Rigor in Qualitative Social Work Research: A Review of Strategies Used in Published Articles

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This study was conducted to describe strategies used by social work researchers to enhance the rigor of their qualitative work. A template was developed and used to review a random sample of 100 articles drawn from social work journals listed in the *2005 Journal Citation Reports: Science and Social Sciences Edition*. Results suggest that the most commonly applied strategies were use of a sampling rationale (67%), analyst triangulation (59%), and mention of methodological limitations (56%); the least common were negative or deviant case analysis (8%), external audit (7%), and specification of ontology (6%). Of eight key criteria, researchers used an average of 2.0 ($SD = 1.5$); however, the number used increased significantly between 2003 and 2008. The authors suggest that for this trend to continue, social work educators, journal editors, and researchers must reinforce the judicious application of strategies for enhancing the rigor of qualitative work.

KEY WORDS: *qualitative methods; research methods; rigor; social work research*

The social nature of inquiry is an ongoing challenge to the production of good research in social work. As the positivist belief in the potential objectivity of social work research has come into question, researchers using a range of paradigms have recognized the pervasive effects of human limitations and subjectivity. This has motivated some postpositivist researchers to carefully design their studies, using quantitative methods to minimize "bias" or "subjectivity." Over time, these efforts have become standardized as criteria to ensure the rigor of the work. In a postpositivist framework, these would be described as standards for establishing reliability and validity (Padgett, 2004).

As social research using qualitative methods has moved beyond anthropology and into the social sciences, researchers have had to grapple with the meanings of terms such as "objectivity," "reliability," and "validity" (among others) in a completely new context—one that insists on recognition of the interactive dimension of social inquiry. How can social work researchers using qualitative methods produce credible work when objectivity is no longer assumed or even pursued (Kincheloe, 2001; Padgett, 2004; Rolfe, 2004)?

Sometimes referred to as "criteriology," this question has been a conundrum for qualitative researchers for at least three decades. It has given rise to a substantial body of literature on criteria: whether they are needed, what they should be called, how and when they should be implemented, and whether they can be used to evaluate the quality of the work (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Emden & Sandelowski, 1998, 1999; Kincheloe, 2001; Marshall, 1989; Rolfe, 2004, Seale, 1999, 2002; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). We discuss the main points of this literature here as background to the present study.

Dialogue about criteria started in the early 1980s as qualitative methods became more visible in the social sciences (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Early discussions about criteria, such as Kirk and Miller's (1986) *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*, were based on postpositivist research assumptions. Lincoln and Guba proposed criteria based on the terms "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "confirmability," which were based on the postpositivist concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Lincoln (1995) rightly calls these early efforts, including her own, "foundationalist": "These criteria. . . . rested in assumptions that had been developed for an empiricist philosophy of research, and spoke to the procedural and methodological concerns that characterize empiricist and post-empiricist research" (p. 276).

Although some objected to the use of these parallel terms, they did offer a useful vocabulary

for qualitative researchers to speak about their work with those unfamiliar with qualitative methods and perspectives. Many writers incorporated these basic concepts as criteria, and they have endured and been further developed in the literature (Golafshani, 2003; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Whittemore et al., 2001). However, there is no consensus on what strategies or how many should be used to develop strong qualitative research.

Other writers (Denzin, 2002; Fade, 2003; Seale, 1999, 2002; Tobin & Begley, 2004) criticized the parallel concepts proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), noting that research paradigms in the qualitative tradition are philosophically based on relativism, which is fundamentally at odds with the purpose of criteria to help establish "truth." The foundationalist critique led Lincoln (1995) to reevaluate the earlier work and discuss emerging criteria in qualitative research, most of which bespoke a "relational" quality. These included the positionality or standpoint of the researcher, the role of community in research, voice, reflexivity, reciprocity and fluidity between researcher and researched, and sharing of the privileges of power. These emerging criteria focus attention on the relational aspects of knowing and of working to produce knowledge, leading us to question more deeply the links between the quality of the work and the relationships that form the context in which the work is developed.

The relational quality of the criteria poses another challenge for researchers in evaluating qualitative work and points to the subjective nature of judging the goodness or strength of such research (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998; Marshall, 1989). Marshall concluded in a public presentation that "evaluating the goodness and value of research requires a judgment call," regardless of the criteria used. Later, Lincoln (1995) recommended that qualitative researchers move beyond standardized criteria, uniformly applied, toward quality decisions that are made "locally" within the context and paradigm of a research project itself. Once we become comfortable with the subjective nature of doing and evaluating research, we can understand the flexible nature and broad range of criteria that may be used in qualitative research. Indeed, as Seale (1999, 2002) suggested, we come to see research more as a craft skill in which practitioners make "local" (or project-specific) decisions to enhance the quality of the end product.

