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1. INTRODUCTION

In Sweden, as elsewhere, the development of evidence-based practice (EBP) has been debated for over a decade now. One of the issues concerns the top-down strategy used by Swedish government to enhance the knowledge about interventions in social work practice (Bergmark & Lundström, 2011; Denvall & Johansson, 2012). Critiques of this top-down approach argue that this is not a feasible way forward; instead the social work profession needs to take over the leadership. And, arguably, this calls for structures that enable professionals and researchers to engage in practice-relevant research to solve current and urgent problems. Two assumptions have been argued in the debate. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners, or rather between academia and practice, could on the one hand contribute to making research knowledge more beneficial to social work practice and thus their clients, and on the other hand, that such collaboration stimulates interesting research questions (Austin et al., 1999; Börjeson & Johansson, 2014; Julkunen, Karvinen-Niinikoski, Marthinsen, Rasmussen, & Uggerhøj, 2012; Osterling & Austin, 2008).

This could thus be related to what has been suggested as the two communities theory, viewed as a bridge between the community of research and the community of practice, also described as the political-administrative community (Caplan, 1979). Such forms of knowledge production in collaboration have been called Mode-2. According to some studies it has actually shown to increase research use among practitioners (Huberman, 1990; Osterling &
Austin, 2008; Walter, Davies, & Nutley, 2003) and thus might be a reasonable way to further develop EBP in social work in Sweden. At the beginning of the discussions of EBP in Swedish social work there were actually several initiatives supported by the Swedish government in line with this collaborative agenda, although with varying long-term impact on practice. These initiatives faded out and the strategy used by the Swedish government is characterized by short and ad hoc operations which have not contributed to a long-term development for the benefit of the social service professionals or their clients (Denvall, Lernå, & Nordesjö, 2014). One of the ideas that were introduced, now rather forgotten, was the idea of an academic social service office as a potentially fruitful way forward.

**Aim and methods**

The aim of this paper is to analyse conditions for new pathways between Swedish social work practice and research and to critically review the idea of academic social services offices. We review research that has reported from similar initiatives from Swedish health care and from collaboration between academia and social work in the Swedish context and abroad. The following questions will be addressed:

- What characterizes an academic social services office?
- What are the opinions of management in charge when considering this pathway?
- What are the recommendations from research?

To fulfil the purpose of this paper, we have gathered empirical material in the form of opinions from managers by both surveys and interviews as well as several more informal meetings and gatherings with social service managers in our networks. In the interviews we have focused upon how they view and try to develop the knowledge base in their organizations.

FSS (The cooperation of Swedish managers in Social Welfare) is an independent socio-political organization working for development and innovation in Swedish welfare, founded in 1938. Most of the 650 members are leaders in the social services and related organizations. It has been a radical and highly influential force aiming to develop social welfare in Sweden,
working to support the use of the best knowledge, both from experience and from scientific evidence.¹

Two questionnaires were sent to members of the association over a period of ten years. A postal survey in 2005 was answered by 71% of the respondents, and a web survey in 2015 was answered by 49% of the members. Analyses of the dropout in 2015 showed the same gender for those who did not answer as for those who did respond, i.e. 70% of women and 30% men.

2005: 8 out of 10 are managing directors, 2 of 3 are between 51 and 60 years old, one in five has been a member for more than fifteen years
2015: 7 out of 10 are management executives, every second one is aged between 51 and 60, and one in ten has been a member for more than fifteen years

In summary, more women than men responded to the 2015 survey, they are slightly younger than ten years ago and with a shorter period as a member of the FSS.

We are also in the process of conducting a literature review in which we focus upon opportunity structures as well as potential pitfalls when working in collaboration. Some restrictions need to be mentioned. For example, we understand that there is a large amount of literature from other fields such as pedagogy, public health and industry which we have not included in this review. Also, studies focusing on how to involve users in the research process have not directly been searched for, although some of the studies also include users in the knowledge development process.

