Qualitative Social Work

Of Quant Jocks and Qual Outsiders: Doctoral student narratives on the quest for training in qualitative research

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>> Version of Record - May 22, 2012

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 24, 2011

What is This?

Of Quant Jocks and Qual Outsiders: Doctoral student narratives on the quest for training in qualitative research

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Abstract
Conceivably all doctoral students experience a degree of uncertainty and anxiety while pursuing their degree, yet the decision to use qualitative methods in a dissertation can be fraught with additional burdens. These may include identifying supplementary coursework, locating supportive faculty, and frequently justifying methodological choices. This article seeks to illuminate the experiences of qualitatively oriented social work doctoral students in the United States as they negotiate these challenges. Personal narratives of four current and recent doctoral students who have incorporated qualitative methods into their education are presented and analyzed for common themes. The themes that emerge from these narratives include early exposure to qualitative methods and a commitment to methodological pluralism, as well as experiences with encountering biases, additional costs, and the challenges of translating the methodologies of other disciplines. Recommendations are presented to encourage dialogue about qualitative research in social work doctoral education.

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The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education's Guidelines for Quality in Social Work Programs (2003) recommends that curriculum content include both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Moreover, there are many qualitative articles being published in social work journals (Shek et al., 2005). Social work research, guided by a commitment to the profession's ethical values, often focuses upon vulnerable populations. Qualitative methods can be especially important tools to understand the problems of vulnerable people and to explore solutions for their amelioration.

Yet many US schools' coursework and training focus (sometimes exclusively) on quantitative methods, leading to a marginalization of qualitative methods (Gilgun and Abrams, 2002). Often, social work academics stress the need for quantitative research in order to be considered a 'credible profession' (Sowers and Dulmus, 2009: 114). Although many social work doctoral students use qualitative methods, they often face challenges in pursuing qualitative research. Our research question is what is the experience of US students who elect to pursue qualitative training and employ qualitative methodologies at a quantitatively-focused institution? Through the use of narratives, this article explores our motivations, educational pathways, obstacles faced and strategies used to pursue qualitative methods.

Literature review

The social work literature does not offer much guidance in best practices for teaching qualitative methods, especially at the doctoral level. A keyword search of Social Services Abstracts for the terms 'qualitative methods' and 'social work education' identifies 25 peer reviewed sources for the 20 year span, 1990–2010. By expanding the search to all CSA Illumina Social Science databases, a few more sources appear, but most relate to teaching qualitative methods in sociology, not social work.

The majority of the social work articles describe teaching qualitative methods to undergraduate and Master of Social Work (MSW) students. The range of topics covered include teaching specific qualitative methods and topics (Sells et al., 1997; Sidell, 2007), examining the relationship of research and practice (Ruckdeschel and Shaw, 2002), and exploring the relationship of qualitative methods with social work values (Holley et al., 2007; O'Connor and O'Neill, 2004). One content analysis study examined 48 MSW research course syllabi and found most courses devoted only a single class session to qualitative methods, and very few syllabi identified any specific qualitative research methodology (Drisko, 2008).

This literature review found only four articles specifically about qualitative research in doctoral education. In one, Brun (1997) reviews 54 dissertations that utilize qualitative methods to explore doctoral student experiences in conducting qualitative research. Brun finds that doctoral students choose qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of research participants' lives and to investigate under-researched topics, but struggle with epistemological questions and voice.

The other three articles are narratives that reflect themes similar to those that emerged in Brun's research. Two of the narratives are by doctoral students, describing their research journeys (Clute, 2005; O'Connor, 2001). The third narrative offers the perspective of a quantitatively-focused professor who was asked to teach a qualitative methods course (Franklin, 1996). Given the lack of attention about teaching qualitative research at the doctoral level, it is unsurprising that uncertainty and anxiety permeate all three narratives. Clute (2005) has 'panic attacks' about her research, O'Connor (2001) wonders how the quality of her work will be judged, and Franklin (1996) experiences 'ambivalence' about being asked to teach qualitative methods, and notes that she agreed only after being coerced by her colleagues. Another theme across narratives is that isolation and loneliness pervade the experiences of doing qualitative research in social work. Though it is likely that all doctoral students may experience anxiety, doubt, and isolation as they embark on their dissertation research, the decision to employ qualitative methods appears to be fraught with additional burdens. These may include choosing from a limited group of knowledgeable or supportive faculty advisors and having difficulty translating methodological coursework from outside social work.