Together, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and revised by Lincoln (1995) have become part of the ongoing discussion of evolving criteria. These criteria, and the strategies suggested to meet them, provide a good starting point for evaluating qualitative work.

Credibility involves generating confidence in the truth value of the findings of qualitative research, reminding ourselves that all texts are local, and all researchers write themselves into the text, and, thus, "truth" has a local quality to it (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Kincheloe, 2001; Saukko, 2005). Some strategies for strengthening credibility are prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member-checking (Lincoln, 1995). These strategies are important and do contribute to depth and detail; for example, prolonged engagement in fieldwork requires that a researcher spend sufficient time in a setting, developing trust and relationships, understanding a variety of perspectives, and co-constructing meanings with members of that setting.

Prolonged engagement helps a researcher to identify and "bracket" his or her preconceptions, identify and question distortions in the data, and essentially come to see and understand a setting as insiders see and understand it. How do we know prolonged engagement when we see it? Is it by the outcome of a study (that is, prolonged engagement produces rich description)? Is it by length of time? How long is long enough?

The same questions arise with persistent observation, intended as a strategy to deepen understanding. Generally, persistent observation requires a researcher "to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). How much observation is enough? We can already see with these two strategies that, as evaluators of research, we are dependent on an author's accountability in articulating his or her decisions regarding methods; accountability becomes an important standard for judging the quality of the work.

Triangulation, as a strategy to establish credibility, may involve multiple data, methods, analysts, or theories; originally, it referred to collecting data from multiple sources—for example, using interviews, observation, documents, and video recordings as data sources in one study. The purpose of triangulation

is to deepen understanding by collecting a variety of data on the same topic or problem with the aim of combining multiple views or perspectives and producing a stronger account rather than simply achieving consensus or corroboration.

Peer debriefing requires researchers to disclose their personal and methodological processes during the research to a disinterested peer, with the purpose of making explicit aspects of the work that might remain implicit within the researcher's mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Most researchers do this to a certain extent, by discussing their work with peers; this strategy asks researchers to engage in this process of discussion and questioning of their work in a consistent and systematic fashion and to record the process in notes that will be useful in the analysis. This strategy also supports researchers in exploring their perspectives, reactions, and analyses as they go through the research process.

Negative case analysis is used to challenge the emerging patterns or analyses in a study. Rather than accepting without question the dominant patterns that one observes, a negative case is selected with which to compare analytically the cases in the emerging pattern.

Member-checking is another technique for strengthening credibility in qualitative studies, but it is not without controversy. There are different approaches to implementing member-checks: Participants may read transcripts of their interviews and comment on accuracy or omissions; researchers may use individual or group discussions with participants to check representation in the data and analysis. Member-checking has been criticized as a strategy for establishing credibility. Rather than clarifying the meaning of data, participant reviews may confuse an issue by changing accounts from one time to another. Participants may see the data differently than researchers; whose view or account should prevail? Participants may have varying perspectives on the same data; again, whose view prevails? Member-checking, like triangulation, can be used to deepen understanding rather than as a corroborative strategy. By listening deeply and raising questions with participants, researchers have a chance to clarify or develop their thoughts, which will strengthen their findings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend the use of thick description to strengthen transferability, the parallel term for generalizability. Thick description involves rendering a deeply detailed account of one's work so that readers can judge the work's potential for application to other times, places, people, and contexts. But remember the "local" nature of interpretive work; to what extent is any work applicable to other contexts? Some would argue that transferability is a noncriterion, one that does not make sense within the qualitative paradigm.

An audit trail is one technique for developing confirmability in qualitative research; it is a record of the steps taken in the process of the research project from beginning to end and includes decisions made along the way that help illuminate and detail the entire process. Using the audit trail as a criterion again requires accountability or transparency on the part of the researcher and good record keeping throughout the process (Anfara et al., 2002).

Building on criteria discussed by Lincoln (1995), Creswell (2007) identified eight key strategies for establishing rigor and recommended that qualitative studies use at least two of them. His approach offers a practical synthesis of recommendations from other authors. The key strategies are prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, reflexivity (clarification of researcher bias), member-checking, thick description, and external audits.

