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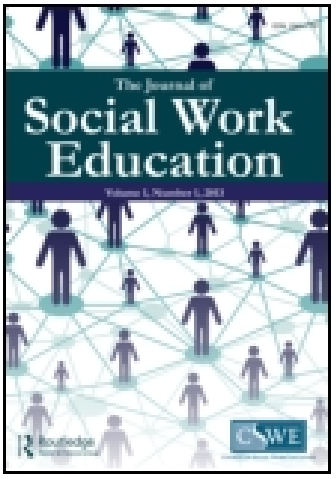

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Christina Gringeri , Amanda Barusch & Christopher Cambron
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Examining Foundations of Qualitative Research: A Review of Social Work Dissertations, 2008–2010

Christina Gringeri, Amanda Barusch, and Christopher Cambron

This study examined the treatment of epistemology and methodological rigor in qualitative social work dissertations. Template-based review was conducted on a random sample of 75 dissertations completed between 2008 and 2010. For each dissertation, we noted the presence or absence of four markers of epistemology: theory, paradigm, reflexivity, and power. We also examined methods choices and the strategies used for ensuring rigor. Results suggested that most (96%) doctoral students completing qualitative dissertations address theory, but fewer refer to reflexivity (45%), paradigm (13%), or power dynamics (8%). Students typically used multiple strategies for ensuring rigor. Grounded theory and phenomenology were the most popular methods choices, followed by case studies, ethnography, or narrative methods. Implications for doctoral education are offered.

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The quality and content of research training at the doctoral level has been a longstanding concern in the field of social work (Anastas & Congress, 1999; Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009; Khinduka, 2002; Mcvicar & Caan, 2005; Reisch, 2002; Tucker, 2008). Prior to the 2003 revisions, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education's (GADE) guidelines emphasized research using quantitative methods and gave rather short shrift to qualitative methods in doctoral training (Reisch, 2002). The revised guidelines encourage doctoral programs to develop students' skills and knowledge in both quantitative and qualitative approaches to social inquiry (GADE, 2003). The guidelines are not intended to specify content, skills, or knowledge, and the extent and nature of training provided within doctoral programs remain unclear. Dissertations are a common product of social work doctoral education, providing accessible evidence of the research knowledge and skills of graduates who use qualitative methods.

GADE's revised guidelines (2003) indicate growing interest in and acceptance of qualitative research methods in social work; other indicators are the development of the journal *Qualitative Social Work*, started in 2002, and the increasing publication of articles using qualitative methods in most of the well-rated social work journals. Of course, the continued development of qualitative methods in social work does require attention to issues of quality, rigor, and epistemology. There is ongoing discussion of appropriate criteria by which to assess qualitative research, with some arguing that standard criteria cannot be developed for paradigms based in relativism (Denzin,

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Christina Gringeri is professor and Amanda Barusch is professor at the University of Utah. Christopher Cambron is a doctoral student at the University of Washington.

Address correspondence to Christina Gringeri, PhD, College of Social Work, University of Utah, 395 South 1500 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0260, USA. E-mail: cgringeri@socwk.utah.edu

2002; Marshall, 1990; Seale, 1999, 2002), whereas others maintain a more pragmatic approach, recommending flexible application of a range of criteria (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1995); we tend toward the latter approach.

In this study, we examined social work research in dissertations in which the authors used only qualitative methods for the presence of epistemological markers and the application of strategies to support rigor, as one way to assess what doctoral students may be learning about these aspects of qualitative research. Previous research noted the neglect of strategies for rigor and epistemological markers in published social work research articles (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011; Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013) and found that about half contained references to theory, whereas significantly fewer incorporated reflexive accounts or noted power dynamics in research relationships. These findings led us to wonder about factors that might contribute to the relative lack of reference to epistemological markers and strategies for rigor. Could it reflect the absence of these topics in doctoral research curricula? Or are dissertation chairs and committee members not encouraging students to discuss epistemological issues and account for strategies to support rigor? These questions motivated the present study to examine the presentation and discussion of qualitative methods in social work doctoral dissertations.

We offer an overview of epistemology as a core aspect of the research process, underscoring the idea that how we know shapes what we know; thus, accounting for our epistemology strengthens our research contributions. We discuss theory, reflexivity, and power in the researcher–participant relationship, along with paradigm, as four markers of epistemology in research. In addition, we briefly examine several strategies for rigor in qualitative research, synthesizing recommendations offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2007).