However, it is important to note that this may be a problem specific to the US. Qualitative research methods appear to be more accepted and prolific in the UK and Europe. British social work students are often supported in conducting qualitative studies (Dominelli and Holloway, 2008). In fact, Lyons (2003) indicates that a previously heavy focus on the use of qualitative methods in the UK and Europe may now be influencing a push for more quantitative methods. This article focuses on the experience of attempting to pursue qualitative methods in a US-based social work doctoral program.

Methods

We applied an auto-ethnographic approach to investigate our experiences of the culture of doctoral education in social work. *Auto-ethnography* is the anthropological study of one's own culture through self-reflection and analysis of autobiographical materials (Hayano, 1979).

Evolving as a more introspective form of ethnography (Padgett, 2008), this approach is concerned with addressing questions of how one's own experience of a culture offers insights into situations, events, institutions, and ways of life (Patton, 2002).

In order to reflect upon the culture of our department and its doctoral students, we each prepared a narrative based on our own experiences to investigate the culture of social work academic research. We used this self-reflexive methodology to explore and reveal the biases and contours of our own culture in a setting where we all have lived and worked. Auto-ethnography permits an exploration of our personal experiences in connection to our own culture, including uncovering cultural biases (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

While we were not in the same cohort, our four doctoral careers overlapped and we became friends. Through our friendships, we realized we shared similar experiences in our attempts to pursue qualitative training. Prior to writing the narratives, we identified a key set of questions to guide our self-explorations. These included descriptions of the origin of our interest in qualitative methods, the decision to pursue qualitative research methods in our doctoral education, the role of advisors in this process, what resources we found helpful, and what challenges we encountered. To promote the rigor of our narratives we used triangulation and peer-debriefing, regularly critiquing and discussing each other's work, reflection, and process (Lietz et al., 2006). Codes emerged from this process of feedback and revision which we then used to develop themes for our analysis and discussion.

The group process of reviewing all narratives and codes expands an individual auto-ethnographic approach to a collaborative process of team-auto-ethnography. We conducted our coding analysis through the Coding Analysis Toolkit, a web-based tool for analysis of textual datasets (University of Pittsburgh & University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2009). This allowed us to calculate our inter-rater reliability as we coded our narratives, using the kappa statistic, which corrects for chance agreement. Each of our narratives is provided here, followed by the analysis and discussion of major themes, similarities and differences.

Narratives

Overcoming methodological biases – David

Full of confidence, I stepped inside my advisor's office. Meeting with a member of my dissertation committee usually exposed my deepest doubts about my doctoral work. Yet this day, I felt good. After much agonizing and careful consideration, I had decided upon a dissertation topic close to my heart, and gained access to a population I could study. Fantasizing about the academic accolades my scholarship was sure to win, I presented my methodological approach and research design.

'Are you sure that you want to do a survey?' I blinked at my advisor across the desk. 'Perhaps quantitative methods aren't right for this project', he suggested. Years of being steeped in statistical tests revolted at the question.

'Not use quantitative methods?' I stammered, feeling as if he had informed me that up was down. 'You don't want to "hit a screw with a hammer"' he cautioned.

This was the pivotal moment when I learned the often-repeated, seldom-embraced wisdom, 'Let the research question drive the methods'. As my committee warned me about imposing an inappropriate methodology upon a research project, I came to understand that my dissertation would be stronger with a 'goodness of fit' between the question and design. I decided qualitative interviews were the most appropriate methodology for my research question, settled into a reawakening of my love for people's stories, and came full circle in my perspective as a doctoral student as I completed a qualitative dissertation. Qualitative research methods had figured into my decision to pursue doctoral education, however, throughout the

program I frequently had to justify their use, and became biased against them. I ultimately needed to be convinced to deploy them in my dissertation.

