

A mixed methods study of faculty attitudes about qualitative research methods in U.S. psychology graduate programs

Report submitted to the Executive Committee of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP)

June 7, 2015

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Executive Summary

Rationale. The visibility of qualitative research methods (QRM) in American psychology has increased with the dissemination of qualitative research in journals and books, through formation of professional and scientific organizations, and through gaining recognition in educational institutions. In this sense, we have witnessed a significant era in the history of the field. The question remains, however, what the current state of training in qualitative methods is in U.S. psychology programs. Are graduate students being trained in qualitative methods? If so, to what extent, and what are the overall attitudes of faculty towards QRM? These questions remain less understood as the field of qualitative research in psychology begins its next chapter.

Methods. In March-April 2015, an online survey was sent to 487 individuals associated with U.S. graduate psychology programs (dept. chair, graduate program directors, and dept. administrators). The survey consisted of 20 items and took 2-3 minutes to fill out. A total of 125 surveys (26% response rate) were received from 76 universities. Of the 20 survey questions, three were open-ended and inquired about respondents' perceptions of qualitative research methods. The open-ended questions were analyzed for thematic content; the remaining 17 questions were analyzed for overall frequencies. In addition, we examined four departmental and faculty characteristics collected in the survey questions (departments were seen to value/not value QRM; departments that had/had not offered QRM courses in the last five years; respondents who reported wanting more/less attention to QRM; and departments where a low/moderate/high number of graduate students used QRM in their dissertations) to see how these aspects might influence the reception and teaching of QRM in psychology programs.

Survey Findings. On average, 39% of the respondents reported that their department offered a QRM course in the last five years ($n=36$). Of those, most had offered a semester-long course (69%) with just over nine weeks being the average amount of time dedicated to teaching QRM. A little under half of graduate students (46%) took QRM courses in departments outside of psychology. One third (29%) of the respondents rated their departments as viewing QRM as important, while nearly the same amount (26%) reported QRM were seen as unimportant, but nearly half (46%) reported that QRM were seen as neither important nor unimportant.

Thematic Findings. Respondents reported that they valued QRM for providing in-depth data, while others noted that they focused not on specific methods, but rather the “fit” between the research question and the method that is being used. Reasons for not using or not valuing QRM were the perceived lack of objectivity, reliability, and generalizability. Some respondents focused on qualitative research in its potential to support quantitative research through generating new research questions and providing context for interpretation. In addition, respondents noted that the disciplinary conventions within the field of psychology were not compatible with using QRM. Perhaps most importantly, respondents pointed to the lack of knowledge in their existing faculty to develop a QRM course, lack of funding to hire new faculty who have the skills and knowledge to develop a QRM course, and lack of enthusiasm to support students to learn and use QRM at the same time, which reflects the larger institutionalization of quantitative methods.

Recommendations. We make several recommendations that may help SQIP and its members to increase the development of QRM courses and utilization of QRM more widely in psychology departments across the U.S. These include advice regarding existing courses (number of weeks of training and the frequency with which QRM courses are offered), as well as the important role of departmental culture and key role that research question development plays.