

## HOW IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TAUGHT AT THE MASTER'S LEVEL?

**James W. Drisko**

Smith College

This study examined how qualitative research is taught in foundation MSW courses using a content analysis of syllabi and a survey. The Council on Social Work Education required qualitative research content in 1994 and several authors advocate for greater inclusion of it. Yet no research about what qualitative content is included on syllabi is presently available. All accredited MSW programs were contacted, yielding 57 surveys and 48 syllabi. Wide variation in the numbers of course sessions, focal content, readings, and assignments was found nationally. Qualitative content was absent in 8% of syllabi, and only a single class session was the modal level of inclusion. Few syllabi included named qualitative research approaches. Further, very few assignments addressed qualitative research content. Recommendations for curriculum development are offered.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH POSES many challenges for educators. The named approaches to qualitative research are numerous and diverse; it is not a single unified tradition, as is probabilistic quantitative research. Differences in epistemologies, research purposes, methods, and reporting styles make simple generalization about qualitative research difficult. At the same time, social work authors note its usefulness in developing empirical knowledge (Gilgun, 1994; Riessman, 1994; Sherman & Reid, 1994) and its utility in policy research (Rodwell & Woody, 1994) and practice research as well as in program evaluation (Drisko, 2001; Gould, 1999; Ruckdeshel, Earnshaw, & Ferrik, 1994). Qualitative research is

also a good fit with social work values and purposes (Gilgun, 1994; Riessman, 1994). It often has a discovery orientation and is usually applied to complex, open systems in naturalistic settings. Its methods are most often interactive and relational. Anastas (1999) states, "There has been an explosion of writing about the uses of qualitative research and evaluation in social work and the helping professions" (p. vii). This growth in publications and the requirement that qualitative research be included in baccalaureate- and master's-level social work education (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 1994) demonstrate appreciation for its merits. Determining what qualitative research content to teach, and how

best to teach it, nonetheless remain challenges for educators.

A search of the electronic and print literature reveals no prior research on how qualitative research is taught at the MSW level, though an extensive social work literature calls for more education in qualitative research (e.g., Allen-Meares & Lane, 1990; Padgett, 1998; Sherman & Reid, 1994). The substantive literature further makes plain that social work scholars have identified several limitations in the ways that social workers have applied qualitative research methods (e.g., Drisko, 1997; Gilgun, 1994; Oktay, 2004; Wells, 1995). To improve student preparation, a better knowledge base regarding how qualitative research is taught is needed.

Overall, very few empirical studies on the research content taught in accredited social work programs have been conducted. The available literature is piecemeal and quite varied. Indeed, Dunlap (1993) suggested that there was pervasive and enduring confusion regarding what to teach in social work research courses and how best to do it. Morris (1992) also noted this confusion, questioning both the validity and the role of the scientific method in social work research. Perhaps in response to this confusion, Wodarski, Feit, and Green (1995) surveyed 2 decades of research on graduate social work research education. However, no mention was made in this extensive survey regarding what to teach about qualitative research.

In 1994, qualitative research was added to the content required by the CSWE in all accredited social work programs at both the BSW and MSW level (CSWE, 1994). A review

of publications on research teaching between 1995 and 2004 listed in *Social Work Abstracts* revealed that following this new requirement qualitative research topics were considerably more frequent. For example, Zeiger (1995) advocated for inclusion of process-oriented qualitative research methods addressing data collection and data analysis, with an assignment linked to human behavior in the social environment content. Drisko (1997) offered standards for evaluating qualitative studies and reports and later detailed the use of qualitative data analysis software (Drisko, 1998). Sells, Smith, and Newfield (1997) offered a model ethnographically-oriented course joining research- and family systems-oriented practice. Marino, Green, and Young (1998) found that more social workers reported agency-based involvement in qualitative research (26%) than in single-system designs (23%), and that many fewer reported the use of bivariate statistics (9%) and multivariate statistics (2%). Shelby (2000) described the importance of mentoring to optimal learning of qualitative research. Still more recently, Connolly (2003) described a method for teaching qualitative data analysis. O'Connor and O'Neill (2004) advocated for qualitative research content as a location for addressing social justice issues, stating that qualitative research offers to students a different way of "being a social work researcher" (p. 19). They further noted that at their Canadian school of social work, students may take either a qualitative or a quantitative option and that 85% take the qualitative option. O'Connor and O'Neill state that this choice reflects a "statistics phobia" that students bring into the pro-

gram and that it "may also reflect the congruence between the values that inform social work practice and the assumptions and methods of qualitative research" (p. 22). Yet, overall, even this limited literature shows great variety and little development in depth.