As a MSW student, I used qualitative methods to evaluate my fieldwork, and to gauge other students' level of satisfaction with the program. I became involved in mitigation research, employing qualitative methods to support social work knowledge and expertise in the courts. This motivated my intellectual curiosity into the relationship between narrative and social identity and led me to the doctoral program. I built upon my professional and research experiences with qualitative methods by studying narrative interventions for communities recovering from violent trauma.

In my doctoral program, I was required to load up on quantitative methodology courses. I took my required statistical courses in Public Health and Demography, and learned various statistical software packages. Pursuing my interest in human rights, I served as a statistical consultant to the Timor-Leste Truth & Reconciliation Commission. The experience of analyzing three large datasets, quantifying human rights violations, and estimating the mortality rates from the Indonesian invasion and occupation demonstrated the immense power of quantitative methods.

I did search for qualitative courses. Finding adequate training in qualitative methods proved difficult; with the exception of one masters level course, the only qualitative training available was outside my department. I conferred with other doctoral students, got syllabi from professors, and decided upon a course in Education. After enjoying a couple of class sessions immensely, I had to drop it. The professor had structured the class to cover data collection in the fall, and data analysis in the spring companion course. Yet for my dissertation I had textual data that needed analysis before my fieldwork. Despite having found a good class, I had to drop it due to the regrettable issue of timing.

This experience underscored my understanding that social work doctoral students are largely on their own in search of qualitative training. We could take a qualitative research elective outside of our school, but there was no guarantee of compatibility. This situation strengthens the interdisciplinary nature of our field, yet subjects students to the vicissitudes of other departments, which frequently have waiting lists, different theoretical perspectives, and can be hostile to social work's value commitments or applied nature. A fellow student related a difficult experience in a class outside our discipline that he took to broaden his methodological horizons. He inadvertently critiqued the methodology of a core text of the field, and was hence driven from the class by reciprocal attacks. Furthering my frustration was the realization that there were few funding sources available for qualitative social work dissertations.

At the same time, I was completing my training in quantitative coursework, gaining practical experience on quantitative projects, and generally becoming further socialized into the social work academy. I attended the Society for Social Work and Research conference, networked with other graduate students, participated in dissertation seminars, and watched graduates compete for academic

positions on the job market. This exposure helped me become attuned to the culture of academic social work research in the US. What I saw confirmed my budding bias against qualitative methods. I saw that, much like required research courses that glossed over qualitative methods – usually in one week, the conference presentations favored research based upon quantitative methodologies. I noticed most research articles published in top-tier journals employed quantitative methods. I developed the impression that to succeed academically at getting research funded, published, and to obtain a tenure-track job, I should use the most sophisticated quantitative research methodologies in my dissertation. This was premised on the assumption that qualitative methods were not respected, and hardly acknowledged as a legitimate path to knowledge. I felt that in order to have my ideas taken seriously, I needed to couch my research in the language of statistics.

I knew how I wanted to conduct my dissertation; I knew what I would have to do to become competitive for grants, and in the job market. I would take advanced statistical courses, and develop my dissertation proposal using quantitative methods. I was confident this would demonstrate my statistical prowess and guarantee me academic success. I walked, full of confidence, into my faculty advisor's office.

Coping in a quantitative culture – Amy

My interest in qualitative methods dates to my post-MSW work experiences. My direct practice and administrative experiences contributed to an appreciation for both qualitative and quantitative methods. I was originally interested in working directly with clients and was not enthusiastic about spending time filling out surveys. However, I also came to appreciate that just because you 'feel' you are helping someone, this is not necessarily accurate. Quantitative evaluative tools can illuminate the effectiveness of programs and highlight areas for improvement, while opportunities for people to share freely about their experiences can reveal information not available through crunching numbers. For example, the social services agency I worked for implemented a customer feedback survey which provided both quantitative and qualitative results. Each quarter we could see if various programs improved, maintained, or declined on satisfaction criteria. The tallied results included client quotes which indicated how a program helped a client. The results would not have been as enlightening without the qualitative feedback. Thus, my respect for mixed methods was born.