Although strategies are important in helping researchers strengthen the quality of their work, they are difficult to apply in evaluating research. Not only is it important to know whether certain strategies were applied, it is critical that researchers be open and accountable in describing the choices they made to implement various approaches to establish credibility. Without accountability, the work simply cannot be judged. We approached this assessment of qualitative social work research asking two main questions: (1) To what extent are the eight strategies present in published social work articles? (2) What trends do we observe in the use of the key strategies?

METHOD

Although the irony of using statistical methods to examine qualitative research was not lost on us, such data proved appropriate to address the aims of this study. We see research as a "craft skill" and believe that research questions—rather than philosophy, personal preference, or convenience—should drive methodological decisions. This study used a retrospective descriptive approach, based on review of a random sample of published articles. Data were

recorded on a standardized template and analyzed using descriptive and bivariate procedures available in SPSS. In this section we discuss the researchers, the data collection template, issues concerning reliability, the sample, and the data-analysis procedures.

Researchers

Three researchers participated in this study. Two were senior faculty members in colleges of social work. Both were trained in the United States, and both had taught qualitative methods at the doctoral level. Of these two, one was trained in quantitative methods, coming to qualitative work midcareer, whereas the other was trained in and conducted her work exclusively using qualitative methods. The third researcher was a master's student in social anthropology at a New Zealand university who used qualitative interviews and analysis for her bachelor's and master's theses.

Template

Development of the template was a fairly lengthy process. We initially reviewed articles published from 1980 to the present on evaluation of rigor in qualitative research, then we developed and tested multiple drafts of the template. The final version fit (with some squeezing) on one piece of paper. It included a list of 19 strategies, including some that were not particular to qualitative methods but are hallmarks of good research, such as specification of theoretical framework, sampling rationale, analytic procedures, methodological limitations, protection of human subjects, and institutional review board (IRB) approval. We included the eight strategies that Creswell (2007) identified in their entirety. Other strategies were drawn from a range of sources, including our experience. These strategies included analyst and theory triangulation, audit trail, theoretical saturation, and articulation of ontology and/or epistemology. A list of strategies in the template is presented in Table 1.

The body of the document consisted of four columns: (1) strategy name, (2) description, (3) presence, and (4) notes. Several key decisions were made in development of the template. These were recorded in meeting summaries and e-mails, which were retained as an audit trail or record of the research process. Specific decisions included the following:

- Through multiple iterations, the descriptions of strategies were refined to reflect the consensus of the researchers informed by the literature.
- Response options for the presence of a strategy were "yes," "no," and "?," which indicated maybe or unclear.
- Notes were taken to record the reviewer's basis for deciding whether a strategy was used in cases in which there might be some ambiguity.
- In addition to notes related to the strategies, the reviewers recorded their identity; date of the review; the journal, year and article title; the sample size and data collection method(s); and whether the reviewer thought there was a good fit between the methods used and the author's conclusions.

Table 1: Percentages of Sampled Articles Using Each Strategy (*N* = 100)

Strategy	%
Sampling rationale provided	67
Analyst triangulation[a,b]	59
Problems/limitations specified	56
Analysis detailed	53
Theory or framework specified	50
Human subjects considerations addressed	44
Data triangulation[a,b]	36
Peer debriefing/review[a]	31
Member-checking[a]	31
Theory triangulation[a,b]	18
Persistent observation[a,c]	17
Thick description[a]	16
Reflexivity or use of self[a]	14
Prolonged engagement[a,c]	13
Audit trail	9
Theoretical saturation achieved	8
Negative/deviant case analysis[a]	8
External audit[a]	7
Ontology/epistemology specified	6

[a]One of Creswell's (2007) eight strategies.
[b]These strategies were combined as one in Creswell's formulation.
[c]These strategies were combined as one in Creswell's formulation.

Reliability

We used analyst triangulation to refine our definitions of the 19 strategies, measuring interrater agreement to test the consistency of our coding. To do this, all three reviewers separately coded two sets of five articles. After each set, we noted areas of disagreement and made any necessary revisions. This

process continued until all three reviewers agreed on at least 80% of the codes.

In subsequent data analysis, we computed a chi-square statistic for each of the items in the template by reviewer. This was done to check for consistent reviewer differences, and it resulted in the exclusion of one item, the fit between methods and conclusion, from further statistical analysis. No significant reviewer effects were observed for other items in the template.