So far, two major searches for peer-reviewed articles have been conducted in Social Services Abstracts and Academic Search Premier using the search words: social work, social agencies, social services, research and practice, partnership and cooperation. Also, we have reviewed four special issues in journals related to our topic; Social Work & Society (2011), Nordic Social Work Research (2014), Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work (2015) and Research on Social Work Practice (2014). In this first compilation only studies clarifying data are analysed. However, a large share of the studies found so far (almost 100) are descriptions of collaborative efforts with an unclear presentation of what constitutes data from authors, and/or more theoretical or normative discussions. These have been excluded.

¹ http://www.socialchefer.se/
2. THE SWEDISH CONTEXT FOR EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In Sweden, social work was initiated as a research discipline at the universities in the late 1970s, aiming to contribute to the development of knowledge and method in the practice of social work. And ever since, research in social work has been criticized for failing this mission. Instead, researchers have, according to some, mainly been occupied with conducting “misery research” meaning that they (we) have criticized the performance of the social services and/or the shortcomings of social workers (Oscarsson, 2009). It is against this background we should understand the Swedish state authority’s establishment of institutes (CUS & IMS) outside the universities aimed at strengthening the knowledge base of social work practice. The rather varied intensity at the local research and development units (R&D) emerging in the late 1990s in Sweden could be viewed as an example of initiatives aimed at strengthening the knowledge base of social work. In some municipalities R&D units are rather well-established whereas others (often smaller ones) totally lack this resource.

The social services in Sweden are organized within the 290 municipalities operating under the Social Services Act (SoL 2001:453). In 2012 the total funding for the social services (including services for older and disabled people which in Sweden are included in the social services) was 200 billion SEK (Socialstyrelsen, 2015). The municipalities are constantly under economic pressure and it is doubtful whether they are able to fund relevant research. Eight years ago the report Evidence-based practice within the social care services – to the users’ benefit (SOU 2008:18) concluded that the Swedish government has a responsibility to support the municipalities through funding to strive towards EBP. However, as mentioned above, since then we have witnessed an agenda characterized by short and ad hoc operations that have not contributed to a long-term development for the benefit of the social service professionals or their clients.

So, the preconditions for developing and implementing EBP seem rather limited so far. But funding and infrastructure are not everything. If we acknowledge that the professional social worker is the hub in EBP (as a seeker, interpreter, applier and evaluator of knowledge in practice) we indeed need a profession interested in conducting EBP (McBeath & Austin, 2014). But in Sweden EBP has not been a project driven by the profession; instead it is driven top-down by the government (Bergmark & Lundström, 2011; Denvall & Johansson, 2012) with the aim being to “pull social work practice out of the world of opinions and untested
knowledge and introduce it into the world of evidence and awareness about what works and what is potentially harmful in social work interventions” (Sundell, Soydan, Tengvald, & Anttila, 2010, s. 714).

The Swedish context for EBP in social work thus differs from that in, for example, the USA and also from medicine, the origin of EBP. It should however be noted that, even if the profession has not taken over the baton, research shows that attitudes towards the idea of EBP are relatively favourable – the majority of the social work professionals want their practice to be characterized by the latest research and by evaluated interventions. Keeping up to date on the state of research in their areas of expertise and seeking studies relevant to practice-related problems does not appear to be particularly common, however (Bergmark & Lundström, 2011). This possibly has to do with a combination of the profession’s strong attachment to the social service organization (when considering control over one’s own work) while this same organization in many respects lacks the basic structures to support EBP (Alexanderson, 2009; Börjeson, 2014; M. Johnson & Austin, 2008).