Not only is research limited, but teaching materials addressing qualitative research in social work are not widely available to inform educators. The CSWE published a compendium of exemplar qualitative research syllabi (Burnette, 1998), and several syllabi from social work and allied disciplines are found online (Chenail, 1998), but no content analyses are available. There are indications, however, that the *lack* of qualitative research content has been a source of difficulty for some programs undergoing the reaccreditation process. For example, Sar, Yankeelov, Wulff, and Singer (2003) state that, in a 1999 summary by the CSWE, 11 programs over a 2-year period were cited during reaccreditation for a lack of qualitative content. They also found that their own "equal time and equal voice" model of teaching both qualitative and quantitative research methods led to significant learning. At post-test, students improved in both qualitative and quantitative research knowledge and reported increased confidence in evaluating their own practice efforts.

This small body of literature reveals that very little is known about what qualitative research content is actually included on syllabi taught at CSWE-accredited social work programs. To profile the ways that programs teach qualitative research and meet CSWE (2003) accreditation requirements, more empirical research is necessary.

## Methods

A two-part method was employed for the present study. First, content analysis of foundation syllabi was conducted to determine what qualitative research content is covered, what books and materials are used, and what assignments are used. Second, a brief survey sought answers to six descriptive questions:

1. How many foundation research courses does your program offer?
2. Is qualitative research content included in concentration-level research courses?
3. Is qualitative research offered as one of several research options to meet concentration requirements?
4. Is qualitative research offered as an elective?
5. Is qualitative research included in practice courses?
6. Is qualitative research included in the field education internship?

The last two questions were included to determine whether qualitative research content was taught as an aspect of practice and practice and/or program evaluation.

Content analysis of syllabi is an appropriate empirical methodology for curriculum analysis (Krippendorf, 2004; Weber, 1990). Oddly, direct requests for syllabi appear to be a rare, almost absent, approach to studies of social work education. Only Aguilar's (1995) survey of minority content in baccalaureate social work syllabi was found in a search of 30 years' worth of abstracts in *Social Work Abstracts* done by the author and a social

science reference librarian using the terms *syllabus(i)* and *content analysis(es)* as well as variants of these terms. It may be that academics believe that their colleagues will treat syllabi as proprietary, or that programs and institutions have policies that prohibit sharing of syllabi even for research purposes.

### Sample

The syllabus request and survey were mailed to deans or directors of all 143 CSWE-accredited master's programs listed on the CSWE Web site as of February 2004. Initially, there were only 32 valid responses, so an e-mail was sent to the CSWE and the Society for Social Work and Research qualitative interest group members in March requesting that their programs participate. This led to a final survey sample of responses from 57 programs, or 40% of the then-accredited programs. Forty-eight MSW-level foundation research syllabi were returned, a 34% response rate. This is higher than Aguilar's (1995) response rate (29%) to a similar request for social work syllabi. An additional seven programs (5%) replied that their institutions had policies that did not permit distribution of course syllabi. Of the participating programs, 32% were private institutions and 68% public, compared with 27% and 73%, respectively, reported in a recent CSWE program survey (CSWE, 2004). Responding programs represented all 10 regions defined by the CSWE. A region-by-region percentage breakdown showed higher participation from the CSWE's regions IV (Southern) and V (Midwest), although the distribution overall was similar to that of the CSWE member programs. Several *U.S. News*

& *World Reports* "Top 20" programs were included in the obtained sample.

### Analysis

Krippendorff's (1980, 2004) approach to content analysis was used. Content analysis of the syllabi examined the number of class sessions or named topical sections explicitly including qualitative content and the specific types of qualitative content so included (i.e., named methods such as ethnography, or content on the merits and limitations of qualitative research). In addition, the number and types of readings or exemplar articles used in conjunction with qualitative course content were examined. Finally, the number and types of qualitative research assignments were examined. Content analysis of the syllabi allowed detailed analysis of whether or not explicit qualitative content was included in key parts of the course content: descriptions of science, epistemology, ethics, social justice and diversity issues, research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, software for data analysis, and reporting issues. Teaching materials and assignments was also examined, as well as the omission of specific content.

