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Evaluation of Evaluation Studies Using Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Work Literature (1990-2003): Evidence That Constitutes a Wake-Up Call

Daniel T. L. Shek

Vera M. Y. Tang

X. Y. Han

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Objective: This study examines the quality of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in the social work literature in terms of a number of criteria commonly adopted in the field of qualitative research. Method: Using qualitative and evaluation as search terms, relevant qualitative evaluation studies from 1990 to 2003 indexed by Social Work Abstracts were examined, and their quality was evaluated. Results: The review shows that the quality of published evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in the social work field is not high and that many of the reviewed studies are not sensitive to the following issues: philosophical base of the study, auditability, bias, truth value, consistency, and critical interpretations of the data. Conclusions: Social workers using findings arising from published evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work should be cautious and social workers conducting qualitative evaluation studies should be sensitive to the issue of quality. Adequate training for social workers on qualitative evaluation should also be carried out.

Keywords: *qualitative research; evaluation; social work literature; evaluative criteria; criteriology*

Is social work intervention effective? A review of social work literature shows that the answer to this question has changed with time. In the 1970s, several reviews of quantitative social work evaluation studies suggested that social work intervention was not effective (Fischer, 1973; Segal, 1972). However, with the growth of quantitative outcome studies showing that social work intervention programs were effective (Reid & Hanrahan, 1982; Rubin, 1985), this gloomy picture changed in the 1980s. Besides, there were attempts to develop guidelines that govern the quality of quantitative evaluation studies. Thyer (1989) outlined a series of first principles governing social work practice research, and Thyer (1991) further proposed guidelines for evaluating social work outcome research reports. With the publication of new social work journals,

such as *Research on Social Work Practice*, quantitative studies documenting the effectiveness of social work have gradually accumulated.

Although there is a growing effort to evaluate the effectiveness of social work intervention via quantitative methods, there has also been a growing literature on qualitative studies in the social work context. A review of *Social Work Abstracts* in June 2004 showed that although there were 513 publications when the search term *quantitative* was used, there were 1,338 publications when the search term *qualitative* was used. In a review of social work research dissertations and theses, Dellgran and Hojer (2001) found that of the 89 Ph.D. theses covering the years 1979 to 1998, half of them were qualitative studies, 14% were quantitative studies, and 36% were mixed-method studies.

With the growing number of qualitative evaluation studies in the social work literature, one important question that should be asked is whether the qualitative evaluation studies paint an optimistic picture of social work intervention as effective. In response to the growing emphasis of qualitative research in the social work profession, Thyer (1989) argued that "the advocates of qualitative research are urged to provide the profession with similar positive examples of research on the outcomes of

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social work practice, and to develop explicit guide-lines for the conduct of qualitative studies” (p. 309). Nevertheless, before we can claim that qualitative evaluation studies in the social work literature give support to the effectiveness of social work intervention, we have to ask a more fundamental question: Do qualitative evaluation studies in the social work context have good qualities so that we can draw meaningful conclusions about the effectiveness of social work intervention? Unfortunately, a review of the social work literature shows that no study has been conducted to evaluate the quality of existing evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work. Against this background, this study was carried out to examine this question.

When one intends to evaluate the quality of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work, one fundamental issue that one has to face is the question of whether there are criteria that can be used to evaluate the related studies (Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Seale, 2002). Basically, there are two different views on this issue. On one hand, for those who adhere to the strong versions of social constructionist views (Schwandt, 2000) and hard-core postmodernism pursuing anarchy in knowledge claims (Bloland, 1995), it is maintained that it is not possible and, in fact, there is no need to develop any valid criteria. For example, Schwandt (1996) suggested we should say “farewell to criteriology,” which means that social science researchers should abandon “the pursuit of autonomous, indisputable criteria for distinguishing legitimate from not so legitimate social scientific knowledge” (p. 70). Although such radical social constructionist and postmodern thoughts are thought provoking, there are alternative views arguing that the related views are “fashionable nonsense” (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998) and queries questioning whether such relativistic views are consistent with social work values (Atherton & Bolland, 2002; Rubin, 2000). Most important of all, in an era that emphasizes accountability, it would be very difficult for the public and members of the social work profession to make sense and accept the claim that there is no way to differentiate good and bad social work practice via qualitative research methods.

On the other hand, there are views suggesting that there is a need and it is possible to develop criteria to examine the quality of qualitative studies (Huberman & Miles, 1994). However, a review of the literature shows that there are different versions of the criteria that could be used to evaluate qualitative studies. In a comprehensive summary of the criteria in different paradigms, Patton (2002) clearly pointed out that researchers with different worldviews used different criteria to evaluate

qualitative studies. In the traditional positivistic paradigm, the criteria adopted include objectivity of the inquirer, validity of data, systematic rigor of fieldwork procedures, triangulation, reliability of coding and patterns of analyses, correspondence of findings to reality, external validity, and strength of evidence supporting the causal hypotheses. In the constructivist paradigm, researchers used the following criteria to examine qualitative research: acknowledgment of subjectivity, trustworthiness, authenticity, triangulation, reflexivity of the researcher, praxis, particularity, and degree of deep understanding. For those who emphasize artistic and evocative principles, criteria including creativity, aesthetic quality, interpretive vitality, degree of stimulation, expression of distinct voices, and feelings of true, authentic, or real are adopted. Finally, criteria in terms of enhancement of consciousness about injustice, identification of the nature and sources of inequalities and injustices, representation of the perspective of the less powerful, degree of collaboration between the researchers and the researched, and degree of empowerment for the researched are used by researchers adhering to the critical theory perspective.