In social research, epistemology operates on two levels. Researchers may attend to general epistemological issues, such as reflexivity, power dynamics, theory, and paradigm. Additionally, there are specific epistemological assumptions associated with each paradigm. Thus, epistemology is an integral part of every research paradigm, and paradigm choices underlie the general epistemology of research.

PRESENTING EPISTEMOLOGICAL MARKERS

Epistemology is the understanding a researcher brings to her or his work about the process of knowing, and what constitutes knowledge; it is the foundation upon which research is built and guides choices about topics, research questions, theories, methods, analysis, and interpretation. Epistemological assumptions are found in all paradigms; because research is a process of knowledge production, our assumptions shape decisions made throughout the process. Anastas (2002) notes that our epistemology determines what we see as scholarship, what work is completed and published, how it is valued, and how we locate ourselves in our work.

Several aspects of epistemology should be discussed in any research presentation. Marshall and Rossman (2006) encourage authors to be open and accountable regarding decisions made in the process of research; epistemological integrity, they argue, requires authors to present the "logical and compelling connections between genre, overall strategy, the research questions, the design, and the methods" (p. 55). Many authors recommend specifying theoretical or conceptual constructs used in the work, and discussing the selection of the research paradigm, the practice of reflexivity, and the recognition of power dynamics as important aspects of epistemology (Anastas,

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2004; Dowling, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Padgett, 2009; Pascale, 2010; Takacs, 2003; Watt, 2007).

PARADIGM

Paradigms, so often left implicit in research publications, are the foundation of the research process. Here we define research paradigm as a set of beliefs that guides the process of social inquiry (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). As Guba (1990, p. 23) noted,

> Because they are human constructions, paradigms inevitably reflect the values of their human constructors. They enter into inquiry at choice points such as the problem selected for study, the paradigm within which to study it, the instruments and the analytic modes used, and the interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations made.

Because choices of paradigm inevitably shape the research process, we argue that it is important to specify these and related assumptions.

A research paradigm reflects the researcher's worldview on what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge is produced, and includes the basic elements of ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (nature of knowing), methodology (best ways to construct knowledge), and axiology (the role of values in knowledge production) (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln et al., 2011). Frequently used paradigms in social work and the social sciences include postpositivism, constructivism, critical theory, and participatory action frameworks; the basic elements in each paradigm build on different assumptions about reality and knowledge.

Every research study is guided by an underlying paradigm, or elements of several, though it may not be made explicit by the author. A clear account of the paradigm helps readers understand and evaluate the philosophical foundations and assumptions that shape the work. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011, p. 38) observe that

> paradigms or worldviews are neither right nor wrong; one way of seeing is another way of not seeing. However, paradigms are powerful ways of looking at that reality, and they are windows giving us information about the social world and often frame the particular questions we seek to answer.

Qualitative researchers should present our work with sufficient detail that readers can easily recognize the connections between the research paradigm and the rest of the study (Anastas, 2004; Padgett, 2009). As Padgett (2009) notes, "the burden of proof is on the researcher" to be transparent about the underlying assumptions and logic on which our work is based (p. 102).

THEORY

Theory is an integral part of scholarly work; researchers use theories as lenses through which to view our topics, as well as to frame the entire work. We applied a broad definition of theory in this project, seeing it as a set of interrelated constructs that authors used to explain and understand the people or events studied. There is no research without theory, but authors frequently leave it implicit in the work rather than discussing it (Barusch et al., 2011; Gringeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010). Theoretical frameworks may serve as conceptual maps, weaving together our

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selection of literature reviewed, choice of research questions, selection of methods, and analysis and interpretation (Anastas, 2002). Theory is essential to support researchers in moving beyond descriptive work to explanation, and it helps focus the analysis. Explicit discussion of theory throughout the work demonstrates a scholar's awareness of and accountability for "how we know the world," and allows readers to interact with us and with our work. "The value of research depends upon the ability of the researcher to substantiate a number of claims about . . . the validity of their interpretation of the evidence in the light of theory" (Avis, 2005, p. 12).