A master's-level statistical analyst and I coded 20 of the returned syllabi, yielding a 97% level of agreement and a Cohen's kappa of .94. Our major focus was to identify the core categories of explicit mentions of qualitative research or types of qualitative research (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory). During coding, we were quite aware that qualitative research might be covered in a class session on, for example, "science and inductive and deductive methods." However, this content

was coded as qualitative research content only if the term was explicit or linked to a named qualitative research method. The drawback of this focus on explicit qualitative research content is that it did not allow us to find implicit content. It is possible that qualitative content was included in readings or content areas that lacked any explicit qualitative label or mention. On the other hand, this method avoided false attributions (Weber, 1990). It also seemed to fit well with the structure of most courses that explicitly labeled one or two class sessions or content sections as addressing qualitative research.

Data from the six survey questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Given the skewed distribution of some results, multiple descriptive statistics are reported.

## Results

### The Structure of MSW-Level Research Courses

The results of the content analysis indicate that explicit content on qualitative methods varied considerably across accredited master's programs but was generally very limited. Most foundation research courses at the master's level focused heavily on measurement issues and appeared to be geared toward statistical data analyses (taught in the research class or in a separate course).

A single course was most often used to address foundation research content. Forty-nine of 57 programs responding to the survey (86%) offer one foundation research course, and the other eight (14%) offer two. The obtained foundation research syllabi were

organized either by class session (organized by weeks; apparently one class per week, class duration unstated) or by topical sections not explicitly linked to dates or specific class sessions. Thus, a standard metric unit for class sessions or calculating contact hours is lacking. However, class sessions and content sections were the naturally occurring subdivisions used within these similar documents. They therefore provide an author-generated segmentation of the original documents useful for aggregate content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980, 2004). Content analysis of the 48 syllabi indicates that the number of overall foundation research class sessions/topical sections varied from 6 to 20, with a mean of 13.4 ( $SD=2.9$ ) and a median ( $Mdn$ ) of 14 (see Table 1).

### "Class Sessions" Addressing Qualitative Research

Content analysis revealed that the number of foundation research class sessions/topical sections explicitly addressing qualitative research ranged from zero to eight (0% to 57% of total) (see Table 2). The modal number ( $Mo$ ) of qualitative research sessions/sections was 1; the mean ( $M$ ) was 1.98 ( $SD=1.6$ ). This single class session/section is most likely to be located after problem formulation, ethical issues, and several methodological issues have been covered. The one or two qualitative class sessions/sections typically preceded several classes addressing statistics, although no explicit content on qualitative data analysis was found in the typical foundation research syllabus. Only one-fourth of the syllabi (25%) had three or more classes/sections addressing

qualitative research. Slightly more than 8% of participating programs had no classes/sections explicitly addressing qualitative research.

### Specific Qualitative Research Content

Great variation was evident in foundation research content on qualitative research at the MSW level (see Table 3). In this part of the content analysis, a single syllabus might generate multiple, different content areas. Twenty-two programs included content on "qualitative methods" or both "quantitative and qualitative methods." This content was most often not further specified in the syllabus. Ten programs included content on "qualitative data analysis." Nine programs addressed "the strengths and limitations of qualitative research," and six addressed "the similarities and differences between quantita-

tive and qualitative research." Only eight programs explicitly addressed "qualitative research design." Five programs addressed "the contributions of qualitative research to social work practice," and another four addressed "the use of qualitative research in practice monitoring and in practice or program evaluation."

Qualitative data collection methods were less commonly represented: five programs included "field research," four included "observational data collection methods," and three included "qualitative data collection." The use of interviews, documents, and artifacts was not explicitly tied to qualitative data collection among the 48 syllabi. Three syllabi addressed "reliability and validity in qualitative research," and another three covered "rigor in qualitative research" (or "keeping things plumb").

**TABLE 1. Foundation of Research Class Sessions/Sections in MSW Syllabi**

Total Foundation Classes/Sections	Frequency <sup>a</sup>
6	2 (4)
8	2 (4)
9	4 (8)
10	1 (2)
12	1 (2)
13	7 (15)
14	12 (25)
15	11 (23)
16	5 (10)
17	2 (4)
20	1 (2)

Note.  $N=48$  syllabi;  $Mo$  and  $Mdn=14$ ;  $M=13.4$ ;  $SD=2.9$ .

<sup>a</sup>Percentages are given in parentheses.

Content related to the scientific method in relation to qualitative research was rare. Two programs included each of the following topics: "science versus art," "determinism," "constructivism," and "computer software for qualitative data analysis." Single mentions included "the credibility of qualitative research," "confirmability," "triangulation," "transferability," and "auditability." Only one syllabus addressed "informed consent and institutional review board (IRB) issues in qualitative research." Another single syllabus addressed "race and class bias in qualitative research" (but had no parallel regarding quantitative research).