With specific reference to the postpositivistic or realist standpoint (Seale, 1999), different criteria have been put forward to examine the issue of quality in qualitative studies. In an early attempt to address the issue of quality of qualitative studies, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) proposed four criteria to evaluate the quality of qualitative research. These include internal reliability (i.e., whether different researchers within the same study agree with each other), external reliability (i.e., whether independent researchers would identify the same things in the same or similar setting), internal validity (i.e., whether the observations can really reflect the reality), and external validity (i.e., whether the phenomena identified could be applicable across groups). Triangulation (i.e., whether findings based on different methods, data, and researchers converge) is another criterion commonly used to examine the validity of claims emerging from mixed-method studies involving quantitative and qualitative methods (Tschudi, 1989).

Alternatively, evaluative criteria based on the constructivist paradigm have been proposed. Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggested several criteria that could be used, including credibility (i.e., whether there are faithful descriptions or interpretations of human experiences), fittingness (i.e., whether a study’s findings can fit into context outside the study and whether the readers view the findings to be meaningful and applicable to one’s experience), auditability (i.e., whether the details of the study are described in sufficient details so that one can follow

the decision trails of the researchers), and confirmability (i.e., neutrality).

With particular focus on auditability, Sandelowski (1986) suggested different ways to enhance the auditability of a qualitative research. These suggestions include clear description, explanation, and justification in the following areas: (a) rationales for the study, (b) researchers' views on the subject matter, (c) purposes of the study, (d) how the participants are engaged, (e) mutual influences between the researchers and participants, and (f) details of the data collection, data analyses, and transformation.

Adopting a critical realist position, Huberman and Miles (1994) proposed five criteria that attempt to integrate and reflect both the postpositivistic and constructivist standpoints: (a) objectivity and confirmability: the degree of neutrality of research findings and the relative influences of researcher biases; (b) reliability, dependability, and auditability: whether the process of the study is consistent and reasonably stable with time and across researchers and methods; (c) internal validity, credibility, and authenticity: the extent to which the findings represent an authentic picture of the reality; (d) external validity, transferability, and fittingness: the extent to which the findings can be applicable to contexts of the original study; (e) usage, application, and action orientation: whether the findings enhance levels of understanding of the participants and promote their actions to improve their state.

In the social work literature (particularly in the North American context), several social work researchers have discussed the issue of quality in qualitative research. Rodwell and Woody (1994) discussed different techniques for achieving authenticity, including fairness (e.g., obtaining full, informed consent from the participants), ontological authenticity (e.g., maintaining audit trails), educative authenticity (e.g., appreciating alternative views), catalytic authenticity (e.g., assessing the resultant action), and tactical authenticity (e.g., treating all participants as equal partners). Drisko (1997) proposed several criteria for implementing qualitative research and evaluating qualitative reports in social work. These include specification of the philosophical framework, goals and audience, and methodology (Criteria 1, 2, and 3); identification of biases (Criterion 4); maintenance of social work ethics (Criterion 5); and assurance of consistency of conclusions with study philosophy and data. Padgett (1998) proposed six strategies that can be used to enhance the rigor of a qualitative study. These include prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing and support, member checking, negative case analysis, and audit trail. Anastas (2004) suggested that several dimensions could

be used to evaluate the quality of qualitative studies, including clarity of the research questions, identification of the epistemological framework, effective use of theory and prior knowledge, adequate dealing of ethical issues, documentation of all aspects of the methods of the study, assurance of trustworthiness of the data, and effective communication of findings. Except the above isolated attempts, "thorough and detailed evaluative criteria for qualitative research are rare in social work" (Drisko, 1997, p. 185).

Based on the preceding discussion and a thorough review of the literature, the following criteria were adopted in this study to evaluate evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work. First, because there are many different branches in qualitative research and because the philosophical bases differ among the different brands of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 1990), it is meaningless to simply tell the readers that a qualitative study has been conducted or that qualitative methods have been used. Thus, there is a need for the researcher to clearly point out whether the study is based on a general qualitative orientation (where general elements of qualitative studies are incorporated in the study, such as holistic emphasis and empathic neutrality; Patton, 1990) or a specific qualitative orientation (where a specific approach such as phenomenology, grounded theory, critical theory, or ethnography) has been used. In other words, there is a need for qualitative researchers to clearly spell out the philosophical base of the study (Criterion 1; Drisko, 1997) because qualitative approaches with different philosophical bases call for different methodological approaches. In the case of mixed-method studies, the researchers should also specify the underlying philosophy for mixing different research methods, such as pragmatism, which assumes that mixture of methods at the methodological level is possible, or social constructionism, which argues that there is not any one form of superior understanding.

