

**National Science Foundation Qualitative Research Workshop  
May 2005  
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These suggestions are intended for research proposals that use ethnographic, socio-historical, or in-depth interviewing methods, those with which I am most familiar. Some of these are based on ideas developed by scholars engaged in qualitative research in the field of nursing. I do not cite individual works in the text, but a list of relevant articles in nursing is appended.

**What are the standards of rigor in your discipline?**

In ethnographic, socio-historical, and in-depth qualitative interviewing studies in sociology, the standards for rigor involve a number of aspects of the research design, including:

- § The project should have a clear *focus*. Ideally, it should be possible to summarize the goals of (or the questions driving) the study in 1-2 sentences and the significance of these goals/questions in another 1-2 sentences.
- § The research should have a clear *starting point*, but generally, *not* be clear about how it will proceed throughout to the endpoint:
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    - \* The starting point for research should include a description of: (i) sources of data and access to these; (ii) the process whereby particular data units (persons, events, interactions, etc) will be identified, selected/sampled, and acquired; and, (iii) if the selection of data is influenced by pragmatic considerations (e.g, membership in a group), an acknowledgment of that and a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages.
    - \* In most qualitative designs using ethnographic, socio-historical, or in-depth interviewing, it should be clear that initial data collection/analysis may require alterations in data collection, sampling, identification of variables or subjects, and/or research design, so these should not be specified in the proposal a rigid fashion beyond the initial stages of the project.
- § There should be a clear sense of what will constitute *data* in this study or a sense of how that will be determined in the process of the study.
- § There should be a clear sense of how the researcher will look for *patterns* in the data, while preserving a sense of the complexity of social life. Is s/he looking for numerical frequency, foundational status, commonness, or other features, and how does that fit the overall goal of the research design? There should be a statement about how negative cases will be sought and what status they will have in the design as well as what other measures will be used to increase the researcher's accountability to the data.
- § There should be explicit (possibly even standard, within the project) means by which data

will be *assessed* to help ensure that: (i) all data are considered; (ii) more spectacular acts/events/individuals are not overly stressed; and (iii) data that are different from the pattern are not discounted without a clear rationale for doing so.

- § The design should be *sufficient* to produce the claims that are intended from the study.
- § For most (but not all) projects, there should be a clear *distinction* between *analytic procedures* and *data analysis*. Generally, lists or frequencies of themes or categories (in interviews), reflexivity (in ethnography), or event occurrences (in socio-historical studies) should be presented as analytic procedures rather than analysis unless these involve new interpretations.
- § For many (but not all) projects, analysis (including ‘thick description’) should consider *relationships* among concepts or a sense of their origin, development, construction, etc. rather than presentations of individual concepts, dimensions, themes, or categories.
- § There should be more than a formalistic or bureaucratic assessment of the *ethical issues* involved in the study, particularly concerning fundamental ethical and political concerns that arise in research with human subjects, beyond and different from those covered in standard protocols of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs).

### **How might these standards of rigor be communicated to or applied in other disciplines?**

- § NSF could create a template for the assessment of rigor in qualitative research proposals across the social sciences and include that on its website.
- § NSF could create a template that sensitizes reviewers (especially in more highly quantitative social science fields) on how to assess a research plan that looks different from a deductive study, in which, for example, there is not likely to be a dependent variable or a hypothesis.
- § NSF could have available on its website several mock ‘bad’ and mock ‘good’ qualitative proposals, with detailed reviewer commentaries on the research design.
- § NSF could create additional incentives (in the form of supporting teaching buy-outs) for research projects that involve teams of qualitative researchers from multiple disciplines studying a common phenomenon or site.

### **What are major areas of divergence between your own discipline and other social science disciplines? How might these be addressed?**

- § In Sociology – and perhaps even more so in Political Science and Economics -- description is viewed as an inadequate outcome of research, even in qualitative studies. This may be less the case in Anthropology, History, and some interdisciplinary social sciences.