REFLEXIVITY

Awareness of how our social locations influence what and how we know can clarify why certain questions are asked, specific topics are selected or ignored for research, or whether particular groups of participants are included in studies. Research is essentially a set of interpretive processes, and scholars should be accountable for "the many processes of interpretation involved" in producing knowledge (Pascale, 2010, p. 72). The interpretative nature of scholarship obliges us to acknowledge the roles our "values, histories, and interests" play in constructing knowledge (Koch & Harrington, 1998, p. 887). We engage the practice of reflexivity, like the application of theory, throughout all aspects of the research process, with the aim of sharpening our awareness of the presence of our self in our work, which is central to epistemology. Reflexive practice requires researchers to be aware and explicitly discuss the social inputs shaping the production of knowledge in our work (Koch & Harrington, 1998). All findings and interpretations are molded by the biographies and perspectives that researchers and participants bring to the project. Critical awareness helps shine a light on the diversity and complexity of social locations and relationships we bring to knowledge production, and the influences of our biographies on the process and outcomes of research, as well as our interactions with participants.

Reflexivity supports researchers in managing and accounting for subjectivity while completely engaging in the work. Although he recognized the importance of reflexivity, Creswell (2007) did not include it among the eight key strategies he identified to establish rigor and strengthen qualitative work overall. Acknowledgment of reflexivity recognizes the role of social position in determining our understanding of what constitutes knowledge. For this reason, we consider reflexivity a marker of epistemology.

POWER

Our social locations shape our interactions with participants and influence the power dynamics of the relationship. Researchers and participants occupy multiple roles during any given project, some of which may grant power and privilege to the researcher relative to the participants: investigator, expert, decision-maker, participant recruiter, and insider/outsider, among others. Awareness of these roles and how they shape all aspects of the research project as well as interactions with participants may give rise to considering the possibilities of sharing roles and/or privilege. Power is not unidirectional in any relationship, and it is exercised by participants throughout the project, as they may question researcher authority or expertise and reclaim the power to name their experiences, as well as offer their interpretations. In developing our

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awareness and publishing our accounts of the dynamic relationships between researchers and participants, "alternate claims to power" become more visible (Takacs, 2003, p. 35). Recognition of power dynamics reflects an understanding of the central role of power in the generation and acceptance of knowledge claims. Accordingly, we included it as an epistemological marker in this study.

ENHANCING METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR

Along with Lincoln (1995), Creswell encouraged qualitative researchers to employ at least two of eight key strategies in their research: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative or deviant case analysis, member-checking, thick description, or audit trail. This is not a case of "more is better"; rather, the researcher is expected to articulate a reasoned selection regarding the strategies that will best serve to strengthen any given study. As Seale (1999, 2002) suggested, research is more of a craft skill in which practitioners make local (or project-specific) decisions to enhance the quality of the end product. These strategies provide a good starting point for evaluating the craft of qualitative research in social work.

Lincoln (1995) proposed credibility as an evaluative criterion for qualitative research. Credibility refers to strategies and approaches that strengthen confidence in the truth value of the findings; other writers describe credibility as findings and interpretations that resonate with readers and participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are twin strategies that researchers may employ to strengthen credibility; the strategies involve deep and ongoing connection to the field setting, within which observation is regular and frequent.

Triangulation is a group of strategies that may involve multiple sources of data, more than one analyst, multiple theories, or diverse methods of data collection. Although Creswell tends to group these together, in practice, they are often employed as separate strategies. It is important to note that triangulation is not for the purpose of corroboration, as much as it is to deepen understanding of the nuances and complexities of the people, places, or events in the study through multiple accounts.

Peer review or debriefing, negative or deviant case analysis, and member-checking are additional strategies to support credibility. Peer debriefing is a process in which the researcher can discuss the research process with a disinterested peer, allowing that person to question the researcher's perceptions, intuitions, and interpretations and helping the researcher explore various aspects of the work. Negative case analysis is used to confirm or disconfirm a pattern observed in the data; the negative case is used in contrast to the pattern, in order to question the assumptions the researcher may make in determining a pattern in the data. Member-checking involves having the participants review the data or preliminary interpretations and discuss them with the researcher.

Thick description is a term often attributed to Clifford Geertz (1973) and used by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This strategy is designed to support transferability. Thick description refers to presenting the data and findings in sufficient detail so that readers may evaluate the extent to which the findings may aid in understanding other people, times, situations, or places. An audit trail is a record of the steps and decisions made throughout the research process, from conceptualization

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through the final products. Qualitative researchers may choose to use an external review of the audit trail as one strategy to enhance rigor; an external review is carried out by a research peer not involved in the study to check the process and product of the study. The external auditor assesses whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are sufficiently grounded in the data (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1995).

