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Memo for NSF Workshop on Qualitative Methods

Overview of Organizational Efforts on Qualitative Methods in Political Science

Before turning to the workshop issues, I want to apprise scholars in other fields of several notable recent organizational efforts on behalf of qualitative methods in the field of political science. In the last five years, qualitative methods have attained a higher profile and more institutionalized role in political science that is more commensurate with their importance in published research in the field. One 2003 survey shows that nearly half the articles published in the top political science journals use qualitative methods, and that this proportion has remained fairly steady for the last two decades (Bennett, Barth, and Rutherford, 2003). Yet the same survey shows that qualitative methods are under-represented in graduate methodology courses, and until the last few years these methods lacked an institutional home comparable to the ICPSR (Inter-University Consortium for Political Science Research), which has successfully improved, disseminated, and promoted statistical research methods.

Several developments have begun to rectify these imbalances in the field. First, the formation of the Consortium on Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM) has created an institutional base for qualitative methods analogous to that which the ICPSR has provided for statistical methods. CQRM, headquartered at Arizona State University, has held four annual two-week training institutes in qualitative methods for advanced graduate students and junior faculty, training over two hundred students thus far. The institutes are held at ASU in the first two weeks of January. CQRM is funded by member departments and research centers, which pay membership dues in return for the opportunity to send students or junior faculty to the annual institute, and the consortium presently includes essentially every top political science department as a member.

Second, the creation of a new qualitative methods section in the American Political Science Association (APSA-QM) has given these methods a prominent role in APSA. After only two years of existence, APSA-QM has over 700 members, making it one of the largest APSA's three dozen sections, and it has an excellent newsletter now in its fourth issue. APSA-QM and CQRM jointly maintain a web site, at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/>, which includes many syllabi and teaching materials in addition to information on the two organizations and the annual institute.

Third, for the past several George Washington University has sponsored a four day summer institute on conducting archival research. The third such institute is planned for June, 2005, and will accept up to 25 students. Further information on this institute can be found at <http://www.shafr.org/ieres.org> and at ieres.org.

Finally, a group of European scholars has created an organization devoted to improving and disseminating qualitative methods through a series of conferences, workshops and related activities. This organization, known as COMPASSS (Comparative methods for the Advancement of Systematic cross-case analysis and Small-n Studies) maintains a web site that includes publications, working papers, software, and an extensive bibliography and list of scholars interested in qualitative methods, as well as announcements of ongoing COMPASSS activities (see www.smalln.spri.ucl.ac.be/).

Standards of rigor for qualitative work in Political science:

While there is no “one size fits all” qualitative research design, and the many different kinds of research designs and comparisons (most similar cases, least similar cases, outlier or deviant cases, most- or least-likely cases, before-after cases, and so on) have different goals and requirements, there are a half-dozen general standards that help identify whether a piece of qualitative research has been done rigorously:

- **Case or site selection.** Has the researcher carefully selected the cases to be studied, and are these cases appropriate to the research design and objectives? Has the researcher defined “what this is a case of” and “what population are cases of it?” Has the researcher indicated what other cases were or could have been considered for close study, and why they were not chosen? Has the researcher considered what would constitute a “negative case” of the phenomenon, identified what cases might qualify as negative cases, and considered inclusion of such cases for purposes of comparison if this is appropriate to the research design and the phenomenon under study?
- **Conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement.** Has the researcher adequately conceptualized the phenomenon being studied, situated it with respect to the relevant theoretical or conceptual frameworks in the field, and defined the independent and dependent variables if the goal is causal inference? Are the measures of these concepts valid with respect to capturing the ideas or concepts they are meant to represent?
- **Attention to potential endogeneity.** Has the researcher considered and anticipated potential endogeneity, giving attention to possible feedback loops and selection effects that might create endogeneity or that might simply reverse the causal arrow from the direction hypothesized by the researcher?
- **Attention to the kind of case comparisons explicitly or implicitly used.** Depending on what kinds of comparisons are to be used, has the researcher adequately prepared and carried out these comparisons? For example, in a most-similar cases design, has the researcher adequately considered the residual differences between the cases to be compared, in addition to the one independent variable of interest that differs between the two cases, to be sure that these residual differences do not account for the difference in outcomes?

