of Science from Thomson Reuters (updated on 02 December 2016) to provide the data. According to the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) of 2015, there were 76 journals listed in the Web of Science category of psychology, and a total of 287,037 book reviews from 1900 to 2015. However, we refined these results by selecting the Web of Science category of Psychology, which gave us 22,988 book reviews to work with.

In addition, to further simplify matters, we:

- re-classified articles originating from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales as originating from the United Kingdom (UK).
- re-classified Yugoslavian affiliations to be in Croatia.
- checked that affiliations in Czechoslovakia were classified as being from the Czech

Republic.

- checked that affiliations in Federal Republic of Germany, East Germany, and West Germany were classified as being from Germany.
- re-checked that affiliations in USSR were checked to be from Russia.
- re-checked, similarly, that the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences (Acad Med Sci USSR) was checked to be the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences (Russian Acad Med Sci), and that the Czechoslovak Acad Sci was checked to be the Czech Republic Acad Sci.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 shows both the number of book reviews in each decade and their citations per publication. It can be seen that there was an increase in the number of book reviews from the 1910s until the 1930s, then a lull until the 1960s, then an increase to the 1970s, and then a steady decline since the 1990s. In addition Figure 1 also shows that, despite the ‘gee-whiz’ nature of the graph, that book reviews in Psychology *are hardly cited at all* (with highest book reviews being cited only 0.65 times in the 2000s).

Figure 2 shows i) the distribution of number of book reviews in the Web of Science without author information, ii) the number of book reviews without any citations, and iii) the number of book reviews have been cited at least once.

Conclusions

The data do indeed show that the number of published book reviews in psychology is declining. We now need to replicate this study with other disciplines to see if this is specific to psychology or is a more general case. It is possible that the number of published book reviews in paper-based journals may be declining for at least two reasons: i) it takes too long to publish reviews in a paper-based journal compared with publishing them on a web-based

system, and ii) because (as shown in Figure 1) book reviews are hardly cited at all by others, then editors may prefer to use the space for more citable articles.

References

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Nicolaisen, J. (2002). The scholarliness of published peer reviews: A bibliometric study of book reviews in selected social science fields. *Research Evaluation*, 11 (3), 129-140.

Figure 1. The number of book reviews published in Psychology and their citations, 1900s – 2010s

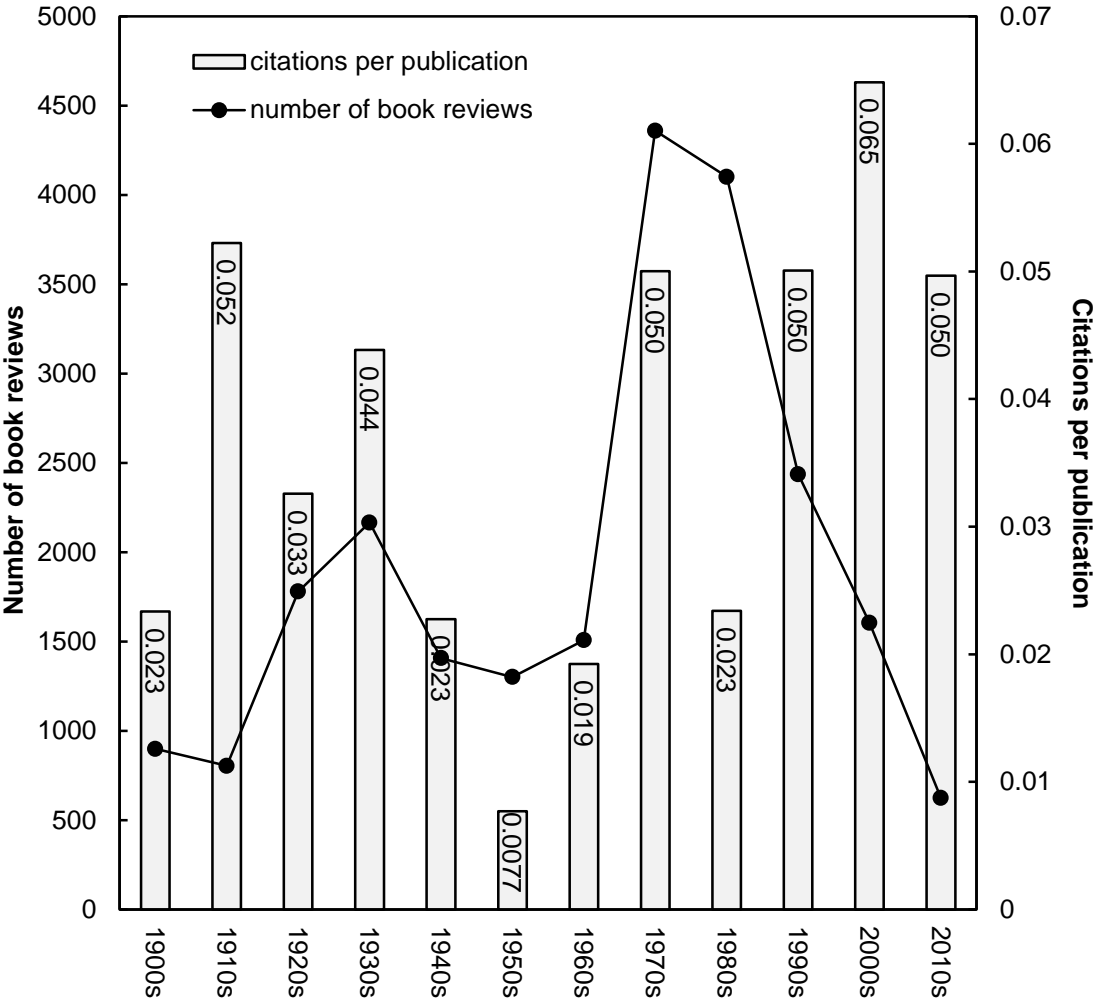


Figure 2. The number of book reviews published in Psychology since 1900 that have been cited at least once, or not cited at all, and the number published anonymously.