3. INTRODUCING THE IDEA OF AN ACADEMIC SOCIAL SERVICE OFFICE IN SWEDISH SOCIAL WORK

Previously we drew attention to the critique that the university-based research has met with; namely that it conducts “misery-research”. What this means is of course a matter of definition. We would argue, for example, that research criticizing and problematizing the welfare system and the activities might be of great relevance. This is not the problem. Instead we would add a dimension, namely research conducted within the social service organizations, grounded in the issues social workers face in their daily execution of social work practice. In medicine, this is an obvious element. Every Swedish hospital is affiliated with an academic environment offering structures and opportunities (funds, supervisor and other resources) for research-minded physicians, nurses or other professions to conduct practice-relevant research, and doing this is considered a merit. Also, we see an interesting development in primary care in different parts of Sweden. Primary care centres have formed networks and mobilized resources to conduct clinical relevant research in situ.2

In Swedish social work, the possibilities for social workers to conduct practice-research, as a part of their work, on their own or in collaboration with university-based researchers are today

2 See for example https://www.skane.se/sv/Webbplatser/FoU-samlingsnod/Centrum-for-Primarvardsforskning/ http://akademiskavardcentraler.se/.
rather slim if not entirely absent. Such possibilities however existed a few years in the mid-
00s in Sweden but those experiences seem not have had any obvious strong imprint in
practice (Denvall et al., 2014). This could be contrasted, for example, with the development in
Finland where practice-research are more or less institutionalized in law.

The Matilda-Wrede Institute in Helsinki is an example of this strategic effort to conduct
research close to the practice of social work with the explicit aim being to “create scientific
knowledge that has practical value, and to generate practical knowledge through empirical
studies on a local level” (Julkunen, 2011). In an analysis of the differences between
knowledge management within the social services in Sweden and Finland, Lena Hübner
concludes that in Sweden we have had so-called mediators (who translate the idea of EBP to a
Swedish context) at our central agencies with strong ties to the Campbell Collaboration, and
also American researchers who proposed a more radical version of EBP, that is (imported)
evidence-based methods and the production of national guidelines (Hübner, 2015). In Finland,
on the other hand, knowledge production seems to have taken a more bottom-up stance, with
evaluations and research conducted close to the actual social work practice. Another example
from social work is the Bay Area Social Service Consortium in San Francisco, USA. This
consortium was developed more than 30 years year ago and aims at promoting interaction
between social service organizations and academia (Austin et al., 1999).

There is thus no need to reinvent the wheel. We find examples of how a rapprochement
between research and practice can be achieved. It is time to develop academic social service
offices in Sweden. Such offices have a research capability, that is professionals with time and
resources to conduct practice-based research and connected to a larger network of offices and
also to a university nearby. We are however sensitive to the importance of practice
formulating its own agenda and direction here. As one manager in our collaborating agencies
said;

_We have to find out what we need to know, and we are about to systematize that now.
Otherwise, the academy is going to tell us what we need to know, and it is probably not
the most viable way forward._

4. APPROACHING THE MANAGERS

Respondents were asked to take a stance on eight strategic propositions about EBP on a five-
point scale and were also given the possibility to reflect in open writing. In the table below
answers in the middle (3) are deleted, answers 1–2 are presented as “Very bad” and answers 4–5 as “Very good”. Comparisons are made between 2005 and 2015. Two new questions were added in the 2015 survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I regard this proposition..., percentage</th>
<th>2005 N: 254</th>
<th>2015 N: 252</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>Very bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The social services must conduct their own clinical research</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The social services should hire personal with a Ph.D.</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 A Ph.D. should be an important employment criteria for managers in the social services</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The social services should only engage in activities which have been assessed or evaluated</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Decisions within social services must be based on evidence-based knowledge</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 The journey towards evidence-based social work must continue</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Increased user participation improves the quality of the social services</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Activities within the social services should to a greater extent be controlled by national guidelines and regulations</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Survey to members of FSS 2005 and 2015.

Question 1: A majority of the members support the idea of clinical research, but they mention objections, skills and shortages.

_We who are operating in smaller municipalities are not able to achieve research on our own, to possess PhD staff, etc. We are very happy if we can hire skilled social workers!_

_Higher demands require new staff with more skills_

Question 2: Here there has been a substantial change in attitudes in the decade since the last survey. Half of the members would now consider hiring postdoctoral employees – even if there is some suspicion, see below.
No problem if it is in proper context – so for the benefit of the social work.  
One might get a geek ...

