

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN EUROPE (EUROQUAL)

Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS)



The European Science Foundation (ESF) was established in 1974 to create a common European platform for cross-border cooperation in all aspects of scientific research.

With its emphasis on a multidisciplinary and pan-European approach, the Foundation provides the leadership necessary to open new frontiers in European science.

Its activities include providing science policy advice (Science Strategy); stimulating co-operation between researchers and organisations to explore new directions (Science Synergy); and the administration of externally funded programmes (Science Management). These take place in the following areas: Physical and engineering sciences; Medical sciences; Life, earth and environmental sciences; Humanities; Social sciences; Polar; Marine; Space; Radio astronomy frequencies; Nuclear physics.

Headquartered in Strasbourg with offices in Brussels, the ESF's membership comprises 75 national funding agencies, research performing agencies and academies from 30 European nations.

The Foundation's independence allows the ESF to objectively represent the priorities of all these members.

Introduction

During the past few decades the use of qualitative research methods has become increasingly widespread throughout the social sciences. As the range and variety of these methods has expanded we have also seen a proliferation of methodological literature, vigorously marketed by commercial publishers, and dominated by Anglo-American authors and their intellectual traditions.

These trends suggest that qualitative research is flourishing within the social sciences and may appear to need little further support. However, there is good evidence to suggest that while qualitative research is highly visible, it exists within many sub-specialisms, and reflects national as well as disciplinary boundaries. There is a clear need for scholars throughout Europe to share, develop and promote high-level methodological expertise. There is an equally pressing need for capacity building within the European social sciences. Moreover, there are particularly good reasons why a distinctively European perspective is needed.

Despite the widespread use of qualitative research in the social sciences, there is an urgent need for capacity building throughout the social science disciplines. There is evidence to suggest that a good deal of “qualitative” research is methodologically limited. Leading researchers repeatedly report difficulty in recruiting research associates and research fellows who have sufficiently well-developed skills to carry out funded research. This remains a problem even when – as in the United Kingdom – there are well-established requirements and programmes for postgraduate research training. The need for capacity building is by no means restricted to the promotion of skills at relatively junior levels. There is an equally pressing need to improve the quality of skills, the range of training competences, and technical expertise at more senior levels.

The methodological literature on qualitative research in the social sciences is globally, dominated by commercial publications from UK and US publishing houses, and English-language academic journals. The proliferation of such literature has promoted qualitative research but it has tended to overlook and marginalise the actual and potential contributions from other national and intellectual disciplines, especially from key European states outside the UK. There are important, but mutually isolated, traditions that relate to qualitative research that ought to be brought together. They can and should inform and



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enhance the existing research literature and the collective skills of European social scientists. Synergy between European perspectives and Anglophone traditions would enhance research capacity throughout the research networks, most notably within the European Research Area (ERA).

A distinctively European programme is required in order to link the pockets of expertise to be found throughout the European states and European disciplines in the social sciences. The current US/Anglophone domination of the research and methodological literature means that important insights and strategies of research are being under-used, to the detriment of the overall scientific effort. Furthermore, there are major methodological innovations in this general area that need to be shared across the national and regional research communities.

The participating states who have agreed to fund EUROQUAL are: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

The running period of the ESF EUROQUAL Research Networking Programme is for four years from June 2006 to June 2010.

Objectives of the Programme

The programme will

- advance knowledge of the methods of analysing increasingly complex social science data;
- increase the human capacity to analyse such data; and
- advance comparative qualitative social science.

Strategies

The strategies for achieving these aims include:

- sharing knowledge and expertise, enabling networking among European scholars;
- increasing the numbers of European social scientists trained to an advanced level in qualitative techniques;
- training young social scientists and enhancing the skills-base of academic leaders;
- transferring methodological expertise across disciplinary and national boundaries in Europe;
- developing interdisciplinary methodological awareness across European disciplinary networks;
- promoting the use of qualitative research in the pursuit of European-wide programmes of social and cultural research.

Activities

The programme will address these aims and objectives through a series of integrated workshops and seminars which will provide training for junior social scientists in the latest methods of analysis of social scientific data and also provide the opportunity for senior researchers working in Europe at the cutting edge of analysis and methodological innovation to share their research. Throughout the programme the emphasis will be on the methodological solutions to real social science problems and as a consequence there will be a strong emphasis on engagement with researchers in substantive areas. In this way a network of senior researchers will foster a new network of more junior scholars who will be able to lead the next generation of qualitative social scientists.

The programme will consist of a series of high-level workshops and associated training events that will develop and disseminate the increasingly specialised methods for data collection, analysis and theory-building in qualitative social research.

Workshops

The workshops will each have a dual function. First, each will bring together experienced, senior researchers from across Europe, together with a smaller number of scholars from elsewhere, to share, develop and promote the high-level skills and analytic traditions that characterise the different disciplinary and national traditions. Second, each will have a capacity building function, bringing together less experienced colleagues drawn from the different national constituencies, in order to disseminate the methods and to develop networks of researchers who are able to extend the methods in their own research, through research-methods teaching, and through further networking. The overall vision for the programme is one of cascading expertise across boundaries and across generations of researchers.