**Named Approaches to Qualitative Research**

In addition, named qualitative research approaches were very rare among these foundation research syllabi. Two syllabi addressed "ethnography," two addressed "case studies," and two addressed "focus groups." Only a

single syllabus named "grounded theory." Also named on single syllabi were "content analysis," "comparative analysis," and "historical analysis." Three syllabi covered "feminist research methods" and two covered "naturalistic methods." Both of these last two topics are not qualitative research methods per se but were labeled as such on these particular course syllabi. Overall, these syllabi demonstrated more variation than consistency. There appears to be little consensus regarding the core qualitative research approaches to be addressed in foundation-level MSW research courses.

**Course Materials and Exemplar Articles**

Content analysis revealed that 39 of 48 (81%) programs used the Rubin and Babbie (2001) textbook, whether they had no, minimal, or extensive qualitative research content. Twenty-eight (58%) programs used text chapters exclusively as the readings on qualitative

**TABLE 2. Class Sessions/Sections on Qualitative Topics in MSW Syllabi**

Total Classes/Sections on Qualitative Topics	Frequency <sup>a</sup>
0	4 (8)
1	19 (40)
2	12 (25)
3	7 (15)
4	1 (2)
5	3 (6)
6	1 (2)
8	1 (2)

Note. N=48 syllabi; Mo=1; Mdn=2; M=1.98; SD=1.6.

<sup>a</sup>Percentages are given in parentheses.

research. The five syllabi with the greatest amount of qualitative research content (five or more class sessions covering qualitative content) also used multiple articles and/or chapters from multiple books. Only four syllabi included a separate qualitative research text

**TABLE 3. Frequencies of Specific Qualitative Content in MSW Syllabi**

Qualitative Methods or jointly Quantitative and Qualitative Methods	22
Qualitative Data Analysis	10
The Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Research	9
Qualitative Research Design	8
The Similarities and Differences Between Quantitative and Qualitative Research	6
Field Research	5
The Contributions of Qualitative Research to Social Work Practice	5
When to Use Qualitative Research	5
Observational Data Collection Methods	4
Qualitative Sampling	4
The Use of Qualitative Research in Practice Monitoring and in Practice or Program Evaluation	4
Qualitative Data Collection	3
Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research	3
Rigor in Qualitative Research	3
Science versus Art	3
Constructivism	2
Computer Software for Qualitative Data Analysis	2
Determinism	2
Measurement (explicitly under qualitative research)	2
Surveys (explicitly under qualitative research)	2
Unobtrusive Measures (Unobstructive Research)	2
Action Research	1
Auditability	1
Confirmability	1
Being Native versus Going Native	1
The Credibility of Qualitative Research	1
Empowerment Evaluation	1
Informed Consent and IRB Issues in Qualitative Research	1
Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research	1
Transferability	1
Triangulation	1

*Note.*  $N=48$  syllabi, 4 with no qualitative content apparent.

(most often Padgett, 1998). Exemplar articles used to illustrate qualitative research varied widely: only Lindsley's (1998) article had two mentions; all others were unique. The content areas covered in these exemplar articles and the research methods that they employed also varied widely.

### **Assignments Addressing Qualitative Research**

To maximize learning and document mastery, course assignments usually address required course content. Only 36 of the 48 (75%) syllabi submitted by responding programs included detailed course assignments. Excluding class participation and citizenship, the number of graded assignments in foundation research courses ranged from two to nine, with a mode of five assignments. In some cases, syllabi allowed students to elect to do either a qualitative or a quantitative assignment. This option masks the numbers of students who actually undertake qualitative assignments and therefore was not counted as qualitative content because not all students opted to do a qualitative assignment. Although some students may opt to do qualitative research in an assignment, a full 27 of 36 (75%) syllabi with assignments had no assignment that explicitly targeted qualitative research content from all students.

Nine (25%) syllabi required qualitative research assignments from all students. Five required one qualitative research assignment and four required two. Of these 13 required assignments, six involved drafting qualitative research proposals, three involved observational data collection (although none included analysis of the collected data), and two involved reviews of published qualitative

research reports. An additional two required the preparation of materials for an IRB submission on a qualitative research project. Most MSW foundation research courses appear to offer no structured opportunity to demonstrate qualitative research learning. When assignments are used, there is wide variation in their focus.

### **Qualitative Content in Concentration Research Courses**

Based on the survey data, 36 of the 57 responding programs (63%) reported offering an MSW concentration-level research course that is "mixed method" in nature: including both qualitative and quantitative content. Fourteen programs (25%) had no concentration research course, and another 2% did not specify the focus of their concentration-level course. Only five programs (9%) used a research project for concentration content, and just one (2%) reported including research content in the field practicum. Just one program (2%) offered a required, "stand-alone" qualitative course at the concentration level. No qualitative "track" was offered by any participating program to allow students to develop in-depth qualitative research knowledge and skills.