Question 3: In health care it is common for management positions to be combined with a postgraduate degree. When speaking about social work, however, doubts among the associations members are palpable.

Being a manager consists of other components than being scholars.

Questions 4–8: We find a nearly one hundred percent commitment to the orientation towards knowledge-based social services. In the table above we also notice a massive support for the belief that user involvement increases the quality of social service activities. Confidence in user participation is obvious. In contrast, the statement that the social services should increasingly be guided by national policies and regulations does not gain strong support; only slightly more than half of the members support that view.

Simply using methods that are “certified” after being evaluated is taking it too far. The same applies to evidence-based knowledge in the sense that everything is researched and proven. It would be restrictive.

Commitment also requires time for reflection and the opportunity to discuss to a greater extent than there is time for at present. In addition, of course, an understanding is required in both politicians and managers about the importance of the municipal administration’s involvement by virtue of their profession and expertise. Furthermore, the cooperation between the local administrations needs to be improved and strengthened.

In summary results show that managers are very positive to the idea of evidence-based social work, but this should not rely on national policies. They are moving towards an organization where skills in research are more sought for. According to the managers, however, this knowledge should not be an important skill within their own field of expertise.

5. APPROACHING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In order to investigate the possible ground for a more practice-based evidence development in collaboration between academia and practice in the Swedish social services, we are conducting a literature review focusing on empirical investigations of collaboration efforts. In essence, we are interested in how to fail or how to succeed in collaborating for knowledge
production. The conclusions that can be drawn from this search are not surprising, although it is well worth reflecting about facilitating and hampering factors when planning for and implementing a collaborative research effort (Fook, Johannessen, & Psinozos, 2011).

In this context we included 11 peer-reviewed studies of collaboration efforts between academia and practice with relevance for social work. Five were from the USA, two from Norway, two from Canada, one from Australia and one from New Zealand. Mainly qualitative data were gathered (Allen-Meares, Hudgins, Engberg, & Lessnau, 2005; Beddoe & Harington, 2012; Bellamy, Bledsoe, Mullen, Fang, & Manuel, 2008; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Cassity & Ang, 2006; Dal Santo, Goldberg, Choice, & Austin, 2002; Fook et al., 2011; M. A. Johnson, Wells, Testa, & McDonald, 2003; King et al., 2010; Moe, Tronvoll, & Gjeitnes, 2014; Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, 2011).

Three different types of organizing collaboration were identified. First, *loosely*, by interested persons coming together to solve or highlight some important issues. Second, *person- and/or project-bound*. Here it is primarily researchers that wish to learn more about how research utilization can be stimulated by involving professionals and clients. Lastly, *developing a variety of infrastructures*, where a multitude of projects are undertaken. In the studies above barriers and facilitators for successful collaboration were identified; these will be illustrated below and are summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to succeed</th>
<th>How to fail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively work to trust each other</td>
<td>Allow no time for collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relationships face-to-face</td>
<td>Have high staff turnover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve all partners in setting the target for the research</td>
<td>Allow no research funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate thoroughly the preconditions (for example willingness to participate) for research collaboration</td>
<td>Belittle this kind of research experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have managers (both in academia and in practice) explicitly encourage collaboration efforts</td>
<td>Have competing development projects in the social service organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build on previous positive collaborations</td>
<td>Have previous negative experiences of collaborations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2; How to succeed and how to fail collaboration between academia and social work

*How to succeed in collaborative efforts*

First we will address the question of how to succeed with collaborative efforts. Several studies (Allen-Meares et al., 2005; Beddoe & Harington, 2012; Cassity & Ang, 2006; Fook et al., 2011; Moe et al., 2014; Perrault et al., 2011) highlight mutual respect, understanding and trust
as an important part of collaboration. Partners from different domains emphasize respect for the other as a precondition for establishing successful partnerships. This means respecting the other’s view of what needs to be done, as well as their area of expertise. In concrete terms, this means listening to the other collaborators’ concerns when actively working to create trust. For researchers, it could be a matter of stepping away from the role of being an expert (Allen-Meares et al., 2005). One of the included studies (Perrault et al., 2011) concludes that trust is strengthened if collaborators actively work to “build trust around the table” from the very beginning.

