

Promoting Qualitative Research in Switzerland

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Abstract: The Social Science Policy Council (SSPC), a committee of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, has launched an initiative to promote qualitative research in Switzerland. In this article, the reasons and objectives of this initiative are delineated. Qualitative research in Switzerland is as strong as in other countries, but it is somewhat lagging behind with regard to networks and structures that could offer information, support, resources, quality control and advanced training. There is hardly any mandatory training in qualitative methods at Swiss universities, and there exists no archive which is specialized to acquire and process qualitative data and no resource center that offers services and advice to qualitative researchers. The objectives of the SSPC's initiative are described as well as the next steps being taken.

Key words: *networking, promoting qualitative research, qualitative and quantitative methods*

1. The Social Science Policy Council:
A Brief Portrayal
2. Why Promote Qualitative Research?
 - 2.1 Qualitative and quantitative research
 - 2.2 Reasons to promote qualitative research
3. How to Promote Qualitative Research?
4. Why Choose the Social Science Policy Council as a Platform?

References

Author

Citation

The Social Science Policy Council (SSPC), a committee of the Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences, has launched an initiative to promote qualitative research in Switzerland. Before sketching out the why and the how of this initiative, let me first provide a brief portrayal of the SSPC, its history, mission and some of its achievements. [1]

1. The Social Science Policy Council: A Brief Portrayal

The Social Science Policy Council was founded in 1993 and grew out of the "Club SOWI." This was an informal group of presidents of four social scientific associations who launched some major initiatives to advance the social sciences in Switzerland. One of those initiatives was the foundation of the Swiss Information and Data Archive Service for the Social Sciences (SIDOS) by the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences in 1992, which maintains an inventory of social science research projects and data and offers services like methodological validation and advice as well as data retrieval. A second entailed the evaluation of the social sciences in Switzerland by a group of international experts, which was conducted by the Swiss Science Council in 1991. The final report of this evaluation made a number of policy recommendations for the universities as well as the national level, and suggested several institutional innovations. Many of them were realized or supported by the Priority Program "Switzerland: Toward the Future" of the Swiss National Foundation from 1996-2003, which boosted social scientific research in thematic key areas and took a number of structural measures (e.g. founding the Swiss Household Panel and organizing post-graduate methods training in an annual summer school). The Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences decided to formalize the "Club SOWI" and founded the Social Science Policy Council. The mission of this council is to represent the social sciences in Switzerland, foster transdisciplinary exchange and cooperation, develop

social science policy recommendations and sensitize political authorities and the society to specific issues in the development of the social sciences.¹ [2]

Since its foundation, the Social Science Policy Council has taken significant steps forward. To name just a few: it was able to convince the Swiss National Foundation to finance post-graduate training and to oblige every funded researcher to register their research projects at SIDOS, to explore, where appropriate, existing data archives and to deliver their data to SIDOS after the termination of their projects. When a political motion challenged the federal census of the population, the SSPC initiated a close cooperation between the social sciences and the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, and helped to organize a symposium on "statistics serving the public" and developing an innovative charter which specifies the lines of common action between the partners, in particular in the domains of scientific exchanges, data policies, formation and public valorization. A major recent initiative concerned the National Centers of Competence in Research (NCCR) where the SSPC successfully convinced key decision-makers to avoid a competition between the natural and social sciences in the future. Another initiative explored possibilities of funding more teaching positions as the number of students per teaching person is extremely high in the social sciences. A further initiative now is to promote qualitative research. [3]

2. Why Promote Qualitative Research?

The initiative to promote qualitative research is smaller in scope but it is based on a similar observation as many of the former initiatives: that Switzerland is somewhat lagging behind. Qualitative inquiry has experienced a tremendous increase in popularity during the last two decades. The amount of qualitative studies presented at scientific conferences or published in books and journals has rapidly risen. Meanwhile, there are excellent textbooks, handbooks and readers either giving overviews of the field or in-depth explanations of one specific approach or method.² This trend has been recognized in universities, government institutions and NGOs all over the world and has resulted in the creation of numerous groups, networks, and institutes solely dedicated to the support, promotion and teaching of qualitative methods. Empirical research in Switzerland is engaged with this form of research as strongly as it is in other countries, but it is lagging behind with regard to networks and structures that could offer information, support, resources, quality control and advanced training. More specifically:

- networks between qualitative researchers in Switzerland are still weak;
- there is hardly any mandatory training in qualitative research methods at Swiss universities;
- there is no archive which is specialized to acquire and process qualitative data, and there is no resource center which offers services and advice to qualitative researchers;
- partly as a result of the above, there still exist many prejudices against qualitative research within the scientific community, and many public agencies which fund social research have no clear idea what qualitative inquiry really is. [4]

Following the Social Science Policy Council's strong commitment towards advancing quantitative research and building adequate infrastructures, the time has come to do something for qualitative research. [5]

¹ For a portrait of the Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences see <http://www.sagw.ch/> (German) or <http://www.assh.ch/> (French). For a portrait with a mission statement and a brief history of the Social Science Policy Council (in French) see the same website, under the heading "entreprises et commissions."

² On qualitative inquiry and research approaches: DENZIN and LINCOLN (1998a,b,c, 2000a); SILVERMAN (1997, 2000, 2001); FLICK (2004); SEALE, GOBO, GUBRIUM and SILVERMAN (2004); MAY (2002); HITZLER and HONER (1997); on ethnography: ATKINSON, COFFEY, DELAMONT, LOFLAND and LOFLAND (2002); on interviews: GUBRIUM and HOLSTEIN (2002); for current thematic discussions see *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>); for an overview on qualitative research in Germany see MRUCK and MEY (2000); HITZLER (2000).

2.1 Qualitative and quantitative research

The first problem to point out is the unfortunate juxtaposition of qualitative and quantitative research. It is illogical, as the distinction refers to different dimensions, and it obscures the fact that every empirical research has to deal with quality *and* quantity. Nevertheless, two camps have been formed within the scientific community under the heading of qualitative vs. quantitative research, at times fighting each other, and at other times proclaiming that they are complementary. Whatever their names, they are here to stay. And as their designations are well established, we have no choice but to use them too.³ [6]

Whether a qualitative or quantitative research design is more adequate, depends on the research question. For example, if we want to find out how people construct their life-histories or how meanings are constituted in interaction, we will choose a qualitative approach. If we want to investigate the extent of migration or of social inequalities in our society, we will choose a quantitative approach. There are also many research questions which would suggest a mixed-methods approach. However, there are not many researchers who are able to apply qualitative *and* quantitative methods competently. Monocultures have been formed which give their members a specific identity and make them look suspiciously at those who venture out to make more than superficial contact with the other camp. Qualitative researchers ask only those types of research questions for which qualitative methods seem suitable, and quantitative researchers always choose quantitative research designs. Qualitative researchers are usually associated with an interpretive paradigm, like phenomenology, social hermeneutics or constructivism; quantitative researchers with a positivistic or post-positivistic position (see MOTTIER [in this volume](#)). The distinction of qualitative vs. quantitative research is, in other words, not just concerned with methods but refers to differences in many respects: epistemology, philosophy of science, paradigms, theory, methodology, data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods are often characterized as soft, flexible, subjective, political, case study oriented, speculative and "grounded," and quantitative methods in contrast as hard, fixed, objective, value-free, survey-oriented, hypothesis testing and abstract (HALFPENNY 1979, p.799). As with all dichotomous distinctions which structure a complex field, these labels obscure the inherent inner diversity which exists within both camps and which stirs many debates within each family.⁴ [7]