Programme themes

The programme activities will focus on key themes of methodological significance across the social sciences. These thematic priorities will include:

- the collection and analysis of visual data;
- the collection and analysis of narrative and discourse data;
- the development and use of archives of oral history and other qualitative data types;
- the integration of spatial analysis into ethnographic and archival research;
- the use of innovative information technologies for analysing, sharing and disseminating qualitative research;
- the use of qualitative data for developing and evaluating evidence-based social policy and practice; and
- the use of multi-method research designs to integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

While the programme is defined in terms of research strategies and methods, the emphasis throughout will be on the practical work of applying techniques to empirical social research. The workshops will provide training in these seven broad areas of qualitative research with an underlying focus on the interdisciplinary exploration of methods, and the translation of methodological innovation into research practice.

Objectives of the Programme

Visual data

The collection and analysis of visual data and the integration of visual analysis into broader social and cultural analysis is becoming increasingly important in several fields. Visual anthropology is already a well-established sub-discipline. Cultural and media studies necessarily include the analysis of film, video, photography and graphic representations. The graphic representation and mapping of spatial and historical data is already well established. The rapid development of information technology, facilitating the creation and editing of digitised data, and computer-based techniques for the storage and management of visual data, means that new methodological tools are being developed and are envisaged for the near future.

Discourse and narrative

The analysis of naturally occurring talk and personal narratives is one of the most significant of qualitative research fields. While methods are well established in a number of domains – conversation analysis, discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, narratology, folk-lore, discursive psychology – they often reflect different national and disciplinary traditions. There remains, therefore, a need to bring these diverse traditions together and to promote new syntheses of advanced analytic strategies.

Archives

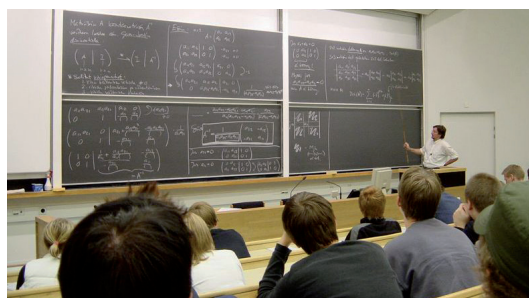
There are several initiatives aimed at archiving qualitative data, such as the UK's Qualidata provision, supported by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and located at the University of Essex as part of the Data Services investment. The use of the archive has, however, many more connotations within European social research. There are, for instance, 'naturally occurring' archives of collective memory, oral history, national and local museums that are resources for social research and also topics of research in their own right. 'The archive' as an artefact is a site that brings together biographical documents, official and unofficial histories, testimonies of resistance and traces of local identity. Archival and life-history research cross-cuts many national and disciplinary traditions: history, anthropology, political science, sociology and cultural studies are the most relevant.

Spatial and network analysis

Spatial analysis is, of course, well developed in the geographical disciplines. Its applications need to be developed more widely, to disseminate methods of spatial analysis and the representation of spatial relations within more traditional analyses of community, social networks and social identities. The specific methods of network analysis are established within sociology, but have not been well integrated more widely, and there are important opportunities to link network analysis with qualitative analyses of social relations, political analyses, patterns of collaboration, and so on. Spatial and network analyses are among the specialised methodologies that provide the opportunity for the formal analysis of qualitative data.

Innovative information technologies

The use of specialised software for the analysis of qualitative data is now firmly established. Software packages are now commercially distributed and widely implemented. They do not, however, exhaust the opportunities provided by new information technologies. First, there are alternative, and potentially more powerful, uses of information technology, such as hypertext and hypermedia applications becoming available. The creation of digital resources for social research opens up new possibilities of extending the repertoire of qualitative methods for text, visual, sound and other data to be integrated. The use of information technology also creates new opportunities for research in 'cyberspaces', through the investigation of geographically dispersed networks linked through the Internet. Finally, new technologies create new opportunities for distributed teams of researchers to share data and collaborate through virtual research groups.



Objectives of the Programme

Evidence-based policy

Government departments and other policy agencies increasingly demand that policy innovations should be evidence-based, and that policies should be subject to careful review and evaluation. It is widely assumed that the research evidence that is used and invoked in such policy contexts is necessarily quantitative in nature. It is, however, increasingly recognised that qualitative research is needed if policy is to be informed by appropriate evidence on social processes as well as outcomes. Moreover, researchers are finding ways of incorporating the procedures and the findings of qualitative research into large-scale trials and systematic reviews – key strategies for policy-relevant research.

Multi-method strategies

The proper relationships between qualitative and quantitative research strategies continue to be contested. While it is clear that an antagonistic or oppositional stance between the two is unproductive, and often unjustified, the way forward is not through simple attempts to aggregate findings across the two. Equally, solutions do not lie in making one approach subordinate to the other (e.g. treating qualitative research as suitable only for “pilot” or “sensitising” phases within larger research designs). There needs to be continuing dialogue on the integration of all the qualitative research strategies identified already (visual, spatial, discourse, narrative, digital) with quantitative information in the creation of data sets and analyses that are truly “complex” and reflect the complexity of social and cultural forms.

Programme dissemination

In addition to the programme outlined above, there will be dissemination activities intended to bring the work of the programme to as wide an audience as possible. These will include: a programme Newsletter; thematic special issues offered to online journals, such as Sociological Research Online (UK) and Qualitative Research Forum (Germany), or print-based journals such as Qualitative Research or Qualitative Inquiry, arising out of the specialist workshops; and a website. A major dissemination conference will mark the conclusion of the programme.

Opportunities to participate

Calls for participation will be issued on a regular basis and invitations to participate in workshops will also be issued. Open calls for participation in capacity building activities will be issued to all interested early-career and doctoral researchers.

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