Based on the principle of auditability, it is important for qualitative researchers to clearly document the details of the participants, including the number and nature of the participants and the related justifications. According to Patton (1990), there are different ways of sampling participants in qualitative research (e.g., intensity sampling, deviant case sampling, typical case sampling, maximum variation sampling), and the rationales for using these methods differ for different studies. To enable other researchers to have a better understanding of the study and to compare their findings with the reported findings, there is a need to justify the number and nature of the participants (Criterion 2). Similarly, based on the principle

of auditability, it is important for qualitative researchers to clearly describe the procedures in detail (Criterion 3; Anastas, 2004; Drisko, 1997).

Another consideration is related to the notion of critical reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Ryan, 1998). According to social constructionists, because bias in social science research cannot be eliminated, it is important for the researchers to be conscious of their biases and preoccupations. Steier (1991) argued that "researchers have wanted to say something about the 'subjects' (for example, social groups) that they are studying . . . they may now realize that in doing so they are saying something about themselves" (p. 2). Rosenau (1992) also pointed out the importance of acknowledging the "impossibility of setting aside all normative values" and that "researchers must make them explicit in the hope that this will alert readers to their existence" (p. 114). Therefore, whether the researchers have clearly spelled out their biases and ideological preoccupation is an important point to be considered (Criterion 4; Drisko, 1997). Furthermore, because the intense interaction between the researchers and informants in qualitative research may generate bias and because the subjective biases of the researchers may be unacknowledged (Huberman & Miles, 1994), it is important for the researchers to clearly discuss how bias could possibly be minimized. For those who do not believe that bias can be eliminated (e.g., postmodern researchers), it is argued that the related arguments should be outlined (Criterion 5; Drisko, 1997).

Two hallmarks of quality in postpositivist research are reliability and validity (Patton, 2002). Based on the principle of dependability, it is important to know whether the coding and interpretations of the researchers are consistent. Basically, one could ask whether intrarater reliability (stability of the interpretations of the same researcher with time) and interrater reliability (stability of the interpretations across researchers) have been conducted, and one could ask for the related levels of agreement (Criterion 6). Based on the principle of triangulation, it is important to know whether multiple researchers and multiple methods have been employed and the outcome of the triangulated findings (Criterion 7).

Although the hallmark of validity is not explicitly stated in the constructivist literature, there is a strong emphasis on the communal nature of knowledge claims. Lincoln (1998) suggested that the community be used as an arbitrator of quality. Rizzo, Corsaro, and Bates (1992) suggested that there are two ways to check the quality of a qualitative study. These include peer checking (i.e., invitation of peers who are not researchers to check the

quality of the study) and member checking (i.e., ask the participants to check the quality of the study). The essence of these techniques is the involvement of others in helping the researcher arrive at a truthful understanding of the reality (Padgett, 1998). Therefore, checking by members of the community, including peer checking and member checking, forms another criterion for judging qualitative evaluation studies (Criterion 8).

Similarly, although constructivists do not commonly emphasize the hallmark of reliability, the principle of auditability is upheld. According to Sandelowski (1986), auditability of a qualitative study is high if the researcher "leaves a clear decision trail concerning the study from its beginning to the end . . . auditability means that any reader or another researcher can follow the progression of events in the study and understand their logic" (p. 34). Based on this principle, it is important to ask whether the researchers are conscious of the importance of the audit trail (Huberman & Miles, 1994) in which the data, perspective, decisions, and situations are clearly documented (Criterion 9). According to several social work researchers (Anastas, 2004; Drisko, 1997; Padgett, 1998), it is important for qualitative researchers to provide adequate raw data so that the readers can assess the reasonableness of the interpretations advanced by the researchers. Of course, one major difficulty associated with this suggestion is space limitation imposed by journal editors, which makes it difficult of qualitative researchers to report the audit trails in detail. However, it can be argued that it is still important to know whether the researcher is conscious of the importance of audit trail, whether audit trail has been conducted, and whether the mechanism is described (though not necessarily in detail) by the researcher.

The final three criteria are related to the notion of critical interpretations and analyses of qualitative data. Consistent with the spirit of logical thinking in postpositivist thoughts and the notion of critical reflexivity of the social constructionists, whether researchers have clearly outlined alternative explanations for the findings should be examined (Criterion 10). In other words, whether the researcher has considered all possible interpretations of the findings is a source of concern. Because qualitative data may not be so uniform and because there are always cases that do not conform to the patterns observed (Padgett, 1998), whether researchers have properly described and explained the negative cases forms another dimension for the evaluation (Criterion 11). According to Huberman and Miles (1994), description and explanation of negative cases can enhance the quality of a qualitative study. Finally, consistent with the spirit of critical

rationalism (Gambrill, 1999; Gomory, 2000a, 2000b) and critical reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Ryan, 1998), whether the researchers are conscious of the limitations of the study and document them in a clear and honest manner is another area that should be examined (Criterion 12). For example, researchers should clearly answer the question of whether the sample employed is adequate to generate useful data to address the study questions.