Although these strategies are important in helping researchers strengthen the quality of their work, it is challenging to apply them in evaluating research, including dissertations. The first step is to know which strategies authors employed, but that is dependent on authors being open and accountable about the decisions we make throughout the process of our research. Without accountability, readers and evaluators cannot assess the research. It is important to note that we do not expect authors to apply all markers or strategies in each study; we looked for the author's articulation of a thoughtful and justified selection appropriate to the project. We approached this assessment of qualitative social work dissertations asking: To what extent do authors of social work dissertations using qualitative methods account for the epistemological bases and implement strategies to support rigor?

Is there an association between the inclusion of epistemological markers and the use of strategies to support rigor?

METHODS

This study used a retrospective descriptive approach based on review of 75 randomly selected social work dissertations, completed between 2008 and 2010. Data were recorded on a standardized template and analyzed using descriptive and bivariate procedures available in SPSS. Below we discuss the researchers, the sample, the data collection template and review process, issues concerning reliability, and the data analysis procedures.

Situating the Authors

Three researchers collaborated in this study, and brought varied interests and backgrounds to this work. Two are faculty members in colleges of social work and share a value for the contributions that qualitative methods can make in developing social work knowledge. Both were trained in the United States, have experience editing professional journals, and have taught qualitative methods at the doctoral level. One was trained in quantitative methods, coming to qualitative research mid-career, and the other was trained and conducted her work exclusively using qualitative methods. Both senior authors were appointed to faculty positions over 20 years ago, when qualitative methods were minimally present in doctoral curriculum; both participated in developing curriculum on qualitative research, which resulted, in time, in the development of a semester-long required doctoral course on qualitative inquiry. Both authors have mentored doctoral students through the dissertation process, including several who used qualitative methods. This and previous work on rigor and epistemology in qualitative research publications have sharpened our awareness of our own research process, and deepened our attention to the content and process of our teaching in this area. The third researcher is currently pursuing a master of public policy and has completed a master of social work from a U.S. university. He has taken several research courses, including specialized training in statistics.

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Sample

A total of 178 dissertations completed from 2008–2010 were located using the Proquest Dissertation Database. We used the department or program search terms *social work* or *social welfare* to capture U.S.-based social work programs, and searched for *qualitative methods* and *not mixed methods*. Only dissertations in English completed in the 71 U.S. social work doctoral programs listed as GADE members were considered for inclusion in the sample. Two authors read the abstracts, and 143 dissertations met the inclusion criteria of using only qualitative methods to collect primary data; those removed used mixed methods, were not produced in social work departments or programs, or were not in English (e.g., Universidad de Puerto Rico). A random sample of 75 qualitative dissertations was selected from the 143; upon reviewing the methods chapters, 19 were found to use mixed methods and were replaced to maintain the sample of 75 for review.

The final sample drew from 38 social work doctoral programs in the United States, with the highest frequency ($N = 5$) coming from New York University's Silver School of Social Work. Four schools contributed four dissertations to the sample: SUNY-Albany, Loyola University-Chicago, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and City University of New York. Five schools contributed three each to the sample: SUNY-Stony Brook, University of Kansas, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, Michigan State, and the University of Utah. Sixty-four of the 75 dissertations were completed between 2008 and 2009. Fully 95% of the dissertations mentioned human subjects' approval for their work.

The vast majority (96%) of authors detailed their analysis strategy in the dissertation. In most dissertations, a purposive sample was used for recruitment (94.7%); sample sizes ranged widely, from a sample of five persons up to 90. Most samples, however, had 25 or fewer persons. This may be because the most frequent data collection strategy by far was in-person interviews; fully 68 (91%) of the dissertations collected data using interviews alone or in combination with other methods.

Template

Based on our review of the literature and our experiences with qualitative research in the classroom and various field settings, we compiled a template for the review of each dissertation (see Appendix). Two authors used this template to review a sample of three dissertations, and the template was modified slightly based on the results; we eliminated one category that seemed redundant. We recorded on the template descriptive information about each dissertation (title, year, and school) and noted the presence or absence of the following: research questions, paradigm, theory, reflexivity, power, sample size and sampling rationale, methods, Creswell's suggested strategies for rigor as well as some from our experience (such as analyst and theory triangulation, audit trail, and theoretical saturation), and attention to ethics/IRB approval.