Qualitative and quantitative researchers have become accustomed to their co-existence. Their relationship oscillates between mutual disrespect and ignorance on the one hand, and active collaboration on the other hand. In methodological debates, the dichotomous attributions are losing ground. In informal communications they still occur, and they are ready at hand when conflicts surface. A vivid illustration of how precarious the relationship between qualitative and quantitative researchers still is, was the recent quarrel in the German Sociological Association when the existing section "Methods of empirical social research" fiercely tried to prevent the formation of the new section "Methods of qualitative social research." Such debates usually touch on "higher values" as to who are the "true" representatives of the "real" science. The German Sociological Association decided, in spite of the protests, to accept the new section with the suggested name, as the European Sociological Association had done a few years previously. It thereby acknowledged that its members adhere to different conceptions of science, theory and research methods. [8]

With the growing institutionalization and legitimization of qualitative research (see FIELDING [in this volume](#)), an increasing number of people have adopted a liberal stance and contend that qualitative and quantitative research are complementary. For many this means no more than conceding the right of existence to the other camp. In effect they ignore what the other side is doing and continue going about their own business. Others strive for collaboration and ponder the potential of mixed-method approaches. As FLICK (1995, pp.281-284) points out, this can

³ SILVERMAN (2000, 2001), as others do, repeatedly questions this distinction but finally sticks to the terms "qualitative research," "qualitative methods" and "qualitative data."

⁴ For a lively description of "family conflicts" within the interpretative scene in Germany, see HITZLER 2000.

mean many things: different fields of application, dominance by either side, transformation of one into the other, triangulation or integration. The most sophisticated are triangulation and integration. The concrete practicalities of how these can be achieved will be the subject of many debates in the near future, and they will go beyond what has been done so far. What is already clear by now is that the outcomes will not always be complementary, they also may converge or diverge, and we have to find ways of dealing with that (KELLE 2004, pp.174ff).⁵ [9]

2.2 Reasons to promote qualitative research

If we believe in the merits of both groups of research methods and in the innovative character of mixed-method approaches, we have to require—at least in sociology and political science—a mandatory training of our students in quantitative *and* qualitative approaches. We should overcome courses and textbooks which equalize "methods of *empirical* research" exclusively or mainly with quantitative methods, and we should abandon their standard view of a hypothetical-deductive concept of science for two reasons: first, it does not allow for induction and consequently denies the methodical character of qualitative approaches from the outset;⁶ and second, it obscures the fact that many quantitative researchers do not adhere to this position in practice and that some consider themselves explicitly as "interpretive" or as "constructivists."⁷ In German sociology, a *two-pillar-principle* has been implemented: quantitative and qualitative research methods are considered equally important, and every student aspiring towards a diploma must be trained in both. The same system is suggested for the planned bachelor degree in sociology. Such a structure, combined with additional measures which foster mutual exchange, could be a good investment into the future where the secluded monocultures of qualitative and quantitative research are likely to fade. [10]

At the same time it would be an investment into the *quality of qualitative research*. At present, there is an observable trend that qualitative research attracts students as well as practitioners who are not at ease with demanding quantitative procedures and who expect that in qualitative research they can substitute methodological sophistication with common-sense. The more fashionable qualitative research has become in different fields, like social work, business administration, marketing and consulting, the more we face a quality problem. Any investigation which does not make use of statistical procedures is called "qualitative" nowadays, as if this were a quality label in itself. As many have already called for: we need to define criteria by which we can distinguish "good" from "bad" qualitative research, be it "validity" and "reliability" (SILVERMAN 2001) or other concepts like "consistency" (BERGMAN & COXON *in this volume*) or "adequacy of meaning" (EBERLE 1999a,b) or even others. Postmodern approaches which proclaim that "anything goes" and which draw no distinction between social science, journalism and art, and which call the methodological practices of qualitative inquiry a "bricolage" (DENZIN & LINCOLN 2000, p.4),⁸ are not particularly helpful in this respect. The diverse qualitative

⁵ For a further discussion see SCHREIER and FIELDING (2001), COXON (*in this volume*).