Consistent with the spirit of critical reflexivity, several special features of the study are highlighted. First, the notion of subtle realism (Hammersley, 1992) is shared by the researchers, in which it is maintained that social phenomena exist in the objective world while the constructed nature of research is also acknowledged. Seale (1999) argued that "subtle realism provides a pragmatic philosophical rationale for researchers locating their practice with a constructively self-critical research community" (p. 31). Second, multiple criteria from both postpositivistic and constructivist paradigms were used to examine the studies under review. Although the former position accepts critical realism and the use of multiple research methods, with the belief that quantitative methods are superior to qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), the latter also accepts the use of multiple research methods but with the belief that no method is superior to the other. Although there are views suggesting that generalized quality criteria are not useful, Seale (1999) argued that "the quality of research is not automatically determined by the imposition of generalized quality criteria, but such schemes can help sensitize researchers to the issues that a particular project may need to address" (p. 50). Third, to enable other researchers conducting similar studies to compare their findings with the present findings, the articles under review and the review procedures are clearly described. Fourth, to deal with the personal preoccupation that qualitative studies in the social work context are of low quality, multiple researchers were used, and independent assessment of the studies was carried out. Fifth, to enhance the rigor of the evaluation, interrater reliability measures were computed, and views of the independent researchers were triangulated. Sixth, qualitative (e.g., presence vs. absence of certain attributes, such as consideration of alternative explanations) and quantitative (e.g., interrater reliability) indicators were used. Finally, limitations of the study are explicitly acknowledged in this article.

METHOD

Based on the *Social Work Abstracts*, the search terms *qualitative* and *evaluation* were used to identify qualitative evaluation studies indexed in the database from 1990 to 2003. As of December 31, 2003, 75 studies were identified. By excluding articles published in non-social-work journals (Exclusion Criterion 1) and articles not directly reporting evaluation studies of social work intervention programs (Exclusion Criterion 2), 27 articles were retained in the final evaluation process. Although the study by Elks and Kirkhart (1993) did not deal with qualitative evaluation of a social work intervention program, social workers' evaluation practice in a general context was examined in the study. As such, it was also included in the present analysis. Among these 28 studies, 20 studies were mixed-method studies, in which both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used (see Table 1). Because the focus of this article is to examine the quality of social work evaluation studies using qualitative research methods, focus was put on the qualitative components of the mixed-method studies under review. Using the first study (Vera, 1990) as an example, although single-case design, group comparison, and qualitative data and analyses were employed, the review was focused on the qualitative component (including design, participants, data collection, data analyses, and data interpretation) of the study.

Based on the preceding discussion, 12 criteria were used to evaluate these 28 qualitative evaluation studies: explicit statement of the philosophical base of the study (Criterion 1); justifications for the number and nature of the participants of the study (Criterion 2); detailed description of the data collection procedures (Criterion 3); discussion of the biases and preoccupations of the researchers (Criterion 4); description of the steps taken to guard against biases or arguments that should or could not be eliminated (Criterion 5); inclusion of measures of reliability, such as interrater reliability and intrarater reliability (Criterion 6); inclusion of measures of triangulation in terms of researchers and data types (Criterion 7); inclusion of peer-checking and member-checking procedures (Criterion 8); consciousness of the importance and development of audit trails (Criterion 9); consideration of alternative explanations for the observed findings (Criterion 10); inclusion of explanations for negative evidence (Criterion 11); and clear statement of the limitations of the study (Criterion 12).

There are several steps in the evaluation process. In the first step, three authors evaluated the studies in terms of

(continued on page 188)

TABLE 1: Evaluation of Qualitative Evaluation Studies Under Review in Terms of Criteria 1 to 5