Thirty-one of 57 programs (54%) reported offering no concentration-level qualitative course option, and another 15 (26%) responded that the question regarding concentration-level qualitative courses was "not applicable." That is, survey findings indicate that 80% of MSW programs offer no separate qualitative course at the concentration level. Seven programs (12%) reported that they offer a qualitative research "option" at the concentration

level. Another two programs wrote in that they offer a concentration-level research project and both indicated that many or most were qualitative research projects. Six programs (11%) reported that they offer a qualitative research course as an elective. Structured curricular opportunities to continue the development and application of qualitative research knowledge and skills at the concentration level are limited among these MSW programs.

### **Qualitative Research Content in Practice Courses and the Field Practicum**

Because some programs use practice or program evaluation activities as part of their research requirements, one of the questions in the survey was, "Does your program include qualitative research content as part of practice courses?" A parallel question regarding the inclusion of qualitative research content in field education was also included. Twenty-nine of the 57 responding programs (51%) reported that qualitative research content was included in their program's practice courses. Thirty programs (53%) reported that qualitative research content was included as part of the field practicum, and another four programs (7%) reported that this content was optional and/or instructor dependent. In addition, nine respondents (16%) wrote in comments stating that qualitative research was taught in relation to client assessment or as an aspect of practice or program evaluation. A majority of the 57 programs responding to the survey indicated that there was some form of qualitative research content in both their practice courses and their field education internships.

## **Discussion**

The examination of curriculum content via content analysis of actual course syllabi, although a rarely employed method, was found to be viable in the present study. Colleagues were generally helpful and generous with their materials and commentary, although a few programs did have established policies prohibiting the sharing of syllabi even for research purposes. Direct examination of course syllabi can be useful for empirically establishing curriculum content in CSWE-accredited programs.

Henley and Dunlap (1996) called for additional empirical investigations of how research methods and data analysis are taught by social work educators. The present study provides new empirical data regarding how qualitative research content is taught and what specific content areas are addressed. It also fills an omission in Wodarski et al.'s (1995) review of research evidence regarding social work education.

### **Social Work Accreditation Standards and Qualitative Research**

The present study documents that qualitative research content represents a very small percentage of foundation research course content at the MSW level, despite the apparently equal emphasis given to quantitative and qualitative research in the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) (CSWE, 2003, 4.6):

Qualitative and quantitative research content provides understanding of a scientific, analytic, and ethical approach to building knowledge for practice.

The content prepares students to develop, use, and effectively communicate empirically-based knowledge, including evidence-based interventions. Research knowledge is used by students to provide high-quality services; to initiate change; to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery; and to evaluate their own practice.

This content analysis indicates that the CSWE's standard 4.6 requiring qualitative research content is not fully met among all participating MSW programs. Indeed, several MSW programs do not include *any* explicit qualitative research content on their syllabi. This finding is consistent with Sar et al.'s (2003) statement that a number of social work programs have been cited for lack of qualitative research content in accreditation reviews. Many other programs appear to meet the standard while offering only token exposure to qualitative research (i.e., a single class session, no assignments). Although tangibly present, the quality and yield of qualitative research education may in these circumstances be minimal. Very few programs chose to offer an "equal time, equal voice" (Sar et al., 2003) mix of qualitative and quantitative research. Even assuming that more qualitative research content is taught than is reflected on these course syllabi, qualitative research is very much a "second-class citizen" to quantitative research in the vast majority of social work programs. The CSWE should carefully enforce standard 4.6. Advocates may argue for changes in the CSWE accreditation standard, but as long as it is in place, it should be met in a meaningful fashion.

### **Defining Core Qualitative Research Content**

The confusion regarding what to teach in social work research courses noted by Dunlap (1993) and Morris (1992) is reflected in the findings of the present content analysis. No consensus on core qualitative research content emerged from this analysis of current educational efforts. Social work organizations and educators should take responsibility to more clearly define a core body of qualitative research content.

Although qualitative research is not a unified tradition (Riessman, 1994), a set of core content areas can be identified from the available interdisciplinary literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Flick, 2002; Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004). These areas include epistemological foundations, values and ethics, social justice, methods addressing sampling, data collection, data analysis (coding, memos, and interpretation), and report writing.

