

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGNING, EVALUATING, AND STRENGTHENING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Workshop participants made a number of recommendations for the design, evaluation, and support of qualitative research projects. The workshop papers contained in Appendix 3 elaborate further the topics discussed above and contain many recommendations for strengthening the scientific foundations of qualitative research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGNING AND EVALUATING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Below is a summary of recommendations both to improve the quality of qualitative research proposals and to provide reviewers with some specific criteria for evaluating proposals for qualitative research. These guidelines amount to a specification of the *ideal* qualitative research proposal. A strong proposal should include as many of these elements as feasible. Researchers should strive to include these in their proposals and evaluators should consider these in judging proposals. In many respects, these recommendations apply to *all* research projects, not just to qualitative projects. Some will be more salient to qualitative projects; others will represent a challenge to project designers. To write a strong research proposal, researchers should:

- *Write clearly and engagingly* for a broad audience of social scientists. For example, define and explain disciplinary or project specific jargon.
- *Situate the research in relation to existing theory* whether the research goal is to challenge conventional views of some phenomenon or to develop new theory or chart new terrain.
- *Locate the research in the literature* citing existing studies of related phenomena, specifying comparable cases, building on findings of other researchers, and bringing this research into dialogue with the work of others.
- *Articulate the theoretical contribution* the research promises to make by indicating what gaps in theory this project will fill, what argument motivates the research, what findings might be expected.
- *Outline clearly the research procedures* including details about where, when, who, what, and how the research will be conducted.
- *Provide evidence of the project's feasibility* including documentation of permission to access research sites and resources and human subjects approval.
- *Provide a description of the data to be collected* including examples of the kinds of evidence to be gathered, the different modes of data collection that will be used, the places data will be obtained.
- *Discuss the plan for data analysis* including a discussion of different strategies for managing the various types of data to be gathered, how data will be stored and accessed, and the procedures for making sense of the information obtained.
- *Describe a strategy to refine the concepts and construct theory* as more is learned about the case(s) under investigation.
- *Include plans to look for and interpret disconfirming evidence*, alternative explanations, unexpected findings, and new interpretations—try to be wrong as well as right.

- *Provide an assessment of the possible impact of the researcher's presence and biography on the research from the point of problem selection through data collection and analysis; this is especially important where the researcher is present during data collection and thus can have a direct impact on and potentially bias the results.*
- *Provide information about replicability, in particular try to consider and suggest ways in which others might reproduce this research.*
- *Describe the data archive that will be left behind for others to use and the plan for maintaining confidentiality.*
- new ways to combine existing qualitative and quantitative methods in social research and the development of hybrid methodologies that bring together the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods;
- the logical and scientific foundations of qualitative research;
- the creation of a national, longitudinal data archive on naturally occurring social phenomena, systematically and thematically organized.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING AND STRENGTHENING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Workshop participants recognized the importance and prestige of NSF funding, the desirability of making qualitative projects competitive in the NSF evaluation process, and the value of research resources provided by an NSF award. Participants had several recommendations for how NSF could better support and increase the productivity of qualitative researchers, especially in light of the specific resource needs of qualitative researchers. Workshop participants also made several recommendations for strengthening the scientific foundations of social science qualitative research in general.

- *Solicit proposals for workshops and research groups on cutting-edge topics in qualitative research methods, including:*
 - new technologies for qualitative data collection, storage, and integration (e.g., from multiple sources or multiple media);
 - new technologies for qualitative data analysis and the integration of data collection and analysis;
- *Encourage investigators to propose training institutes in qualitative research methods for advanced graduate students and junior faculty. Currently, there is one such institute established in political science for researchers in comparative politics and international relations (The Inter-University Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods). Ideally, there should be several such workshops and also coordination among them with respect to coverage and emphasis.*
- *Provide funding opportunities for graduate departments to improve training in qualitative research methods such as continuing workshops in qualitative research, involving 1-3 faculty and 5-10 graduate students, thematically organized and collective workshops involving clusters of research universities in major metropolitan areas (e.g., Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.) with 1-3 faculty and 5-10 graduate students from each university.*
- *Inform potential investigators, reviewers, and panelists of the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research projects. For example, post this report on the NSF Sociology website and disseminate information about the criteria in outreach activities that the Program conducts.*

- *Fund release time for PIs conducting qualitative research beyond the traditional 2 summer months* when extended support is essential to the research plan.
- *Fund long-term research projects beyond the traditional 24-months* for projects where longitudinal data are being collected, to track change over time, or to develop longstanding relationships with research sites and subjects.
- *Continue to support qualitative dissertation research* through NSF dissertation improvement grants. Much has been accomplished already in Sociology; this recommendation is to build on and expand current efforts.
- *Continue to support fieldwork in multiple sites*, especially international and comparative fieldwork in order to broaden the number of cases, provide points of comparison, and globalize social science knowledge.

Workshop participants suggested various ways to prioritize and combine some of these recommendations. For example, a national qualitative data archive could start out as a workshop, continue as an interdisciplinary research group, and culminate in a long-term research project involving a network of universities (both faculty and graduate students) in major urban areas. Work on new methods of qualitative data analysis or new ways to integrate qualitative and quantitative analysis could follow a similar path, but culminate instead in summer training institutes.