Study	Author	Year	Evaluation Topic	Basic Information on the Study				Criterion 1		Criterion 2		Criterion 3 Procedure Given in Detail	Criterion 4 Bias and Preoccupation Clearly Stated	Criterion 5 Steps to Guard Against Biases Explicitly Stated
				Approach Adopted	Data Collection Method and Analysis	Statement of Philosophical Base of the Study	Justification for Number and Nature of the Participants	Nature						
				General	Mixed	No			Number					
1	Vera	1990	Adjustment to divorce after joining a 10-week group program	General	Mixed	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No		
2	Ringma & Brown	1991	Disabled people's opinions on existing services	Specific	Pure qualitative	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes		
3	Stout	1991	Model for educating social work students and professions about the male controls and violence against women	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No	No	No		
4	Elks & Kirkhart	1993	Social workers' evaluation on their practice	Specific	Pure qualitative	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No		
5	Rehr & Epstein	1993	Mount Sinai Leadership Exchange program	General	Pure qualitative	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
6	Davis, Ray, & Sayles	1995	Structured outdoor project for high-risk rural youth	General	Mixed	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No		
7	Derezotes	1995	Innovative recreational gang diversion program	General	Pure qualitative	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes		
8	Illback & Kalafat	1995	School-based integrated service program	Specific	Mixed	No	Yes	Yes (not for the follow-up study)	No	No	No	No		
9	Salcido & Cota	1995	Cross-cultural training program for child welfare workers	Specific	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
10	Erera	1997	Empathy Training Program and emotionally oriented empathy training program for helping professions	General	Mixed	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Study	Author	Year	Basic Information on the Study				Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3	Criterion 4	Criterion 5				
			Evaluation Topic	Approach Adopted	Data Collection Method and Analysis	Statement of Philosophical Base of the Study						Justification for Number and Nature of the Participants	Procedure Given in Detail	Bias and Preoccupation Clearly Stated	Steps to Guard Against Biases Explicitly Stated
11	Whipple, Grettenberger, & Flynn	1997	Outreach research course in social work doctoral program	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No					
12	Mowbray & Bybee	1998	Outreach or linkage model of providing services for homeless and mentally ill persons	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No					
13	Heath	1998	Pilot project of mediated adoptions	General	Mixed	No	Yes (Sample 1)	Yes	No	No					
14	Bronstein & Kelly	1998	School-linked service programs for immigrant students and their families	General	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes					
15	Sun	1998	Continuing education program for school counselors	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No					
16	Walsh-Bowers & Basso	1999	Two creative drama programs for early adolescents	General	Mixed	No	No	Yes	No	No					
17	Batchelor, Gould, & Wright	1999	Resources for families in two local authority housing estates	General	Mixed	No	No	Yes	No	No					
18	Cigno & Gore	1999	Services of a multiagency children's center for disabled children and their families	General	Mixed	No	No	Yes	No	Yes					
19	Ligon, Markward, & Yegidis	1999	Distance learning and standard classroom courses of a graduate school of social work	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No					

20	Rivard, Johnson, Morrissey, & Starrett	1999	Interagency service for children with serious disturbed emotions	General	Mixed	No	Yes	No	No	No
21	Goicoechea-Balbona, Barnaby, Ellis, & Foxworth	2000	Social services for women with HIV and AIDS	General	Pure qualitative	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	Netting & Williams	2000	Nine demonstration projects of primary care for elderly people	General	Pure qualitative	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
23	De Anda	2001	Mentor program for at-risk high school youth	General	Pure qualitative	No	No	No	No	No
24	Düvell & Jordan	2001	Social workers' comments on working in the asylum teams	General	Pure qualitative	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
25	Gellis	2001	Mental health services of three immigrant caregiver groups	Specific	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
26	Platt	2001	Pilot initial assessment process for children in need	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No
27	Hill, Dillane, Bannister, & Scott	2002	Intensive project for families facing eviction	General	Mixed	No	No	No	No	No
28	Gardner	2003	Two community-based projects by using a critical reflection framework	Specific	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Interrater reliability					0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.82

the criteria outlined above in an independent manner. After the second author (a registered social worker studying in a master of philosophy program) and the third author (a Ph.D. candidate) consolidated their evaluations, they submitted their evaluation results to the first author for comparison and checking. Interrater reliability measures were then computed to assess the degree of agreement among the authors in terms of the proposed criteria. According to Huberman and Miles (1994), interrater agreement is expressed in terms of the number of agreement over the sum of the number of agreement and disagreement. For those areas that were not agreed on among the authors, they were eventually resolved via discussion and consensus between the first author and second author.

RESULTS

Generally speaking, reliability analyses showed that the agreement between the first author and the second and third authors was high. This suggests that the assessment was consistent across evaluators in this study (see Tables 1 and 2).

With reference to Criterion 1, results showed that most of the studies adopted a general qualitative approach ($n = 22$), and explicit discussion of the philosophical bases of the studies was mentioned in a few studies only ($n = 8$). Regarding description of the justifications for the number and nature of the participants of the study (Criterion 2), results showed that very few reviewed studies provided justifications for the number of participants, and only approximately half of the studies included justifications for the nature of the participants. Concerning the question of whether there was a detailed description of the data collection procedures (Criterion 3), it was considered adequate in 13 studies only. These findings suggest that the details included in the social work evaluation studies under review were not detailed enough to permit replication or comparisons by other researchers.

As far as the issue of bias is concerned, it was found that explicit discussion of biases and preoccupations of the researchers was found in only four studies (Criterion 4). Similarly, explicit statements on the steps taken to guard against bias and preoccupation or arguments that biases could not be reduced (Criterion 5) could be found in only nine studies.

With reference to the hallmarks of quality in postpositivistic research, results showed that only three studies had examined interrater reliability and that none of the studies had examined intrarater reliability (Criterion 6). In studies involving multiple researchers, triangulation of

findings in terms of researchers (Criterion 7) was present in only six studies. In contrast, triangulation in terms of data types (Criterion 7) was found in most of the studies, probably because most of the studies under review were mixed-method studies. Using criteria more closely associated with the constructivist paradigm, involvement of others (Criterion 8) and auditability (Criterion 9) were used. The findings show that peer checking and member checking (Criterion 8) were seldom carried out. Finally, results show that the researchers were not very conscious about the importance of auditability (Criterion 9). Among the 28 studies under review, strong emphases on audit trails could be found in only 5 studies. In addition, the terms *auditability* and *audit trail* are seldom mentioned in the studies under review. In sum, using criteria based on either the postpositivistic paradigm or the constructivist paradigm, the present review showed that the rigor of social work evaluation studies under review was not high.