Since entering a social work doctoral program, I have received discouraging messages regarding qualitative methods. My doctoral orientation began with an informal breakfast with faculty and staff. During this breakfast I was asked about my research interests. I discussed staff turnover and my desire to interview staff regarding what agencies could do to improve retention. One professor informed me that I would need to do more than collect interviews, and then explained that a qualitative dissertation would not be taken seriously, that I must include quantitative methods to ensure my credibility in academia. I was further deterred from using qualitative methods in my second year when my advisor urged me to do a

secondary data analysis for my dissertation. I had entered the doctoral program with ideas of designing my own survey and conducting interviews. I had questions about employee retention from my own experiences as a supervisor and was eager to embark on an exploratory study of direct workers in non-profits. However, that research design would take more time and I was discouraged from following that path.

The push for secondary data analysis and rejection of qualitative data collection and analysis that I have experienced may be more related to a desire for students to progress quickly through the program than to a disregard for a particular type of methodology. The department's push for progress is reflected in the advertised median of 4.5 years to PhD completion, which does not allow much time for qualitative methods and seems to contribute to a culture biased against such methods. Other departments, such as sociology and education, report a normative time to degree of 6 or 7 years. These departments offer qualitative methodology courses and appear to have cultures that value a variety of methodological approaches.

However, in addition to the constraints placed on research methods by the department's push for relatively short doctoral careers, there are more overt messages against qualitative methods. One example is the professor who claimed that I will not be marketable in the field of academia if my dissertation relies on qualitative methods. Another example is the lack of qualitative methods courses offered through my department. Besides one master's level elective course on life histories and case studies, there are no opportunities to pursue qualitative methods training in social work. Many qualitative courses are offered on campus, outside my department. In fact I took one on ethnography, offered through Sociology. Yet, a challenge to finding resources for training in qualitative methods is not knowing where to look and not getting support in the search. My department does not provide guidance on what type of qualitative methods would be most useful for social work research.

Furthermore, departmental course requirements focus heavily on quantitative methods. Doctoral students are required to take one research elective in addition to three required statistics courses. The department provides a list of courses that qualify for the research elective, and of the 27 courses listed, only five are qualitative. One course is the previously mentioned elective on life histories; the others are in public health or education. The availability of these courses is additionally restricted by pre-requisites and small class sizes in which priority is given to a department's own students. Presence on a list of approved courses does not guarantee that the course will actually be offered. Without any guidance from the department regarding the wider array of qualitative courses offered, it can be difficult and time consuming to find a useful, appropriate outside course. Along with the department's lack of training and support for qualitative methods, the pressure to make timely progress through the program is difficult to ignore; making the choice to pursue qualitative methods challenging.

My future relationship with qualitative methods is not entirely clear. I want to understand how to use both qualitative and quantitative methods, and sadly feel

that I have minimal knowledge of either. While the ethnography course I took was interesting and enjoyable, I doubt I will fight the school's normative time expectations and extend my studies, which would be necessary to do an ethnographic dissertation. Instead, it would have been advantageous to get recommendations on a good comprehensive course covering a range of qualitative methods early in my studies; offering such a course within our department would have been better still. Regardless, I do believe in the value of qualitative methods to illuminate and educate us about the problems, paths, and solutions of our varied social work populations. For that reason, I see myself as a scholar who will support the teaching and use of qualitative methods, and will promote a culture inclusive of such methods wherever my professional path takes me.

No regrets about the long road through a qualitative dissertation – Sarah

My interest in qualitative research began as an undergraduate at Vassar College. My first Sociology professor, Bill Hoynes, used theoretical texts and ethnographies to explicate classic sociological theory. We read about rationalization and bureaucracy along with a participant observation study of fast food workers, and thus learned how the fast food industry exemplified Weber's theory. This was exciting stuff, and I was hooked.

I had to complete a thesis, and primary research is encouraged. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight Jamaican women in Poughkeepsie, NY to understand how they came to upstate New York and how they participated in their families' immigration journeys. My professors encouraged rigor, but never questioned my methods. I was one of a few graduating Sociology students to earn departmental honors. As qualitative research was acceptable and even rewarded in my undergraduate experience, I did not know, until beginning a MSW program, that qualitative research might not be embraced in my new field.

