Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research

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This report is a summary of the proceedings of the "Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research" workshop held at the National Science Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, July 11-12, 2003. Any opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government.

Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research

Sociology Program
Methodology, Measurement & Statistics Program
Directorate for Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences

National Science Foundation

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Workshop Participants and Attendees

Charles Ragin, University of Arizona, Workshop Organizer

Julia Adams, Yale University

Elijah Anderson, University of Pennsylvania

Vilna Bashi, Rutgers University

Howard Becker

Robert Bell, National Science Foundation

Andrew Bennett, Georgetown University

Joel Best, University of Delaware

Kathleen Blee, University of Pittsburgh

Norman Bradburn, National Science Foundation

Linda Burton, Pennsylvania State University

Lynda Carlson, National Science Foundation

David Collier, University of California, Berkeley

Mitchell Duneier, Princeton University/CUNY Graduate School

Gary Alan Fine, Northwestern University

Rachelle Hollander, National Science Foundation

Jack Katz, University of California, Los Angeles

Michele Lamont, Harvard University

Richard Lempert, National Science Foundation

James Mahoney, Brown University

Joane Nagel, University of Kansas/National Science Foundation

Victor Nee, Cornell University

Katherine Newman, Princeton University

Terre Satterfield, University of British Columbia

Frank Scioli, National Science Foundation

Susan Silbey, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Robert Smith, City University of New York, Baruch College

David Snow, University of California, Irvine

Mark Turner, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences

Sudhir Venkatesh, Columbia University

Eben Weitzman, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Patricia White, National Science Foundation

Executive Summary

On July 11-12, 2003, a workshop on the Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research was held at NSF in Arlington, Virginia. The workshop was funded by an NSF grant from the Sociology Program and the Methodology, Measurement, and Statistics Program to Dr. Charles Ragin, University of Arizona. The purpose of the workshop was twofold. Workshop participants were asked to: 1) provide guidance both to reviewers and investigators about the characteristics of strong qualitative research proposals and the criteria for evaluating projects in NSF's merit review process, and 2) provide recommendations to address the broader issue of how to strengthen qualitative methods in sociology and the social sciences in general. The workshop was intended to contribute to advancing the quality of qualitative research, and thus to advancing research capacity, tools, and infrastructure in the social sciences.

This report is organized into two major sections—general guidance for developing qualitative research projects and recommendations for strengthening qualitative research. The intent of the first section of the report is to serve as a primer to guide both investigators developing qualitative proposals and reviewers evaluating qualitative research projects. The discussion in this section addresses six key questions: What is "Qualitative Research?" What is the Role of Theory in Qualitative Research? How Does One Design Qualitative Research? What Techniques Are Appropriate for Analyzing Qualitative Data? What Are the Most Productive, Feasible, and Innovative Ways of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods? What Standards Should Be Used to Evaluate the Results of Qualitative Research? The workshop report contains a summary of participants' discussion of and answers to these questions.

The second section of the report presents workshop recommendations for designing, evaluating, 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 review process, and the value of research resources provided by an NSF award. Workshop members made two sets of recommendations: recommendations for the design and evaluation of qualitative research projects and recommendations for supporting and strengthening the scientific foundations of social science qualitative research in general.

Recommendations for Designing and Evaluating Qualitative Research

The first set of recommendations is intended 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.

- *Write clearly and engagingly for a broad audience*
- *Situate the research in relation to existing theory*
- *Locate the research in the relevant literature*

- *Articulate the potential theoretical contribution of the research*
- *Outline clearly the research procedures*
- *Provide evidence of the project's feasibility*
- *Provide a description of the data to be collected*
- *Discuss the plan for data analysis*
- *Describe a strategy to refine the concepts and construct theory*
- *Include plans to look for and interpret disconfirming evidence*
- *Assess the possible impact of the researcher's presence & biography*
- *Provide information about research replicability*
- *Describe the plan to archive the data*

Recommendations for Supporting and Strengthening Qualitative Research

The second set of recommendations centers on how NSF grants could better support and increase the productivity of qualitative researchers, especially in light of the specific resource needs of qualitative researchers.

- *Solicit proposals for workshops and research groups on cutting-edge topics in qualitative research methods*
- *Encourage investigators to propose qualitative methods training*
- *Provide funding opportunities to improve qualitative research training*
- *Inform potential investigators, reviewers, and panelists of qualitative proposal review criteria*
- *Give consideration, contingent upon particular projects, to fund release time for qualitative researchers beyond the traditional 2 summer months*
- *Fund long-term research projects beyond the traditional 24-months*
- *Continue to support qualitative dissertation research*
- *Continue to support fieldwork in multiple sites*

The report concludes with appendices that list workshop participants, present the workshop agenda, and include a complete set of papers submitted by workshop participants.

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Background

In 2003 the National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded a grant to the University of Arizona to support a workshop on the scientific foundations of qualitative research. Principal Investigator, Charles Ragin, convened the workshop in July, 2003 at NSF in Arlington, Virginia. The purpose of the workshop was twofold. The first goal was to address a practical NSF Sociology Program concern. An increasing number of qualitative research projects are being submitted to the Sociology Program. These proposals employ a wide range of qualitative research approaches and data collection and analysis methods. Workshop participants were charged with the task of providing guidance both to reviewers and investigators about the characteristics of strong qualitative research proposals and the criteria for evaluating projects in NSF's merit review process. The second focus of the workshop was to provide recommendations to address the broader issue of how to strengthen qualitative methods in sociology and the social sciences in general. Qualitative research is especially valuable for generating and evaluating theory in the social sciences, revealing the workings of micro and macro processes, illuminating the mechanisms underlying quantitative empirical findings, and critically examining social facts. To the extent that the NSF can contribute to advancing the quality of qualitative research, it will have contributed to advancing research capacity, tools, and infrastructure in the social sciences.

The workshop on the Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research was a remarkable gathering of prominent qualitative researchers with a high degree of consensus about the challenges of advancing qualitative methods and research in the social sciences. The 24 invited workshop participants represented a range of social science disciplines (sociology, political science, anthropology, social psychology, human development) and a wide variety of qualitative approaches and methods, ranging from those who study the fleeting social constructions that emerge in interpersonal interaction to researchers who examine broad institutional changes occurring over decades. Despite these differences, there was general agreement on the core features of qualitative research, the characteristics of strong qualitative projects, and the challenges of obtaining funding support for qualitative proposals.

This report is organized into two major sections—general guidance for developing qualitative research projects and recommendations for strengthening qualitative research. The intent of the first section of the report is to serve as a primer to guide both investigators developing qualitative proposals and reviewers evaluating qualitative research projects. The goal of the second section of the report is to present workshop recommendations for (1) designing and evaluating qualitative proposals and (2) supporting and strengthening qualitative research. This report presents a set of recommendations for investigators and reviewers of qualitative proposals and a list of activities that workshop participants consider important for strengthening qualitative research across the social sciences.