To what extent were the qualitative evaluation studies under review critical? Results showed that 13 and 18 studies considered the issues of alternative explanations (Criterion 10) and negative evidence (Criterion 11), respectively. Finally, the review showed that researchers of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in the social work context were not very critical because the limitations of the studies (Criterion 12) were explicitly discussed in only 8 studies.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Several observations can be highlighted from the present review. First, the review shows that most of the qualitative evaluation studies in social work are operated in terms of the general qualitative orientation and that very few studies have adopted a specific qualitative approach in conducting the study. Because the term *qualitative* has different meanings for different qualitative researchers, failure to describe the philosophical base of one's study is a fundamental flaw. For example, a qualitative study in a critical realist orientation would be very different from a qualitative study based on a radical social constructivist orientation. In particular, because most of the studies under review are mixed-method studies, there is a need for the researchers to specify the philosophical base for mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The second observation is related to the principle of auditability, and three points can be highlighted based on Criteria 2, 3, and 10. The first point is that justifications

TABLE 2: Evaluation of the Qualitative Evaluation Studies Under Review in Terms of Criteria 6 to 12

Study	Criterion 6		Criterion 7		Criterion 8		Criterion 9		Criterion 10		Criterion 11		Criterion 12			
	Reliability		Triangulation		Peer Checking		Member Checking		Consciousness of the Importance of Audit Trail		Alternative Hypotheses and Interpretation Considered		Negative Evidence Accounted for		Limitations Clearly Stated	
	Intrater	Interrater	Researcher	Data												
1	No	No	NA	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No		
2	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No		
3	No	No	NA	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
4	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		
5	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No		
6	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No		
7	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
8	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
9	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
10	No	No	NA	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
11	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No		
12	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
13	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		
14	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No		
15	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
16	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
17	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
18	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
19	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
20	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
21	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No		
22	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No		
23	No	No	NA	Yes	No	No	NA	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
24	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No		
25	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No		
26	No	No	NA	No	No	No	NA	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes		
27	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No		
28	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Interrater reliability	0.96	0.96	1.00	1.00	0.96	0.96	1.00	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.86	0.96	0.96		

NOTE: See Table 1 for study information by number.

for the number and nature of participants were generally not clear in the studies under review. Although qualitative studies do not generally aim at generalizability, a clear description of the number and nature of the participants and the related justifications is important for researchers planning to do the study again. In addition, in qualitative approaches such as the grounded theory approach, documentation of the sampling procedures via memos and justifications for the choice of the participants in terms of theoretical sampling are important.

The second point is that the details of the data collection procedures were generally not presented clearly. One striking example can be seen in the work of Salcido and Cota (1995). Although the authors claimed to use grounded theory in analyzing answers to open-ended questions (p. 44), details of the grounded theory procedures, such as coding, memoing, and theoretical sampling, are missing in the article. Finally, the review showed that the principle of auditability was not strongly emphasized in the studies under review. In fact, very few researchers mentioned these two terms in their studies, and the related process (not the details of the decisions) was not clearly described. According to LeCompte and Goetz (1982), without clearly documenting the process of the study, external reliability of the study would be seriously undermined.

The third observation concerns biases and preoccupations of the researchers (Criteria 4 and 5). According to many qualitative researchers, a basic feature of qualitative study is that researchers should be sensitive to one's ideological biases and preoccupations. For example, Janesick (1998) stated that qualitative research requires "description of the researcher's own biases and ideological preference" (p. 42). Unfortunately, although honest reflection and explicit discussion of one's bias and preoccupation are highly valued characteristics in qualitative research, these features were not reflected in the studies under review. Similarly, explicit discussions of the steps on how biases can be dealt with (or should not be dealt with) were not commonly found in the studies under review. These observations suggest that social workers conducting studies using qualitative research methods are not very sensitive about the issue of bias. Obviously, insensitivity of this issue will contribute to insensitivity of data interpretations.

The fourth observation is related to the truth value and consistency of the observed findings. Using the positivistic notions of reliability and validity, results show that reliability measures were seldom computed. In his discussion of the postmodern challenge, Rubin (2000) raised the following challenge for qualitative researchers:

Why should we eschew the use of research methods (such as blind raters, etc.) intended to minimize the extent to which our biases influence our findings just because we can't reach perfection in being completely objective and value free ourselves? (pp. 12-13)

Unfortunately, the present review suggests that social work evaluators adopting qualitative methods do not appear to be very enthusiastic about the issue of reliability. Furthermore, it is questionable whether social workers have a correct concept of reliability. For example, Salcido and Cota (1995) reported that because their study "was a descriptive evaluation with no specific hypotheses, no interrater reliability tests were conducted" (p. 44). It is difficult to understand this claim because it is perfectly legitimate and technically viable to compute interrater reliability estimates for descriptive evaluation with no specific hypothesis. Concerning the issue of triangulation, the review showed that triangulation across researchers in studies with multiple researchers was not very satisfactory. In short, the rigor of the qualitative evaluation studies under review, in terms of the traditional hallmarks of reliability and validity, is not satisfactory. Negligence of these aspects can be regarded as significant, particularly with respect to the fact that most of the studies under review are mixed-method studies that are commonly conducted within the postpositivistic framework.