If there are already established relations (formal as well as more informal) between collaborators, a new project is more likely to succeed given that the relations are viewed as positive by the participants. Here the research also highlights the importance of face-to-face interactions in strengthening the relationships (Allen-Meares et al., 2005; Beddoe & Harington, 2012; Bellamy et al., 2008; Cassity & Ang, 2006; Dal Santo et al., 2002; Fook et al., 2011; M. A. Johnson et al., 2003; Perrault et al., 2011).

Another facilitating factor for collaborative research production involves making all partners feel ownership of the research conducted (Allen-Meares et al., 2005; Beddoe & Harington, 2012; Cassity & Ang, 2006; Dal Santo et al., 2002; Fook et al., 2011; Perrault et al., 2011). In the study conducted by Dal Santo et al. (Dal Santo et al., 2002) it was clear that of the nine projects analysed in their study it was the ones that involved both managers and operational staff in the planning, execution and implementation of research that were judged to have greatest relevance. And in Allen-Meares et al. (Allen-Meares et al., 2005) it was noted that all partners need to have a say about the aim of the projects and that this often took more time than expected. Fook et al. (Fook et al., 2011) argue that the following questions should be dealt with initially in order to clarify and challenge the way one partner with the most power steers the partnership:

1. Whose starting points, assumption and premises seem to dominate?
2. Who has the power to decide? If I step back in my role and give up my power to decide, who steps forward and takes over?
3. Which actors have power over the research agenda?

In the early stages when the goals of the collaboration are made clear, it is also important to examine the participants’ actual willingness to engage in knowledge development in
collaboration. By clarifying the goals, the operational parts can be concretized (Fook et al., 2011). This factor is related to the differences in logics recognized also in the two-communities theory. If the logic for the researcher’s participating, for example, is solely to publish papers, the preconditions for collaborative knowledge production are rather slim. And if social workers or other collaborators from practice aren’t willing to accept and buy into the fundamental principles of research and knowledge production, it is rather difficult to advance collaboration (Bellamy et al., 2008).

Another lesson learned is that managers have a central role to play. Both in academia and in the social service agencies, they need to ask for and also encourage practice-based research (Allen-Meares et al., 2005; Beddoe & Harrington, 2012; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013). As evident in one of the studies (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013), the universities need to encourage the staff to collaborate and to make it a part of potential promotions. An important factor for the managers is to make sure that the research results are communicated back to the involved actors, both orally and in writing (Dal Santo et al., 2002).

How to fail in collaborative efforts

Interestingly, the studies were keener to identify what factors will make collaboration succeed rather than factors that will make them fail. This could be a result of the questions asked in the included studies; what key factors can be identified? How to develop and make partnership improve the social services? What makes collaborations succeed? And so on. However, some conclusions could be drawn from the researchers about how to fail in collaborations.

The lack of necessary time was identified in several of the studies as one of the major challenges when doing research in collaboration with academia (Beddoe & Harrington, 2012; Bellamy et al., 2008; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013). The research has to compete with an intense work-load in the organizations. In a study by Beddoe and Harrington (Beddoe & Harrington, 2012) this factor is also connected to the fact that several of the participants left the organization during the time the research was being conducted, or in some cases a major restructuring of the organization affected the collaboration negatively. Similar conclusions were drawn by Dal Santo et al. (Dal Santo et al., 2002). The fact that operating social service personnel were involved in several parts of the research process combined with a high staff turnover meant that the line of demarcation that sometimes needs to be sustained (Börjeson & Johansson, 2014; Uggerhøj, 2011, 2014) constantly needed to be negotiated. Therefore, they (Dal Santo et al., 2002) argue, “it is important to determine which staff, departments, agencies
and stakeholders should be involved in clarifying the research objective, interpreting the findings, and assessing the recommendations” (p. 76). In a review conducted on the implementation of EBP, lack of time was also identified as a major barrier (Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb, 2012).