Sample

A random sample of 100 articles was drawn from 27 journals listed under "social work" in the *2005 Journal Citation Reports (JCR): Science and Social Science Edition* (2006). To be eligible for inclusion in the study, an article must have involved collection and analysis of exclusively qualitative data. The initial pool of 487 articles included those published between 2003 and 2008 that had the word "qualitative" in either the abstract or keywords. This pool of articles was then numbered, and a random number generator selected 100.

As it turned out, 29% of the initial sample could not be used, either because the research did not involve the collection and analysis of data or because the authors used mixed methods. These articles were replaced with articles that met both sampling criteria. The resulting sample was distributed across all years, with concentration in 2005. The sample drew from all but three of the 27 journals listed in the JCR, with the largest percentages coming from the *British Journal of Social Work* (15%), *Health and Social Care in the Community* (13%), and *Child and Youth Services Review* (10%). The percentage in each journal is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentages of Sampled Articles, by Year and by Journal (*N* = 100)

Year	%
2003	13
2004	10
2005	25
2006	10
2007	20
2008	22
Journal	**%**
British Journal of Social Work	15
Health and Social Care in the Community	13
Child and Youth Services Review	10
Journal of Community Psychology	7
Social Work	6
International Journal of Social Welfare	6
Family Relations	5
Child & Family Social Work	5
Health & Social Work	4
Affilia	4
Journal of Social Policy	3
Child Abuse & Neglect	3
American Journal of Community Psychology	3
International Social Work	3
Research on Social Work Practice	2
Journal of Social Work Practice	2
Clinical Social Work Journal	2
Social Service Review	1
Journal of Social Work Education	1
Child Welfare	1
Journal of Social Service Research	1
Administration in Social Work	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work	1
Indian Journal of Social Work	1
Child Maltreatment	0
Social Work in Health Care	0
Social Work Research	0

Analysis

Initially, we set out to describe the strategies used in qualitative social work research. For these purposes, we computed simple descriptive measures, counting the number of times each response option (yes, no, maybe) was applied. After some consideration, we concluded that only the "yes" option (not "maybe") represented the unambiguous application of a strategy.

During the course of data collection and analysis, several questions arose that required the use of bivariate statistics. We wondered, for instance, whether the number of strategies used had changed during the time period under consideration (2003 through 2008). To gauge this trend, we computed the mean number of key strategies used on average in each year, then estimated the correlation between year published and number of strategies used to assess the likelihood that the trend we observed occurred by chance. A Pearson correlation coefficient was used for this purpose.

Subsequent analysis focused on trends in the use of specific strategies. To describe this, we calculated the percentage of each year's articles that used each

strategy. Then we computed a chi-square to gauge whether the association between year and use of the strategy was statistically significant.

Once statistical analysis of the data was complete, we undertook a process of peer review. (This process was declared "exempt" by the University of Utah IRB.) Five colleagues—located in New Zealand, France, and the United States—agreed to participate in the review of our preliminary findings. Three of these provided feedback individually, and two met with us one afternoon to discuss and interpret the study results. On the basis of their feedback, we undertook additional analysis and modified our interpretation of the findings.

RESULTS

Popular Strategies

The frequency of use for each strategy is presented in Table 1. Five strategies were used in more than half of the articles reviewed. The most popular strategy, used in 67% of articles, was a sampling rationale. Here, we examined each study, looking for the author's articulation of the sampling rationale used. A negative response on this strategy indicated that authors only mentioned convenience sampling. The next most popular approach, used in 59% of articles, was analyst triangulation. This strategy involved the use of multiple perspectives ("eyes") in interpretation of results. Specification of problems or limitations in a study, although not particular to qualitative research, was used in 56% of articles. Careful representation of analysis procedures was used in 53% of article. In these, the description of data analysis procedures was sufficiently detailed such that they could be replicated. Finally, 50% of articles presented studies that were clearly informed by a *theory* or *conceptual framework*, which we defined as broad ideas that predict or explain the phenomenon under consideration. Typically, this content was found in the introduction and discussion sections, though in some cases it was evident throughout the article. Some studies mentioned the use of grounded theory as a method but failed to offer a theory or conceptual framework based on their results.