My master's thesis was a qualitative study of the differing professional acculturation experiences of law and social work students. I asserted that an observational study of law and social work classes would be the best way to explore this topic, because people may not be aware of their classroom cultures. It would be difficult to survey students about their implicit culture (Schein, 1992), including dress code, seating arrangements, and division of 'air time'. This did not persuade the instructor, who preferred quantitative studies. Throughout the year, we engaged in multiple discouraging conversations, and only through the advocacy of a sympathetic teaching assistant did I receive an acceptable grade.

Fortunately, not everyone agreed with that instructor's assessment of my work. I have published my findings in Child and Youth Services Review and presented at professional conferences for lawyers and social workers. The experience of nearly receiving a poor grade for work that was ultimately accepted for publication in a respected journal exposes the rift in our field with regard to qualitative research.

This rift was also evident in my doctoral studies. I encountered numerous difficulties as a qualitative research student being supervised by mostly quantitatively-oriented committee members who ranged widely in their knowledge and acceptance of qualitative methods. One commented that qualitative researchers were like 'novelists' and thus implied that I was not really planning to conduct what he considered research. Another questioned my use of the first person in an introductory section about how I became interested in the topic. These questions of style came to a peak when, upon completion of my manuscript, one committee member argued my writing style was too casual, while another appreciated it. The same committee member who suggested my style was inappropriate also believed my dissertation was far too long, while the lone qualitative researcher argued that if I cut it, I would not be able to cite my evidence properly, and my claims would be unsupported. Though I did ultimately graduate, these disagreements made the long road to a qualitative dissertation longer.

In addition to these obstacles, completing a qualitative dissertation is time-consuming. Facing the many tasks associated with collection of primary data and analysis of a thousand pages of interview transcripts, I was tempted to download a government data set. Not only would I finish more quickly, but I suspected many faculty members would be more supportive of such a dissertation than research involving the complexities and rewards of collecting data and interacting with a vulnerable population. Though no one directly suggested that a quantitative dissertation would be more acceptable, I received frequent unsolicited advice about datasets that might be of interest, even in the midst of describing my plans for a qualitative study.

These challenges to the student researcher are regrettable because qualitative methods are a natural fit for social work. Gilgun and Abrams (2002) make a strong case for the inclusion of qualitative research in social work scholarship. Most importantly, social workers are committed to giving voice to vulnerable people. In my dissertation, I spoke with young people being served in multiple social service systems, such as mental health, juvenile justice, and foster care. Though there are numerous quantitative studies of the problems these young people encounter, they do not tell us how these young people actively negotiate their precarious journeys to adulthood.

In addition to bringing marginalized voices to the forefront of academic and public discourse, qualitative research is also advantageous for students as it is possible to conduct a small, but meaningful study, from beginning to end. Unlike some of my colleagues who have downloaded data sets, my dissertation research gave me first-hand experience in completing a human subjects application, recruiting participants, designing data collection procedures, collecting data, transcribing and transforming data into an analyzable format. Pedagogically, it is surprising that conducting research from start to finish is *not* expected.

I appreciate the scholarly debates I have been forced to engage in, with others and with myself. My casual writing style was again a matter of discussion in relation to a manuscript I was writing based on my dissertation research. I was ready

for the debate. I hope someday these types of debates will no longer be necessary, particularly when I apply for tenure.

Throughout my academic career, I hope to grow as an independent social work scholar with qualitative expertise. I expect to work closely with quantitatively-oriented colleagues, as we have much to learn from one another. Though sometimes painful, our dialogue can enrich our scholarship and field. The issues at the heart of this dialogue – inclusion of research participant voices, accessibility of our research products, and what constitutes social science research – are central to social work's mission and relevance for vulnerable populations.

Of Quant Jocks and Qual Outsiders – Ben

In some ways my doctoral education has been a return to high school. High school was where I first observed the sorting of individuals into different classes and where I watched how labels ('jocks' or 'nerds') facilitate that process. The jocks were an elite corps of bright, athletic, high-achieving young men that all students were encouraged to respect and emulate. As a doctoral student at a prestigious university I have observed the privileging of a new group: the 'Quant Jocks'.