Epistemologies used in qualitative research may draw on realist or pragmatist foundations; several variants of constructivism; critical analyses; and a range of feminist, racial, queer, and cultural theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Not all approaches to qualitative research seek to be scientific. In research courses, or in the curriculum more broadly, social workers should be exposed to multiple ways of knowing (Hartman, 1994). Beyond ways of knowing, epistemologies shape how we engage with, and understand, both people and the world. Exploring epistemologies allows critical thinking about research knowledge and skills, as well as about

values and social justice, and a better understanding of human diversity. Many qualitative approaches heavily emphasize wide participation of varied stakeholders in all aspects of research, as well as strongly emphasize diversity and social justice issues. Despite epistemological differences, numerous qualitative approaches seek to initiate change and improve services and policies, either directly or indirectly. Content on the varied epistemological foundations of qualitative research, and how values impact and shape research, should be more prominent in the social work research curriculum. Such content would also fit well with the EPAS requirements.

A small but expanding literature notes that the ethical challenges facing qualitative researchers differ from those facing quantitative researchers (Baumohl & Stahl, 2003; Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002; Nelson & Reynolds, 2003; Punch, 1994). Issues of engagement, relationship building, ongoing interaction, and termination are much more complex in research that usually centers on the professional use of self to gather information and to systematically analyze it. Content on the specific ethical challenges facing qualitative researchers should be better identified and incorporated into the social work research curriculum.

Among the syllabi reviewed in the present study, very few named qualitative methods were mentioned. This omission masks additional resources for continued learning and may limit students' awareness of the systematic, multidisciplinary development of several approaches to qualitative research (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory). Several specific methodological issues that distin-

guish qualitative and quantitative research can be better identified. For example, differences between qualitative and quantitative sampling are not explicitly developed in the syllabi analyzed for this study. The iterative cycle of sampling, data collection, and data analysis central to several key forms of qualitative research (Drisko, 2003) is also not identified or explicated. These syllabi do, however, identify several data collection methods suitable for both qualitative and quantitative research. Yet, the syllabi emphasize observation in relation to qualitative research, while interviews are much more frequent in the published social work literature (and in that of allied fields). The use of documents and artifacts is minimally evident in these MSW-level syllabi, although the comparison of "planned" versus "enacted" programs can be a revealing form of program evaluation. Qualitative data analysis is absent in most of these MSW syllabi. Specific techniques for coding data, creating and using memos, and using qualitative data analysis software tools are also broadly omitted. The role of qualitative data analysis in developing concepts and theory, establishing process-content linkages, testing theory, and evaluating practices and programs could be more conspicuous. Content on the specific methods used in qualitative research should be more widely included in the social work research curriculum, consistent with the EPAS research standard.

### **Models for Sequencing Qualitative Research Content**

Clearly, teaching the required qualitative research content as well as core quantitative research content is a massive task within a

crowded social work curriculum. A progressive sequence should be developed describing how this content might be divided and implemented across undergraduate and graduate education. Fraser, Jenson, and Lewis (1991) note that social work research education involves considerable repetition of the same content at baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels. Qualitative research educators should offer a plan to deliver this content in a manageable, sequenced fashion avoiding repetition. Yet another alternative is to create different "tracks" allowing programs and students to select qualitative or quantitative research emphases. This approach has been implemented successfully in Canadian social work education (O'Connor & O'Neill, 2004). Varied approaches to deliver qualitative research content in breadth, depth, and specificity should be developed for the social work research curriculum.

Burnette's (1998) CSWE-sponsored compendium of model qualitative research syllabi has been a useful resource but is now in need of updating. Models for delivering qualitative and quantitative research content in balance as well as models for more focused qualitative courses detailing a single approach are needed. Curriculum models applying qualitative research to practice and program evaluation are also needed. A new challenge is to identify how qualitative research can contribute to evidence-based practice.

### **Opportunities to Demonstrate Learning and Mastery**

There were very few assignments addressing qualitative research among the MSW syllabi reviewed in the present study. Assignments send a message to students about the relative

importance of course content. They also afford students the opportunity to actively engage with course content and to experience the complexity and ambiguity of applying knowledge, values, and skills. In addition, they provide instructors a window on student learning and the effectiveness of their teaching. A lack of assignments addressing qualitative research undermines student learning and offers instructors little information about their effectiveness in this area. Given that qualitative research content is required by accreditation standards, indicators of student learning and teaching effectiveness should be much more apparent.

