

**1. What are the standards of rigor in your discipline (address methods with which you are most familiar)?**

My discipline is sociology, and for the most part there are no standards for qualitative work, at least, none in the scientific sense. I see three reasons for this. (1) Much of qualitative sociology – and here I am referring mostly to ethnography and to cultural analysis – has taken its cue from the humanities, whereby producing and illustrating a compelling theory is sufficient. (Sometimes this move is couched in a poststructuralist critique of positivism, although this no longer seems to be mandatory.) (2) A second source of the lack of rigor is sociology's disciplinary roots in the progressive social movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and in journalism, neither of which employ the scientific method to advance their claims (Robert Ezra Park is an exemplary and influential figure in this regard). (3) A new element that mitigates against rigor is sociology's small-but-increasing attention to areas of the world outside of the West or Japan. In these emerging areas of investigation, data of all sorts – archival, textual, quantitative -- is often hard to find, and issues of comparison and interpretation become especially tricky. This may encourage a less systematic and more impressionistic research.

So how do we recognize good work? A few rule-of-thumb criteria are commonly applied:

- Comparison. Looking at two to six cases of similar phenomenon and focusing on how they differ, or drawing on interviews and observations of lots of people and organizing them along a couple of dimensions (e.g. four or six cells) is preferred. (Examples: Binder, Lamont, Salomon)
- Immersion. Thick description leading to the reader's sense of saturation, of being within the phenomenological world and understanding its meaning systems, is preferred. Accounts of worlds we don't know much about are better than accounts of familiar worlds. (Examples: Jackall, Dunier, Fine)
- Transcendence. Powerful theory, illustrated by vivid quotations or observations, is preferred. This theory draws on data, but in some ways transcends it; the theory itself organizes the data, and there is no sense of testing hypotheses. (Examples: Swidler, Alexander, Wacquant)
- Piling up. Amassing huge quantities of data, often including some qualitative data backing up an essentially qualitative analysis, is preferred. Such work is often to some extent historical, but in contrast to historians, sociologists aim for breadth more than depth. (Examples: Fischer, Zelizer, Griswold)

**2. How might these standards of rigor be communicated to or applied in other disciplines (i.e., common criteria for designing and evaluating research)? What are major areas of divergence between your own**

### **discipline and other social science disciplines? How might these be addressed?**

I wonder if this is even a good idea. For example, I strongly prefer comparisons to single cases, but I would not advocate comparison for most historians or anthropologists.

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

First the obligatory caveat: Most areas and topics benefit from a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Relegating any area of knowledge to one style of research or another is a mistake; methodological multiplicity is a virtue.

Now to address the question as asked. Qualitative methods are advantageous for:

(1) Investigations where the analytic categories are not known. This is especially true for minority or non-mainstream groups. For example, a survey investigating the spread of HIV might attempt to categorize people as heterosexual or homosexual. However if the survey designers did not know that some urban African American men employ have a concept of being “on the down low” (heterosexual men having occasional homosexual relations), then a quantitative analysis would miss that category of sexual behavior. Qualitative research has a better capacity to elicit previously unknown social categories.

(2) Investigations of what people value, what makes them happy, what bothers them, and why. Individuals and groups vary in their preferences and in the weight they give these preferences. Survey data is notoriously clumsy at addressing this variation, often making too much or too little of the variables under consideration rather than understanding them as part of a cultural complex.

(3) Investigations of everyday practices, including for example the maintenance of cultural boundaries and the spatial and symbolic dimensions of social inequalities.

(4) Investigations of organizational, community, or small-group cultures.

(5) Investigations of cultural objects: ideological, religious, aesthetic, material, or literary.

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

Designing the research so that one's initial assumptions may turn out to be incorrect. Some form of what I have called "provisional, provincial positivism" -- "if I'm right about this, we should see X, and if we don't find X, I'm probably not right" -- is essential to guard against sociologists' tendency to confirm what they already believe.

**5. What areas of promising qualitative research are most likely to foster multidisciplinary projects?**

What has been called the "new urban studies," which draws heavily on anthropology, landscape-ecological history, and cultural studies as well as economics, political science, and geography, is a natural area for qualitative analysis. The work of neo-urbanists like Richard Sennett, Eric Klinenberg, and Sharon Zukin exemplifies this.

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

I think "training" suggests the wrong model. I prefer reading. People need to read more and read more deeply in the historical and comparative literature on their area of investigation, and on its artistic and literary and journalistic representations. Sociologists (and members of other disciplines) are too inclined to confine their reading to a narrow approach to/definition of the area in question. The training model comes from the natural sciences in which there is a well-defined problem and a well-specified literature on it. In contrast, many important social questions are initially ill-defined, so the researcher must cast a wide and non-specific net.

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

Money. In most cases the funding for qualitative work at all levels from undergraduate to graduate to post doc to faculty does not come anywhere close to the funding for quantitative work. This discourages students and hampers everyone.

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