I actually heard this term during my first semester, when in class a professor praised a graduating student. I instantly recognized something important was being revealed about my new environment. Although I only heard this phrase once or twice, the 'Quant Jock' label helped me understand the type of student my department was hoping to reproduce and send out to influence social work academics. Based on my observations I constructed the following definition of a Quant Jock: a student who moves quickly through graduate school, learns complex statistics, prepares a dissertation on a large quantitative dataset, and secures a tenure-track position at another elite university upon graduation.

Part of my challenge has been negotiating how much I must conform to Quant Jock ideals to find support within my department and ultimately a position within the academy. As I work on my qualitative dissertation I wonder: Can I obtain a letter jacket as a Qual Jock? Does that possibility exist within our field?

I am a non-traditional graduate student and the first college graduate in my family. I have been a social worker for more than 20 years, first as a community organizer and then as a MSW in health settings. I was fortunate to find a MSW practicum as an ethnographer on a funded project examining gay men's methamphetamine use. This promoted a desire to learn more about research.

I selected my doctoral program knowing I would be required to study biostatistics and quantitative methods. I was eager to learn more about both qualitative and quantitative social work research. As a new student I was surprised that my department outsourced almost all research training. The rationale is that there is no need to replicate expertise that already exists on campus, particularly when outside courses are taught by leading scholars. I have appreciated the opportunity

to study with truly outstanding instructors; however, this approach also presents challenges. I took three years of quantitative methods classes without examples or guidance on how to incorporate the research methods into social work settings. While I have learned about outstanding research methods used by public health practitioners and teachers, I know little about the contributions that social work scholars have made in evaluating our practice.

My qualitative coursework taught me that researchers must always question our data and investigate what is missing or made taboo or covert within a system. I was taught to ask: Which groups are privileged and which groups are excluded here? What values and norms are rewarded and hence reproduced here? What ideas are valued and promoted and which are denigrated and suppressed here?

When I ask these questions about my own doctoral training I am saddened by the ways that I feel pressured to reproduce an existing social order of quant jocks. I see no discussion or analysis about what is lost in that process. I am disheartened at how little attention theoretical and epistemological topics receive in social work doctoral training. For instance, theories about social reproduction could help future social work practitioners understand the resistance we will face when advocating for the disenfranchised and social change. Instead, I found myself within an environment focused on training me to compete for government grants. Trying to talk with professors and classmates about cultural analysis or theoretical or epistemological concerns often left me feeling the equivalent of an outsider shoved into a locker by school bullies. In such an environment the pressure to conform to existing norms is overwhelming.

I have accepted certain realities about my choice to pursue qualitative studies in a quant-focused department; I offer these as lessons learned. First, I had to accept that I was actually pursuing dual degrees; a quantitative degree required by my department and my own qualitative path. One consequence is that my time to graduation has been extended because of additional courses and I am collecting my own data. Second, my relationships with faculty contain more potential for conflict than for quant students. In part this is because my choices challenge my teachers' goals for social work research. Third, it is difficult to find training combining my methodological interests and chosen subject areas. I have found opportunities conducting focus groups, interviews, and qualitative evaluations. However, because each assignment was related to an entirely new topic area I was criticized in annual reviews for lacking focus. I described the shared methodological connections but I doubt I convinced my critics. Still, I have found a few supportive advisers, who have worked with me in individual tutorials. Their time reading my papers and helping me find books, articles and training opportunities is invaluable.

When I think about the future training of doctoral students, I hope both qualitative and quantitative researchers will come to see that within a professional field like social work we need each others' expertise. This is important for many reasons but one in particular is that each methodology can take a lifetime to master. To combine the best of both methods we must learn to work together. This will require

that we find new ways to work as collaborative teams – teams that will not leave qualitative researchers the last players picked for the game.