Of course, if research is going to be conducted, funding is required. In a study by Bledsoe-Mansori and colleagues (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013) it is concluded that quite modest resources are available in the United States to finance research projects in close collaboration between academia and practice.

Also, it seems as if the kind of collaborative efforts with practice render few if any career opportunities for university-based researchers. Doing research in collaboration takes time and may not be a good precondition for academic publishing, which is the most viable way of achieving academic qualifications. This is thus something of a catch 22, because, as stated in one study, “results from practice-grounded research do not need to be ground-breaking or publishable. They can have tremendous impact by being presented simply and accessibly within a team, agency or community” (Beddoe & Harington, 2012) (p. 88).

However, the other party, practice, may also have a distorted view of how fast results from research may be available, as for instance in one study which largely confirms the two-communities thesis about different logics. Practitioners expect results to be produced quickly and be of such a character that they can be applied instrumentally (Cassity & Ang, 2006).

The legacy of previous poor collaborations should also be viewed as a factor that increases the risk of failure. For example, Allen-Meares and colleagues (Allen-Meares et al., 2005) talk about how such starting points risk reinforcing a suspicion towards researchers. Their study shows how it is particularly important for researchers to show that they are dedicated to the declaration of intent behind the collaboration; that is, active participation and influence by all partners involved in the research.

Here we can undertake a small excursus and present a domestic example. As previously mentioned, in the mid-00s there were some collaboration projects initiated by the Swedish government and one of these cases (Sociorama) was followed up recently. The authors conclude:

*The organization 2002–2009 shows how the form of the project led to implementation problems when Sociorama was to turn to more regular activities*
within an existing organizational context with other economic and organizational conditions. Furthermore, changes within staff and ambiguous organizational and steering conditions resulted in poor engagement and lack of strategic planning, at the same time as activities on a national level created new rules and conditions. The municipalities submitted their questions to a new R&D unit in which the care-related needs were prioritized. The County Council wanted to focus on their main questions in health care and started collaboration with the newly established university. This shift weakened the importance of Sociorama. The former project manager left Sociorama for new assignments, other personnel from the municipals entered, the economic carrots disappeared and interest in Sociorama faded away. (Denvall et al., 2014)

In our talks with managers in this region they confirm that the experiences of Sociorama are not only positive. As one manager who was active in this period put it:

*We were drained of our most capable social workers, when they were given the opportunity to share their work between practice and research. The truth is that research became the dominating activity for them, and towards the end they were mainly in the corridors of academia with little connection left here. Today, they have totally vanished.*

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have presented the idea of implementing what we call academic social service offices. This is not new; we saw examples of it in the mid-00s, although they had a lean long-term impact (see the quote above). However, there are examples abroad of more stable structures, the Matilda Wrede Institute in Finland and the Bay Area Social Service Consortium in San Francisco, USA, are two such examples. And in Sweden too, if we just glance at the field of medicine, they have completely different possibilities to conduct and implement results from research compared to social work.

Results show that Swedish top managers are positive towards the idea of EBP in social work. The tricky thing seems to be to get it working and to stabilize the connection between academia and practice. Many threats are present, the most obvious of which are lack of time and money. Since we lack structures at present, these have to be built up. As for research, we do not find any typical role models. Each of the good examples presented in the literature
seems to have a history of its own that has created a stable organization. Too often research that has followed experiments is narrow or normative, thus providing limited support. The way ahead seems to be paved with good aspirations but with limited guidelines. Some are provided, though, and in the future we can expect a social services organization with more staff with a degree from research. Hopefully this will support the building of a knowledge-based culture within social work, gaining clients who have the right to receive high quality-service.
7. REFERENCES


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http://links.aps.org/doi/10.1300/J394v05n01_09