§ Surrounding the undervaluing of description in these social sciences (as causes, consequences, or parallel developments):

- \* description is rarely taught as a methodological goal in these disciplines;

- \* there is little or no consensus or explicit standards for what constitutes rigorous or high-quality description (as opposed to just a mass of detail) and how this could be ascertained or achieved;

- \* there has been some shift – at least in qualitative sociology – away from methods (such as ethnographies) that are likely to yield rich description of a social context and toward methods (like interviewing) that are less likely to do so;

- \* abstract renderings of data tend to be valued by reviewers and the discipline, relative to interpretations and analyses that remain closer to the data;

- \* analytic techniques and methods (such as narrative analysis) are imported into research proposals to avoid the negative evaluation that a project is ‘simply descriptive’ when the study’s aim might be better served by excellent description.

§ Perhaps through high-profile workshops at NSF, there could be an effort to create a multidisciplinary set of standards or protocols of excellence for description as an outcome of some social scientific projects. Drawing on the experience of some of the ‘hard sciences’ in which rigorous description is both valued and well established (e.g., biology, astronomy, etc) might be useful for social sciences.

### **What areas or topics are most promising for investigations using qualitative methods?**

§ Qualitative methods have proven useful for examining social phenomena as emergent processes, for uncovering causal connections, and for delineating sequencing of actions, events, or understandings over time. Encouraging more qualitative projects that collect data over time would be expensive due to the intense time commitment necessary by investigators in many kinds of qualitative data collection and analysis projects, but would have good payoff in terms of developing a better understanding of the causation and sequencing of various factors in social life.

### **What are the most pressing issues of research design and methods facing qualitative researcher projects? Any suggestions for solutions?**

§ The volume of data generated by many kinds of qualitative research designs can prove overwhelming, especially to new and student researchers. Data management software like NUD\*IST and others are helpful in sorting these data but require a tremendous amount of time at the front end for coding.

- § The cost of interview or focus group transcription is very high, which encourages researchers (especially students) to use only very small samples. Better in-depth interviewing protocols that combine standardized and computer-ready information gathering procedures with less structured methods would be helpful here, as will be likely advances in voice recognition software that can be used in interviewing situations.
- § There are not good protocols for the reporting of findings in qualitative research. Although qualitative research will never be as straightforward as is the case in quantitative research due to epistemological and methodological issues, including, importantly, the critical role of context in qualitative studies, it is often difficult, as Sandelowski and Barroso (2002) note, to "find the findings" in qualitative studies or to discern how these fit with findings of other studies on your topic. This impedes the cumulation of knowledge from qualitative research designs and the use of qualitative research findings in quantitative research.

### **What is needed to strengthen tools, training, data, research design, and infrastructure for conducting qualitative research?**

- § Training students in qualitative analysis (rather than just qualitative data collection) is needed to move beyond all-too common statement in research proposals that themes and categories of analysis will somehow 'emerge' during the research process.
- § A consistent policy among university and other Institutional Review Boards about the status of various forms of qualitative data collection and, optimally, a blanket exemption for some forms of very low risk and non-invasive data collection similar to that recently granted for oral history projects. A strong message about these issues from the social science units of NSF might help, especially with NSF-funded projects. The language on the NSF website about ethnographic observation is a great step in this direction, but could be expanded to include other types of low-risk qualitative work.
- § Extended time away from teaching for qualitative scholars to develop deep descriptions of the contexts of their research projects.
- § Financial support for collaborative or team approaches in ethnographic or other time-consuming observational methods, including funds that would allow students to work on these projects in collaboration with (rather than in place of) faculty observers.

### **What single advance in qualitative research methods or approach would contribute most to strengthening qualitative research?**

- § A set of large, internet accessible, and high-quality qualitative data bases collected through different qualitative data collection techniques – including interview and focus group transcripts, ethnographic field notes, photographs and video of social interactions in a variety of contexts – to be used for teaching qualitative analysis to students. NSF might fund a special initiative to get data from a variety of previously-funded qualitative projects compiled

in a format that would be useable for this purpose.

### **References to Nursing Scholarship**

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