We noted the presence of reflexivity in any dissertation or article in which the author explicitly discussed her interests in the research topic, including any personal or professional experiences that contributed to the topic and focus of the work. We examined each dissertation for the presence and application of theoretical or conceptual frameworks throughout the work, from the literature review through the analysis and interpretation; we acknowledged the presence of theory

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even when a set of interrelated constructs not specified as theory informed the work. We also acknowledged any discussion of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, even if rather brief; specifically, we looked for the author's recognition of the potential power and privilege dynamics in the researcher–participant relationship. We reviewed each work for the use of a specified research paradigm or tradition of inquiry, such as constructivism, critical theory, or participatory research, mindful of Marshall and Rossman's suggestion that authors of qualitative research articulate the "logical and compelling connections" in their work, starting with the paradigm (2006, p. 55). In addition, we examined each dissertation for strategies of rigor based on the approaches suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2007). These categories framed our review of social work doctoral dissertations completed between 2008 and 2010, supporting our exploration of doctoral students' engagement with and accountability regarding epistemology and rigor in their work.

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Reliability

Two researchers reviewed three dissertations initially, and they compared the results of their review. This gave us the opportunity to clarify and operationalize key terms, such as *power in the research relationship*, or the definition of various paradigms or methods. *Theory* was clarified to include the mention of theory or interrelated constructs, regardless of the extent to which it was used. *Paradigm* included the mention of any specific sets of assumptions that would help us locate the work within postpositivism, social constructivism, critical theory, or participatory action paradigms. *Reflexivity* was defined to include any mention of researcher characteristics that would assist the reviewer in determining the likelihood of bias. Any mention of the power dynamics at play in the researcher–participant relationship gained a positive assessment. Strategies for rigor were sought in each dissertation document both by word search and by close examination of the methods chapter; thus, we were able to note authors' use of strategies even when the actual term may not have been mentioned. At the end of the initial review of three dissertations, the two researchers achieved 95% reliability on the codes. The remaining 72 dissertations were divided in half, and each reviewer completed the template for 36 dissertations.

Analysis

We set out to document the presence of epistemological discussions and rigor strategies used in qualitative social work dissertations. For these purposes, we computed simple descriptive measures, counting the number of times we noted any of the markers of epistemology and the strategies for rigor. To examine whether there was a link between the presence of epistemological markers and the use of rigor strategies in dissertations, a Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficient was computed using these two measures. SPSS version 17.0 was used for all statistical analyses.

RESULTS

Of the epistemological markers, theory was discussed in 96% of the dissertations, usually in the literature review and methods chapters. Reflexivity was mentioned in 45% of the dissertations, and power was the least frequently discussed marker, with only 8% of dissertations containing any

TABLE 1
Epistemological Markers Present in Dissertations ($n = 75$)

Marker	*Number*	*Percent*
Theory	72	96
Reflexivity	34	45
Paradigm	10	13
Power dynamics	6	8
Number of markers present ($M = 2.5$)		
1	4	5
2	38	51
3	28	37
4	5	7

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reference to the researcher–participant relationship. Paradigms were given rather short shrift in the dissertations, with 13% specifying any paradigm. Only 8% of dissertation authors mentioned constructivism, 4% used participatory action research, and 7% mentioned other paradigms, such as feminist critical theory; none mentioned postpositivism. On average, dissertations included 2.5 markers, with a range from one to four. These results are presented in Table 1.

Among the strategies to strengthen rigor, dissertation authors were most likely to report using external audits, and least likely to report using persistent observation. Authors of dissertations were considerably more likely to include theory and reflexivity when describing their studies than to address paradigm and power. These results are detailed below.

Each of the strategies recommended by Creswell (2007) was present in at least some of the dissertations reviewed; external audit was most frequently mentioned (79%), followed by member checking (59%), data triangulation (56%), analyst triangulation (55%), peer debriefing (53%), and thick description (49%). Negative case analysis was only applied in a quarter (25%) of the dissertations, while prolonged engagement appeared in 24%. Additional strategies for rigor not specified in Creswell's key strategies were also employed: audit trail (83%), theory triangulation (65%), analyst triangulation (55%), theoretical saturation (28%), and persistent observation (17%). Dissertations mentioned an average of 3.6 strategies, with a range from one to seven. It is worth noting that 41% of the dissertations employed four or more of the key strategies. These frequencies are summarized in Table 2.