Analysis

Though written independently, our narratives share common themes related to our experiences pursuing qualitative methods at a quantitatively focused school. These themes broadly reflect *obstacles* and *facilitators* for learning and employing qualitative methods. Within both broad themes of facilitators and obstacles, three sub-theme codes were identified: *structural*, *people*, and *subjective*. The lead and second author each coded all four narratives using codes agreed upon by all four authors. We achieved an overall kappa score of.75, with kappa scores for individual themes ranging from.89 to.63.

The subjective sub-themes (both facilitator and obstacle) were coded most frequently. This is to be expected as our narratives reflect on our individual experiences. We identified structures and people which influenced our subjective experiences. While there are primarily areas of overlap across the narratives, it is important to note that our narratives differ in the degree to which facilitators and obstacles were experienced.

Facilitators-structural

Structural-facilitators refer to programs or practices that support the use of qualitative methods to enhance social work research and practice, and our emerging roles as scholars. All of us had direct exposure early in our practice and education careers doing qualitative research that contributed to our interest in this methodology. For some, this exposure was rooted in social work practice experiences, particularly in program evaluation. For others, this connection is rooted in undergraduate or master's level education. The early exposure in both social work practice and education settings plays a factor in the disconnect felt by all narrators during their doctoral program. Sarah indicates that structural supports have continued to exist with the acceptance of her qualitative study for journal publication and conference presentations.

Facilitators-people

People-facilitators are faculty and peers who provided encouragement and support for qualitative methods. This theme occurs with specific reference to a person or people, not just to a school or work setting. Three of the four narratives indicate specific people who supported the student's use of qualitative methods. A clear example of this is the dissertation committee member who encouraged David to 'Let the research question drive the methods.' Ben and Sarah also describe faculty who supported their research.

Facilitators-subjective

Subjective-facilitators relate to descriptions of how we internalized our positive experiences with qualitative methods. Direct experiences with these methods reinforced our motivation to use them as well as our recognition of their value for social work research. Ben states, 'My qualitative coursework taught me that researchers must always question what we see in our data and...investigate what is missing or made taboo or covert within a system'.

Additionally, some of us describe the experience of challenging perceived norms against qualitative methods and succeeding. The struggle to have these methods accepted furthers our commitment. Amy, Ben, and Sarah each describe a future where they will continue to use and support the use of qualitative methods in social work.

Obstacles-structural

Structural-obstacles refer to how quantitative methods receive priority over qualitative and the challenges to including qualitative methods in our education and research. All of us have reached outside our discipline to gain training in qualitative research. Though crossing disciplinary boundaries brings its own rewards, it also carries frustrations, such as scheduling conflicts with required social work courses, uncertainty about being admitted to an outside course, and the need to translate another discipline's perspective. Ben notes that these structural obstacles lead him to feel that he is pursuing two degrees, while Amy comments that she will limit qualitative pursuits in her doctoral program in order to not delay degree completion.

Obstacles-people

We coded descriptions of discouragement and encounters with unsupportive faculty and peers as obstacles-people. This includes conflictual interactions with others over the use of qualitative methods, or others' insistence in employing quantitative methods. Three narratives describe specific encounters with unsupportive faculty. For example, Sarah describes committee members questioning the value of her writing style and qualitative research in general.

Obstacles-subjective

Obstacles-subjective relates to having negative experiences pursuing qualitative methods and challenging departmental norms, and the resulting feelings including isolation and stigmatization. Each narrative describes stress and frustration related to our attempts to pursue qualitative studies. Ben illuminates the anxiety brought about by the shaping of quant jocks in the doctoral setting and fears being shoved in a locker. David internalized pressure to use quantitative methods and initially resists when his committee encourages him to use qualitative methods.

Discussion

Our narratives reveal our direct experiences of and our concerns about the bias against qualitative methodologies in social work in US institutions. Each narrative describes anxiety about our credibility as emergent researchers given the general lack of support for qualitative methods in social work research, especially in doctoral education. Our experiences indicate that there is a rift, at least in the US, that exists in social work academia regarding the value of qualitative methodologies. We each experienced an acceptance of qualitative methods in practice and previous education which contributed to our disappointment and struggle when we attempted to pursue these same methods in our doctoral education.