- Attention to alternative explanations. Has the researcher, in both cross-case comparisons and within-case process tracing, given fair and adequate attention to evidence for alternative explanations?
- Careful empirical research, including into context, sequencing, coverage of a wide range of appropriate sources. Has the researcher sufficiently immersed themselves in the details of the case(s) to make the kind of inferences to which they aspire? Have they researched the relevant primary sources thoroughly, as well as the secondary literature?

How can qualitative methodologists in Political Science better share with and learn from other fields?

While the organizational efforts on qualitative methods within political science have been substantial, these initiatives have not yet reached out to other fields. Opportunities for doing so include the following:

- Publishing in journals in other fields, or co-authoring with those from other fields. It would be very useful in this context to receive advice from scholars in other fields on which journals in their fields would be most open to, and give the highest profile to, articles on qualitative methods. Within political science, the *American Political Science Review* has become much more receptive to qualitative work in recent years; other prominent journals open to such work include the journals *World Politics*, *International Organization*, *Comparative Politics*, and *Studies in Comparative International Development*.
- Attending and making panel presentations at the associational conferences of other fields. Information on which conferences are key, and when and where they are held, would be useful. The APSA conference is Labor Day weekend each year, and this year is in Washington D.C.; the 2006 conference will be in San Francisco.
- Getting students and faculty from other fields to the CQRM Institute at ASU. Thus far, sociologists have been the only scholars to attend other than political scientists. Departments in other fields are of course welcome to become members of the consortium and to send attendees to the institute. The institute also has about eight open slots for attendees from institutions that are not consortium members, but thus far these slots have gone mostly to political scientists.
- Going international. Joint efforts between among APSA-QM, CQRM, and COMPASSS have been limited thus far, but COMPASSS is working to get American scholars interested in qualitative methods to attend the International Political Science Association (IPSA) conference in Tokyo in the summer of 2006, and to hold a conference on qualitative methods in Tokyo immediately following the IPSA conference.

- Sharing organizational email lists for announcements of mutual interest. CQRM/APSA-QM make their mailing lists available for such purposes on a case-by-case basis.
- Crossing disciplinary boundaries on PhD thesis committees. My department has frequently included historians on our PhD committees.
- Cross-listing relevant courses and getting them accepted into program requirements in other fields.

What areas or topics most promising for qualitative methods?

In addition to reaching across disciplinary boundaries and building stronger ties internationally, I would suggest five priorities for future development of qualitative methods:

- Improving techniques for and promoting the use of multimethod research. There is tremendous interest in political science, especially among graduate students, in engaging in multimethod research. There is almost nothing written on how to combine research methods, however, and there are disciplinary/cultural barriers as well as technical challenges in doing so.
- Improving methods for dealing with complexity. There is great interest in complex relationships in political science - - path dependencies, tipping points, multiple interactions effects, and so on - - but these kinds of complexity pose difficult challenges for qualitative and other methods. Improved techniques for dealing with particular kinds of complexity, and exemplary empirical works on how to do so, are needed.
- Developing more teaching materials for courses on qualitative methods. In contrast to statistical and other methods, for which there are well-developed text books and numerous teaching materials like problem sets and exercises, there are relatively few teaching materials widely available for qualitative methods. The CQRM/APSA-QM web site includes some such materials, but much more needs to be developed and disseminated.
- Studying new political phenomena. While qualitative methods do not have a monopoly on studying new phenomena, they may be particularly useful at studying novel and under-theorized developments such as globalization, the political implications of electronic media, and terrorism in an age of weapons of mass destruction.
- The study of American politics. The survey noted above found that qualitative research on American politics has fallen from 12% of the articles in the top

journals in 1975 to only 1% by 2000. A great opportunity exists for reviving a distinguished tradition of qualitative research on American politics.

References

Andrew Bennett, Aharon Barth, and Kenneth Rutherford, "Do We Preach What we Practice? A Survey of Methods in Journals and Graduate Curricula," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, July, 2003.