Grounded theory was the most frequently cited methods choice, with 43% of the authors applying it in dissertations. Most authors did not employ grounded theory to generate an explanatory model in their work; some used only the data collection and analysis strategies recommended in grounded theory. Phenomenology was the next most popular methods approach in dissertations (20%), with ethnography and case study both employed in 13%. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Finally, examination of the bivariate relationship between epistemological markers and rigor strategies suggested a fairly robust positive association, $r\,(73) = .34$, $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The correlation between epistemological markers and strategies for rigor in dissertations is encouraging, suggesting that authors who employ more markers tend to include strategies for

TABLE 2
Rigor Strategies Employed in Dissertations ($n = 75$)

Strategy	*Number*	*Percent*
External audit*	59	79
Member checking*	44	59
Data triangulation*	42	56
Analyst triangulation*	41	55
Peer debriefing*	40	53
Thick description*	37	49
Negative or deviant case analysis*	19	25
Prolonged engagement*	18	24
Audit trail	62	83
Theory triangulation	49	65
Analyst triangulation	41	55
Theoretical saturation	21	28
Persistent observation	13	17

*Indicates one of the eight strategies identified by Creswell (2007).

TABLE 3
Methods Described in Dissertations ($n = 75$)

	Number	*Percent*
Grounded theory	32	43
Phenomenology	15	20
Ethnography	10	13
Case study	10	13
Narrative	3	4
Other	5	7

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rigor as well. Of course, it is impossible to establish a causal link using these data. We believe the association results from an exogenous factor, such as a commitment to quality on the part of students and their dissertation chairs and committees.

Doctoral curriculum in qualitative inquiry should address the philosophical bases of social inquiry, in which paradigm, including ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology, are presented as integral to quality research, and follow with the need to articulate the rationale for employing strategies of rigor to strengthen the knowledge contributions social work researchers can make through qualitative research. If students know that faculty mentors will be examining their work for these aspects of the research process, they will be more likely to employ them consistently. Additionally, we should inculcate a high value for accountability in qualitative research, so that all researchers know they are expected to discuss epistemological aspects and strategies of rigor in published work.

Because of the interpretive nature of social inquiry and the subjectivity involved in qualitative research, it is important for doctoral training to emphasize the role of reflexivity. It is encouraging that 45% of dissertations contained some discussion of author characteristics relative to the

research. We have found it puzzling that more than half of these social work researchers would be reluctant to locate themselves in their work and wonder if it is a byproduct of the emphasis on postpositivist paradigms in graduate training or general discomfort with self-disclosure; the latter may indicate insufficient training in developing reflexive accounts. It also may be that the lack of reflexivity reflects social workers' values for boundaries in practice and research, and the perception that researchers and participants are, or should be, separate; transparency regarding one's involvement in the research may seem incompatible to new researchers with the value for maintaining boundaries (Kanuha, 2000). Doctoral studies in social work need to emphasize the expectation that reflexivity is an ongoing process throughout the study for which we should be accountable in writing.

Research paradigm was infrequently discussed in the dissertations; fewer than 1 in 6 authors mentioned it. In fairness to the authors, one could often derive the underlying paradigm from the text, as many authors were seeking to understand "constructed meanings" or "lived experiences." We believe that most authors left paradigm implicit in their work because they took it for granted. Perhaps paradigmatic choices go unexamined in the dissertation process; however, we argue that making these choices explicit would strengthen the work and its findings, and contribute to building (and examining) the knowledge base in social work. Leaving paradigm implicit may also be a residual effect of doctoral training that emphasizes postpositivism as the dominant and normative research paradigm.

Dissertations seldom included reflection on the power dynamics of the researcher–participant relationship, suggesting that this area deserves greater attention in doctoral research training, as well as in peer reviews of research. In the same way that practitioners must consider and account for their roles vis-à-vis clients, being aware of the ways power and privilege shape the interactions, social work researchers need to sharpen our awareness of relationship dynamics woven throughout our projects. We encourage social work researchers to reflect on the multiple roles we and the participants may occupy during the process of research, and to deepen our awareness of the multiple ways participants may see privilege and exercise power in their own right during the course of the research project. Faculty teaching qualitative methods can model the dynamic of power in research relationships using their own work as an example, as well as examples from the published literature.