### **Expanding Opportunities for Educators to Improve Their Knowledge and Skills**

Given how little qualitative research content is found in MSW-level research courses, it may be the case that social work educators need to improve and expand their own knowledge and skills in this area. The CSWE offers annual faculty development institutes on qualitative research, the Society for Social Work and Research offers annual pre-conference training opportunities on aspects of qualitative research, and the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research frequently offers in-depth workshops on qualitative methods. All of these educational events are well attended. These organizations should continue to provide—and expand—their educational opportunities for social work doctoral students and educators in qualitative research. Institutional structures and support for collegial research work should be further developed.

### **Qualitative Research in Practice and Program Evaluation**

A majority of programs participating in the present content analysis and survey did affirm the worth and merit of qualitative research in providing an understanding of a scientific, analytical, and ethical approach to building knowledge for practice. According to survey participants, qualitative research content is found both in a majority of their social work practice courses and in field education. This would indicate that social work educators and practitioners find qualitative research knowledge and skills useful in practice. These results affirm Marino et al.'s (1998) statement that more social workers are involved in agency-based qualitative research than in any other type of research activity. The limited attention to qualitative research in research courses may undermine student knowledge and skills employed in professional practice and program evaluation. Research courses should more clearly explicate the conceptual and methodological foundations for the use of qualitative research in practice and program evaluation.

### **Potential Limitations of the Current Study**

Course syllabi may not fully or faithfully reflect the content taught in any course or by any given educator. However, course syllabi are used by the CSWE and other accrediting bodies as a key tool in assessing the content taught to students in the absence of better indicators. They provide a useful basis for comparison across programs and, in aggregate, for profiling the intended educational efforts of social work educators. They are use-

ful, although perhaps imperfect, indicators of what we teach.

Despite the limited qualitative research content that the present content analysis has revealed, the sample in the study may be skewed toward programs with *greater* levels of inclusion of qualitative research content than is typical. This stems from the follow-up request for participation made to members of the Society for Social Work Research's Qualitative Research Interest Group to increase the sample size. These faculty members, with an active interest in qualitative research, may be more likely to include it in their teaching at all levels than are other social work educators. Further, any faculty member who felt that his or her program was *lacking* qualitative content might choose not to participate in the study (although apparently some did anyway). Thus, programs with little qualitative content may be underrepresented. However, only speculation regarding why programs chose to participate is ultimately possible from the available data. Coding was conservative in that only explicit mentions of qualitative content were coded, which may underrepresent qualitative content construed broadly. For example, it may be that other content areas within a foundation research course could address qualitative research, such as a section on induction and deduction.

The response rate for the survey (40%) and the content analysis of syllabi (34%) leave open the question of the representativeness of the obtained study sample. The syllabi submission rate was limited by policy restrictions on the sharing of syllabi in force at some institutions (seven of which contacted the author). Nonetheless, the response rate was higher

than that reported by Aguilar (29%) in the only similar published study that was found. Replication under CSWE auspices might yield a higher response rate.

### Conclusion

Little qualitative research content was apparent in the typical foundation-level MSW research course. What was taught varied widely across social work programs. Few concentration-level qualitative research courses were offered at the MSW level. Yet qualitative research content was found in practice courses and field education among a majority of the responding MSW programs—indicating its utility to practice. There is much work to be done to improve the teaching of qualitative research and, in turn, the ability of MSW graduates to be knowledgeable and skilled producers and consumers of qualitative research. The CSWE should carefully ensure that qualitative content is included in all MSW syllabi through the accreditation process. Social work educators should work to better define core qualitative research content and map a sequence for implementing it at each educational level. Social work organizations should continue and expand opportunities and support for qualitative research training. Well-trained social workers will be better positioned to make use of opportunities for qualitative and mixed-method research and will be better able to serve as teachers and mentors to future students.

### References

- Aguilar, G. (1995). Minority content in undergraduate social work curricula. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, 1*(1), 55–69.
- Allen-Meares, P., & Lane, B. (1990). Social work practice: Integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. *Social Work, 35*(5), 451–458.
- Anastas, J. W. (1999). *Research design for social work and the human services* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Baumohl, J., & Stahl, R. (2003, January). Ethical snares in fieldwork for contracted program evaluation. Paper presented at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Conference, Washington, DC.
- Burnette, D. (Ed.). (1998). *Teaching qualitative research: A compendium of model syllabi*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Chenail, R. (1998). Qualitative research online syllabi. Retrieved September 1, 2006, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/syllabi.html>
- Connolly, M. (2003). Qualitative analysis: A teaching tool for social work research. *Qualitative Social Work, 2*(1), 103–112.
- Council on Social Work Education. (1994). *Handbook of accreditation standards and procedures* (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Council on Social Work Education. (2003). *Handbook of accreditation standards and procedures* (5th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Council on Social Work Education. (2004). *Statistics on social work education in the United States: 2002*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *The handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.),