How about the issues of truth value and consistency when constructivist criteria were used? Again, the findings are not very positive. Concerning peer checking, it seems that social work researchers are not familiar with this technique, and it was not commonly mentioned in the studies under review. In addition, it is disturbing to find that the informants were seldom invited to check the interpretations of the researchers. The present findings suggest that social work researchers value their interpretations more than those of the participants.

The final observation that can be highlighted from the present analysis is that the analyses and interpretations of the data in the reviewed studies did not appear to be critical; few researchers mentioned alternative explanations and negative cases, and limitations of the studies were explicitly acknowledged in only a low proportion of the studies. These features of the reviewed studies suggest that social work researchers are not sensitive to the notion of critical reflexivity treasured by constructivist researchers.

In short, the conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that the quality of the qualitative evaluation studies under review is not satisfactory, and it appears that social work researchers are not very sensitive about the issue of quality. Historically speaking, qualitative

researchers have criticized positivism as naïve realism. Ironically, the present review suggests that the limitations of the existing qualitative evaluation studies, including the lack of sensitivity about the philosophical position of the study, auditability, bias, truth value, consistency, and critical interpretations, would probably lead to another form of naïve realism.

However, there are several points that should be taken into account when considering the above conclusions. First, the proposal of 12 criteria should not be misinterpreted as a requirement that all of them should be fulfilled in a single study. As mentioned above, different criteria based on the postpositivistic (e.g., reliability and triangulation) and constructivist (e.g., reflexivity) positions were employed. As such, the relevance of some of the criteria to some extent depends on the philosophical orientation of the study. For example, interrater reliability may make little sense to social constructionist researchers, whereas the related information would be regarded as important for a qualitative researcher adopting a subtle realist position. In fact, the most important point that should be highlighted is that qualitative researchers should conduct qualitative studies in accordance with the standards upheld by the research paradigm that has been adopted. As we have seen, regardless of using postpositivistic or constructivist criteria, the quality of the studies under review does not appear to be high.

The second point is that the present findings do not logically imply that the quality of qualitative social work evaluation research is poorer than that of quantitative social work research. In fact, methodological problems in quantitative social work research are not uncommon (Proctor, 1996). For example, quantitative social work researchers usually do not place strong emphasis on alternative explanations and limitations of their studies. In the same vein, the present findings do not logically imply that the quality of qualitative research in social work is lower than that in other disciplines. In fact, the issue of quality of qualitative studies also exists in other disciplines, such as nursing (Sandelowski, 1986) and education (Huberman & Miles, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

The final point is that assuming the observations highlighted in the present observation is a reflection of the quality of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work, one should ask why this is the case. There are four possible factors that might contribute to the present situation. First, one should be aware of the difficulties involved in implementing strategies that attempt to enhance the quality of qualitative studies (Padgett, 1998). For example, the time and cost involved in peer checking and member checks are extremely

enormous, and they may deter qualitative social work researchers from engaging themselves in the related strategies. Second, probably because of the lack of consensus and the fact that journals rarely provide guidelines and standards to report qualitative research findings, qualitative researchers may face special difficulties when they attempt to consider the issue of quality. Third, space constraint in academic journals is another difficulty that may force qualitative researchers to report their findings in an inadequate manner. Finally, inadequate social work training in qualitative social work research may contribute to the observed findings.

There are several limitations of this review. First, because the studies reviewed were based on the *Social Work Abstracts*, the conclusions of the study may not be generalizable to other studies that are not captured by the *Social Work Abstracts*. Of course, social work researchers are encouraged to publish their qualitative evaluation studies with good quality in those journals that are indexed by *Social Work Abstracts*. The second limitation is that the criteria proposed are based on the belief that it is possible (though in an imperfect manner) to differentiate good and bad qualitative social work evaluation studies. For those who adopt a postmodern stand, they would definitely object to some of the criteria proposed. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that to counteract such arguments, criteria reflecting both postpositivistic and constructivist standpoints were used in this study. Third, only triangulation by researchers and interrater reliability were used to enhance the rigor of the study. It would definitely be more illuminating if other procedures, such as peer checking, could be included in future studies. Fourth, some of the criteria mentioned by other researchers (e.g., ethical issues and the appropriateness of qualitative methodology to the research questions being asked; Anastas, 2004; Drisko, 1997) were not addressed in the present review because of space constraint. In view of their importance in qualitative social work research, this obviously demands an additional study. Finally, the scope of the present review may be constrained by the search terms used (i.e., *qualitative* and *evaluation*). In fact, even a fewer number of studies were identified when the search term *qualitative evaluation* was used. Thus, it is strongly recommended that the indexing system of *Social Work Abstracts* be reviewed to better capture social work evaluation studies using qualitative research methods.