Key Strategies

In this phase of the analysis, we examined authors' use of Creswell's (2007) eight strategies: triangulation (analyst, data, theory), peer debriefing, member-checking, persistent observation or prolonged engagement, reflexivity or use of self, thick description, negative case analysis, and external audit. Creswell grouped all three forms of triangulation as one strategy, which appeared in 77% of the articles reviewed. Triangulation typically involved the use of different individuals in analysis of data. This approach, known as "analyst triangulation," was used in over half (59%) of the articles. "Data triangulation," used in just over a third (36%), involved the use of different types of data, most commonly interviews and focus groups. Theory triangulation, use of divergent theoretical perspectives, was used in 18% of the studies. Typically, researchers reported using only one approach to triangulation, though 32% reported using two or more.

Peer debriefing or review involved a disinterested peer in the process of data analysis and interpretation. This approach was used in 31% of articles.

Member-checking, applied in 31% of articles, involved review of transcript or data interpretation by respondents or people who were related or similar. In these studies, authors typically invited respondents to review transcripts of their interviews or to comment on results of the study. Sometimes this was done in focus groups, and sometimes researchers invited people who were similarly situated to their respondents to review the work.

Considerably less frequently observed strategies were persistent observation or prolonged engagement (treated as one strategy by Creswell, 2007), used in 24% of studies; thick description, used in 16%; reflexivity, used in 14%, negative case analysis, used in 8%; and external audits, used in 7%.

Those studies using persistent observation spent sufficient time in the field in a *variety* of ways beyond the primary method for data collection, allowing a strong focus on an issue within the studied community, such as spending a year on the streets with homeless youths, participating, observing, and interviewing to address the topic of their resilience. Researchers who used prolonged engagement spent a significant amount of time in the field collecting data from a variety of perspectives. Only 6% of studies used both of these approaches.

Authors who included thick description often used rich, direct quotes with well-developed interpretations to present in depth concepts and constructs that were important to the study. Other times, the authors' own words or descriptive phrases conveyed a *sense* of the participants, the environment, or the researcher's experience. This sometimes went beyond what might be considered essential to

reporting the research but greatly enhanced a piece. For instance, one author mentioned that during an informal interview a homeless respondent offered him a piece of cardboard to sit on as protection from the cold street. Another author participated in a Jewish Orthodox community for a year while interviewing women (the focus of the study) as well as community leaders, male and female, about the role of women.

Seventeen percent of the articles reviewed used *none* of these key strategies, and just over half (59%) met Creswell's (2007) recommended level of two or more. This finding is illustrated in Table 3.

Trends

Since the 1985 publication of Lincoln and Guba's ground-breaking work *Naturalistic Inquiry*, the use of qualitative methods by social work researchers has expanded considerably. For instance, the decade between 1982 and 1992 saw a dramatic increase in the proportion of social work doctoral dissertations that used qualitative methods (Brun, 1997). Qualitative research methods are listed in the revised *Guidelines for Quality in Social Work Doctoral Programs* (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, 2003), and there are now dozens of texts available on the topic (Padget, 2004). The 2002 establishment of the journal *Qualitative Social Work* confirms the prominence of these methods.

So, we wondered whether the use of key strategies for ensuring rigor had increased during the period under consideration. Results of our analysis are presented in Figure 1. A modest, positive correlation was observed between year and the number of strategies used [$r(99) = .264$, $p < .01$]. The magnitude of this effect can be seen in a comparison of the lowest year's mean (1.4 strategies in 2003) with that obtained in the highest year. By 2007, this had increased to 2.4 strategies, a level that was sustained in 2008.

Table 3: Percentages of Sampled Articles Using Different Numbers of Key Strategies (*N* = 100)