- The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Drisko, J. (1997). Strengthening qualitative studies and reports: Standards to enhance academic integrity. *Journal of Social Work Education, 33*, 185-197.
- Drisko, J. (1998). Using qualitative data analysis software: Merits and hazards. *Computers in Human Services, 15*(1), 1-19.
- Drisko, J. (2001). How do clinical social workers evaluate practice? *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 71*(3), 419-439.
- Drisko, J. (2003, January). Improving sampling strategies and terminology in qualitative research. Paper presented at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Meeting, Washington, DC.
- Dunlap, K. (1993). A history of research in social work education: 1915-1991. *Journal of Social Work Education, 29*, 293-301.
- Flick, U. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fraser, M., Jenson, J., & Lewis, R. (1991). Training for research scholarship in social work doctoral programs. *Social Service Review, 65*(4), 597-613.
- Gilgun, J. (1994). A case for case studies in social work research. *Social Work, 39*, 371-380.
- Gould, N. (1999). Qualitative practice evaluation. In I. Shaw & J. Lishman (Eds.), *Evaluation and social work practice* (pp. 63-80). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hartman, A. (1994). Setting the theme: Many ways of knowing. In E. Sherman & W. Reid (Eds.), *Qualitative research in social work* (pp. 459-463). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Henley, H., & Dunlap, K. (1996). Policies and performance in the MSW research curriculum. *Arete, 20*(2), 16-23.
- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lindsley, E. (1998). The impact of homelessness and shelter life on family relationships. *Family Relations, 47*, 243-252.
- Marino, R., Green, R., & Young, E. (1998). Beyond the scientist practitioner model's failure to thrive: Social workers participation in agency-based research activities. *Social Work Research, 20*(2), 188-912.
- Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J., & Miller, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Ethics in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morris, T. (1992). Teaching social workers research methods: Orthodox doctrine, heresy, or an atheistic compromise. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 6*(1), 41-62.
- Nelson, R., & Reynolds, W. (2003, January). Children in research: A qualitative exploration of assent, risk, and voluntariness. Paper presented at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Conference, Washington, DC.
- O'Connor, D., & O'Neill, B. (2004). Toward social justice: Teaching qualitative research. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 24*(3/4), 19-33.
- Oktay, J. (2004). Grounded theory. In D. Padgett (Ed.), *The qualitative research experience* (pp. 23-47). Belmont, CA: Thompson.

- Padgett, D. (1998). *Qualitative methods in social work research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Punch, M. (1994). Politics and ethics in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 83-98). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. (Ed.). (1994). *Qualitative studies in social work*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rodwell, M., & Woody, D. (1994). Constructivist evaluation: The policy/practice context. In E. Sherman & W. Reid (Eds.), *Qualitative research in social work* (pp. 315-372). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (2001). *Research methods for social work* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Ruckdeshel, R., Earnshaw, P., & Ferrik, A. (1994). The qualitative case study and evaluation: Issues, methods, and examples. In E. Sherman & W. Reid (Eds.), *Qualitative research in social work* (pp. 251-264). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sar, B., Yankeelov, P., Wulff, D., & Singer, T. (2003). "Equal time" and "equal voice": A model foundation research course. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 23(3/4), 43-58.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J., & Silverman, D. (2004). *Qualitative research practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sells, S., Smith, T., & Newfield, N. (1997). Teaching ethnographic research methods in social work: A model course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33, 167-185.
- Shelby, R. D. (2000). Using the mentoring relationship to facilitate rigor in qualitative research. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 70(2), 315-328.
- Sherman, E., & Reid, W. (1994). *Qualitative research in social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Weber, R. (1990). *Basic content analysis* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wells, K. (1995). The strategy of grounded theory: Possibilities and problems. *Social Work Research*, 19(1), 33-37.
- Wodarski, J., Feit, M., & Green, R. (1995). Graduate social work education: A review of two decades of empirical research and consideration for the future. *Social Service Review*, 69(1), 106-130.
- Zeiger, S. (1995). A case for the inclusion of qualitative methodology into research course content. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 1(1), 111-124.

Accepted: 02/07

**James W. Drisko** is professor, Smith College School for Social Work.

Address correspondence to James W. Drisko, Smith College School for Social Work, Lilly Hall, Northampton, MA 01063; e-mail: jdrisko@email.smith.edu.

Copyright of *Journal of Social Work Education* is the property of Council on Social Work Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.