There are several implications of the present findings to social work research and practice. First, consistent with the spirit of critical rationalism (Gambrell, 1999; Gomory, 2000a, 2000b) and critical reflexivity (Steier, 1991), there is a need to critically assess the quality of

qualitative evaluation research in the social work context. Fundamentally, social workers have to critically ask whether the findings emerging from qualitative social work evaluation studies are trustworthy. Based on the ideas of Gambrill (1999), social workers should draw evidence-based rather than authority-based conclusions from qualitative evaluation studies. In addition, social workers should understand that uncritical acceptance of qualitative evaluation studies of low quality would reinforce the implementation of low-quality qualitative evaluation research in the long run. In particular, if journal editors and editorial board members accept qualitative evaluation research with defects and if social work practitioners and students consume such knowledge, this would create a vicious cycle that would jeopardize the quality of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in the long run.

The second implication of the present findings is that there is an obvious need to enhance the quality of qualitative evaluation studies in the social work context, and several guidelines are suggested. First, because the term *qualitative* means different things to different qualitative researchers, the philosophical base of a qualitative study should be clearly described (Guideline 1). Second, social work researchers should be sensitive to the auditability of a study. These include a clear description of the procedures and rationales for recruiting the participants and data collection procedures (Guideline 2). Third, social work researchers should be sensitive to the issue of bias, and discussion of the steps of how bias would be (or would not be) dealt with should be included (Guideline 3). Fourth, social work researchers should be sensitive to issues of truth value (e.g., triangulation, peer checking, and member checking) and consistency, such as reliability and audit trails (Guideline 4). Fifth, social work researchers should adopt a critical attitude in which alternative explanations and negative cases are properly considered and in which limitations of the study are explicitly stated (Guideline 5).

The third implication of the present findings is with reference to Thyer's (1989) challenge that qualitative researchers are urged to "develop explicit guide-lines for the conduct of qualitative studies" (p. 309) and the remark of Guba and Lincoln (1994) that "the issue of quality criteria in constructivism is . . . not well resolved, and further critique is needed" (p. 114), more discussion on the issue of criteriology in qualitative social work research and development of the related criteria is needed. A review of the literature shows that although there are heated debates on the issue of criteria in the qualitative literature in other

disciplines, very little discussion has taken place in the context of social work.

There are two points that should be noted as far as the issue of criteria is concerned. First, there are views suggesting that it is indeed possible to formulate criteria to evaluate qualitative studies. For example, Hammersley (1990) argued that "we do not need to abandon the concept of truth as correspondence to an independent reality. We can retain this concept of truth by adopting a more subtle realism" (p. 61). In fact, Hammersley (1992) attempted to reformulate postpositivist and constructivist criteria in terms of concepts of truth (e.g., different levels of evidence) and relevance (Seale, 2002). Second, even for those who adopt a relativist view, the issue of quality is still present, although in a subtle form. For example, although Smith and Deemer (2000) maintained that "relativism must be accepted" (p. 878), they also argued that "relativism need not and must not be seen in terms of 'anything goes'" (p. 878) and that it is plausible to devise "a list of features that we think, or more or less agree at any given time and place, characterize good versus bad inquiry" (p. 894). Perhaps it is time for social workers to work on such a list and contribute to the discussion on criteriology in qualitative research.

The fourth implication is that the present findings suggest that there is a need to conduct further research to understand the issue of quality in qualitative evaluation studies in social work. As mentioned above, further work should be conducted to examine the studies in terms of social work ethics (Anastas, 2004; Drisko, 1997). Furthermore, it is important to understand how journal editors and editorial board members evaluate qualitative evaluation studies.

The final implication of the present study is on social work education. The present study suggests that there is a need to strengthen the qualitative research training of social workers. This suggestion is important, particularly in view of the fact that the number of qualitative evaluation studies has increased sharply in recent years but that "the profession continues to suffer a dearth of sufficient, relevant, and quality research" (Proctor, 1996, p. 366). If the argument of Weissman (1981) that "the types of problems that social workers have to deal with, whether they are working with groups or individuals, often require knowledge that, to date, can only be developed through qualitative methods" (p. 63) is taken, it is obvious that qualitative research training for social workers should be strengthened. Unfortunately, as pointed out by Burnette (1998), probably because of time constraint, most social work students have limited knowledge of the complex

nature of qualitative research. It is suggested that social work researchers be trained to possess the following competencies: (a) a clear understanding of different types of qualitative studies and the differences between those adopting a general qualitative orientation and those adopting a specific qualitative orientation, (b) sensitivity to the importance of auditability, (c) high reflexivity of one's biases and philosophical orientations and knowledge of the steps by which biases could be reduced (or arguments that biases cannot and should not be reduced), (d) understanding of the relevance of truth value (e.g., triangulation, peer checking, member checking) and consistency (e.g., reliability and audit trails) to qualitative research, and (e) ability to critically analyze and interpret qualitative data. To produce social work graduates with the above characteristics, there is a need for social work training institutions to review the existing curricula so that social work researchers who are more sensitive to the issue of quality in evaluation studies using qualitative research methods will be trained.

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