Strategies Applied	Percentage of Articles
0	17
1	24
2	23
3	17
4	12
5	6
6	1

DISCUSSION

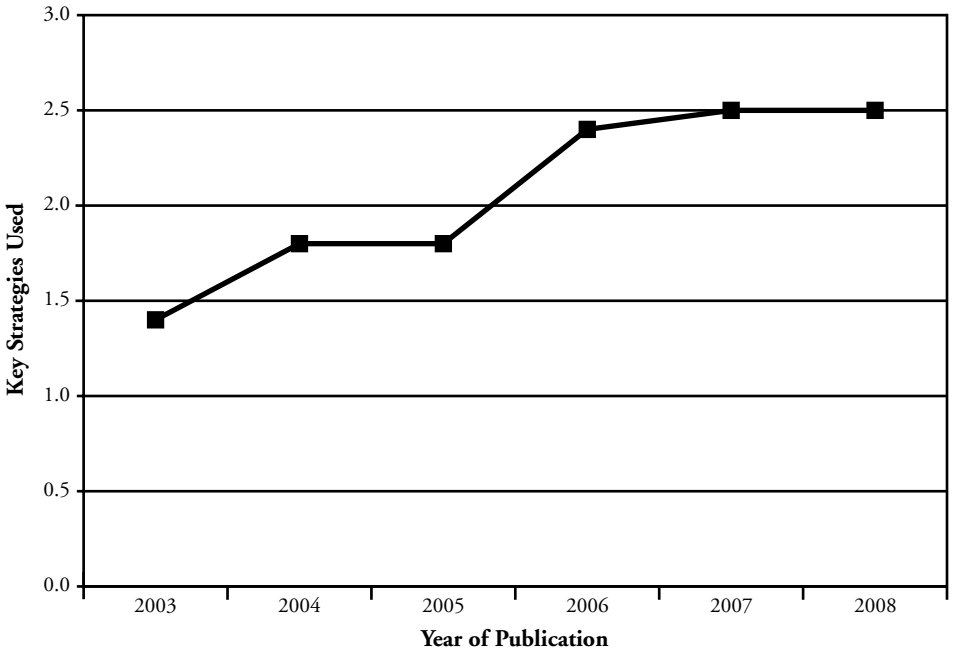
Qualitative research methods seem well-suited to the skills and values of those who select social work as a career. Relationship and communication skills are vital for the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. These methods may also prove a better fit for the "messy" problems that are the focus of social work intervention (Meyer, 1996).

This study identified strategies that qualitative researchers in our field have reported using to enhance the rigor of their work. Interpretations of these findings may be taken from either a "half full" or a "half empty" perspective. For instance, given the importance of sampling, it is reassuring to see that 68% of published articles in this sample offered a clear rationale for the authors' sampling choices. Conversely, nearly a third (32%) did not. Similarly, over half of these articles (59%) met Creswell's (2007) suggested criterion, using at least two of the key strategies; but 17% used none at all. The general trend for the period under consideration was toward use of more strategies for ensuring rigor.

The absence of reflexivity in this sample of recently published social work articles is surprising—in the vast majority (86%) of articles, authors did not provide any information about themselves. Perhaps these authors feared it would be unprofessional or intrusive to disclose their personal characteristics, or perhaps they thought personal disclosure would be inconsistent with editorial demands. Given the acknowledged subjectivity of qualitative methods and the importance of the researcher's lens, we strongly encourage that the simple task of presenting the researcher's relevant traits be undertaken more often.

Like the self, theory was widely neglected in the articles reviewed. Ignoring Kurt Lewin's well-known dictum that "there is nothing as practical as a good theory," nearly half (49%) of the studies reviewed did not specify a theoretical or conceptual framework in any section of the published article. These atheoretical articles seemed to be informed by pragmatic considerations. Sections that might otherwise include theoretical content were devoted to the importance of the social problem or the injustice under consideration. We wonder whether there might be regional differences in the use of

Figure 1: Mean Numbers of Key Strategies Used, by Year



theory and suggest that future research examine international trends in this area.

Careful attention to rigor is necessary but not sufficient to ensure high-quality research. Rigorous research is not necessarily "good" research. As one of our peer reviewers pointed out, research must also be evaluated on the basis of its relevance to the profession and its potential impact on social justice. But, as Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006) suggested, judicious application of the key strategies helps to ensure that participant voices are heard and increases the likelihood that the work will meet other standards of quality.

The present work leads us to reflect on both education and research in our field. Use of the key strategies can help correct the perception that qualitative research is not sufficiently rigorous to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. We suggest that doctoral classes on qualitative methods treat the issue of rigor with depth and that dissertation proposals be reviewed with an eye to the author's methodological awareness. Clearly, published research should set a strong example. Strengthening qualitative research can only benefit social work by offering credible and applicable findings to shape practice, education, and future research.

Given the local character of qualitative research, the application of universal criteria would be counterproductive. However, criteria for strengthening qualitative research cannot be ignored. Instead, we argue for what Seale (2002) called "methodological awareness" (p. 108)— that is, the thoughtful application of relevant criteria throughout the research enterprise. We believe that each researcher is empowered to make autonomous choices regarding what strategies are appropriate to the research context and questions and that the act of doing research carries with it an ethical obligation to be accountable and transparent about those choices. SWR

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