We also examined authors' choices of methods in the dissertations. Grounded theory was applied in almost half of the dissertations, followed by phenomenology. We believe these methods may be more popular with dissertation writers because they are well-developed approaches with clear steps articulated for data collection and analysis. Case study and ethnography were used less frequently, possibly because doctoral students have less exposure to these methods. Case studies may be encountered as a clinical tool rather than a method that can be used in research. Ethnography is a method grounded in anthropology, and the term is used somewhat loosely to refer to a broad range of approaches and strategies; doctoral students (and their committees) may be looking for more clearly defined methods. Alternatively, since ethnography is used to document and understand culture, social workers may not see their work fitting in that genre. Social scientists are becoming more aware of narrative methods, which originate in the humanities, and we may see more doctoral students applying this method in the future. Doctoral coursework on qualitative methods should present a variety of methods choices, with the aim of broadening students' awareness of the tools available to them to enhance and support their research agenda.

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Some of the strategies for rigor were employed in dissertation studies quite frequently, such as audit trail, external auditing of the process, and detailed discussion of the analysis strategy. These are indications that doctoral students are aware of the need to employ strategies to enhance their studies. Both audit trail and external auditing may be required by dissertation committee members, accounting for their frequent use; it is important that such strategies are discussed in research studies subsequent to the dissertation. Over half of the dissertations reported use of member-checking and triangulation of data, theory, or analysts, another good sign that doctoral students are aware of the importance of these strategies. These strategies are also cost-effective and easily implemented and should be encouraged in the development of projects using qualitative methods.

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CONCLUSION

We want to emphasize, in agreement with Seale (1999, 2002), that qualitative research is more of a craft skill, with the researcher making local and context-dependent decisions regarding the development of the project. We do not intend to imply that "more is better" when it comes to epistemological markers and strategies for rigor, or that we can merely check off items to assess the overall quality of the work, but rather we recommend that researchers be accountable for the craft decisions we make along the research journey. Explicit consideration of epistemological development and application of strategies for rigor will help produce a richer, deeper analysis that is more likely to contribute to our profession's knowledge base.

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APPENDIX: TEMPLATE FOR REVIEW OF QUALITATIVE DISSERTATIONS

Reviewer: _____ Date: _____
Dissertation Number/Title: _____
School: _____ Year: _____
*Indicates eight criteria specified by Creswell

Criterion Name	*Description*	*Present?*		*Notes (Where There Is Ambiguity)*
Theoretical/conceptual framework specified	Study is clearly informed by theory/framework. Often in lit review, intro, or discussion—broad, interrelated ideas that predict or explain phenomenon, **not** methodological traditions	Y	N	
Paradigm/methodology or tradition of inquiry	Methodological traditions, i.e., constructivism, critical theory, PAR, Grounded Theory	Y	N	
Purpose or research question specified	Author addresses. Rationale for RQ?	Y	N	
Use of self/reflexivity	Relevant personal traits in relation to topic/participants	Y	N	
Power in research relationship?	Author discusses power/hierarchy inherent in relationship with participants, efforts to deal with it	Y	N	
Sampling rationale and size	Not a convenience sample—researcher thought about the sample and was purposive in selection	Y	N	Sample size: ____
Data collection method	Interview? Observation? Text-based? Photo-voice?			
*Prolonged engagement	Allows for breadth	Y	N	
*Persistent observation	Allows for depth	Y	N	
*Member-checking	Participant (or related or similar group) review of transcript and or data analysis	Y	N	
*Data triangulation	Different types of data (survey and observation/record review and interview)—may be interview and focus group	Y	N	
Analysis strategy detailed	Author gives a clear description of how data were analysed so work could be replicated	Y	N	
Theoretical saturation	Author will indicate that analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved	Y	N	
Analyst triangulation	Multiple eyes involved in interpretation of results	Y	N	
Theory triangulation	Use multiple theories or frameworks	Y	N	
*Peer debriefing/review	Disinterested peer or member(s) of research team	Y	N	
*Thick description	Often with quotes and context—reader's left with a clear "sense" of the respondents and context	Y	N	
*Negative/deviant case analysis		Y	N	
*External audits	Outside researcher (dissertation committee, peer review?)	Y	N	
Audit trail	Researcher kept track of the process of the work through field notes or a journal	Y	N	
Ethics or IRB	Protection of subjects/informed consent/confidentiality	Y	N	

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