The conflict surrounding qualitative methods is expressed within and across our narratives. The example of a master's project that struggled to get a passing grade eventually getting published reflects conflicting messages in one person's experience. Then, some of us found more support for qualitative methods than others. David's committee members encourage the use of qualitative methodology for his dissertation while Sarah experiences criticisms throughout her dissertation process from some committee members. While some of us struggled to find qualitative coursework, others describe taking courses. Does this reflect individual problems or institutional? We believe that differences are to be expected. We will not each have the exact same experience. However, the frequency of similarities, the empirical evidence of structural obstacles, along with the range of years covered by our individual experiences (we were not all students concurrently) leads us to believe that we are not alone in our struggles.

We suggest the similarities across experiences reflect the existence of a culture that supports and favors quantitative methods. Amy reports explicit messages regarding the need to use quantitative methods to be accepted in academia while David describes implicit messages given by conferences and journals which favor quantitative research. Almost everyone identifies individual people in their doctoral program who facilitated the use of qualitative methods, but there is a clear absence of facilitative structural components in our doctoral experiences.

Despite the many benefits of qualitative research – giving voice to vulnerable people, answering particular research questions, and connecting research and practice – our narratives reflect social work's general lack of formal training and informal support for qualitative research. This lack of structure also informs the subtle messages that qualitative methods are a less valued methodology and less legitimate path to knowledge in social work research.

Recommendations

Engaging in qualitative research at the doctoral level requires courage and initiative, as students struggle to locate mentors and often have to justify methodological choices. As we move forward in our careers we can see that this may also be the case for a social work faculty who choose to utilize or engage in

qualitative research. To that end we have several recommendations for promoting qualitative research by creating more structural facilitators in social work departments as well as in national social work scholarship.

At the departmental level, we propose three recommendations. First, departments of social work in the US should offer more courses in qualitative research at the Master's and Doctoral levels. These courses should focus on the application of qualitative research methods within a social work framework, and can alleviate scheduling conflicts that can occur when students seek courses outside their department. Second, students in social work schools can form qualitative research support teams, form inter-rater coding groups, and provide peer reviews of one another's work. These student efforts should be supported by faculty advisors. Finally, social work departments should make an effort to recruit and retain faculty with qualitative expertise who can provide support to interested students.

On a national level, qualitative researchers can form an organized association for qualitative social work research. The informal opportunities at national conferences for networking with faculty and receiving suggestions for how to pursue qualitative research are beneficial, but more organization is required to promote qualitative methods within social work.

This organization could educate the profession by holding round tables at annual conferences that are followed up with formal reports that support the development of qualitative research. For instance it would be helpful to develop consensus on the use of the first person narrative within papers. Guidelines developed by a group of qualitative scholars would be helpful for educating non-qualitative scholars. These guidelines could be disseminated to faculty and would demonstrate accepted best practices in qualitative social work research. This would be one way to help qualitative researchers spend less time individually defending their methods. It would also help quantitative journal article reviewers to understand accepted practices among qualitative researchers.

We believe that qualitative research represents a valuable methodology, which when employed appropriately and rigorously can reveal much about social problems, social work populations and interventions. Furthermore, qualitative methods offer a valuable link between social work practice, research, and education (Denzin, 2002). The richness of qualitative research can inform practice methodology (Shaw and Ruckdeschel, 2002), and in turn social work curricula. Social work's ethical imperatives of inclusion and social justice often involve giving a voice to the voiceless; qualitative methodologies are uniquely suited to injecting the perspective of vulnerable populations into social science and public policy debates. The ability to overcome biases and thus to employ the methodology best able to answer specific research questions is the hallmark of rigorous science. However, many social work researchers face challenges in pursuing qualitative methods; often these difficulties stem from obstacles in doctoral education. Many qualitative social work researchers have had to go outside the discipline in order to get training and support (Gilgun and Abrams, 2002). A strengthening of qualitative research training within schools of social work and professional associations is needed

(Shek et al., 2005). As part of the next generation of social work scholars, we call for a rejection of the methodological biases of the past in order to advance the social work knowledge base, which ultimately enhances our ability to promote the social welfare of vulnerable populations.

Funding

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