⁶ KELLE and ERZBERGER (2004, p.73) are right in pointing out that methodologists who subscribe to a hypothetical-deductive concept of science (as most textbooks on "empirical research methods" do) inevitably argue inconsistently if they allow for qualitative research in an "explorative phase": "on the one hand they recommend, in the context of discovery, the carrying out of qualitative preliminary studies, but on the other hand they claim that it is impossible to methodologize these, and that, for this reason, they have no confidence in the results of such studies ... From the point of view of research pragmatics, however, it remains unclear why researchers should take the trouble to carry out field observation and interviews, if the only result of this is arbitrary hypotheses, and why they do not rather simply sit at their desks waiting for intuitions or pulling hypotheses out of a tombola." Indeed, when KELLE and LÜDEMANN (1995, 1996) proposed two qualitative research procedures for generating hypotheses, LINDENBERG (1996a, b) criticized them harshly for their untenable "inductive procedure" which contradicts the "logic of research" as formulated by POPPER (1934).

⁷ C.f. KELLE (1994).

⁸ DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000, p.4): "The qualitative researcher may take on multiple and gendered images: scientist, naturalist, field-worker, journalist, social critic, artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quilt maker, essayist. The many methodological practices of qualitative research may be viewed as soft science, journalism, ethnography, bricolage, quilt making, or montage."

approaches have to make explicit in what way they employ methodical procedures which can be learned and discussed or if they are an art which can only be judged by the authority of some charismatic "master." [11]

Another issue is anecdotalism, the habit of many qualitative researchers to present "a few, "telling" examples of some apparent phenomenon, without any attempt to analyze less clear (or even contradictory) data" (SILVERMAN 2001, p.34). If qualitative researchers do not present their whole dataset to the public in the same way as most quantitative researchers now do, namely by way of a data archive, the reader has no possibility of ever checking if alternative selections of data or different interpretations were possible. *Developing a culture of archiving data* among qualitative researchers would therefore also allow secondary analysis and it would foster critical debate. [12]

3. How to Promote Qualitative Research?

What are the objectives of our initiative to promote qualitative research? In an internal discussion paper, the following goals were suggested (EBERLE 2002):

- to create a network among Swiss researchers working with qualitative methods;
- to develop a concept for a center of competence for qualitative methods to serve the needs of the Swiss social sciences;
- to facilitate a consensus within the scientific community on quality standards for qualitative research;
- to facilitate a consensus within the scientific community on minimal requirements for the training of students in qualitative methods;
- to present the achievements of qualitative studies to a wider audience; and
- to found a center of competence for qualitative methods (if suitable). [13]

First, we tried to identify the major qualitative researchers in Switzerland in a snow-ball procedure and invited them to participate in a workshop in order to explore the idea of an archive and resource center for qualitative research. All of them, without exception, showed great interest and most of them confirmed their participation. Then we invited key representatives of qualitative archives and similar institutions from other European countries to share their experiences with us. The goal was to cover the why and how of qualitative methods as well as the why and how of archiving qualitative data. The results are presented in this volume. [14]

The discussions in this workshop revealed that the thought of handing over qualitative data to an archive after the termination of a project left many researchers feeling uneasy. As with quantitative researchers ten years ago, and as the history of Qualidata (the Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre at the University of Essex) in the U.K. has proven, it takes time to develop a culture of archiving, and archives should take proactive measures in this respect. Storage prevents the data, which later may be of historical significance, from being destroyed or getting lost, and it provides the possibility of conducting secondary data analyses. There is also a broad range of problems to be solved when acquiring and archiving qualitative data as these have manifold formats (transcripts, field notes, audio- and videotapes, pictures, and so on), and the issues of anonymization, confidentiality, and user support require special attention. Most, if not all, of the core questions were dealt with at the workshop, but many other questions remained open and await further investigation.⁹ [15]

In 2004, we conducted a survey in order to make an inventory of the specific expertise of qualitative researchers: which methods do they teach and which do they use in their own research; what is their specialty; what is their theoretical background; and so on. In 2005, these survey data have been complemented by an analysis of the database of SIDOS, the Swiss

⁹ A report on this workshop appeared in German in the Bulletin No. 115, July 2002, of the Swiss Sociological Association, written by Eva NADAI (<http://www.sagw.ch/soziologie/> under the headings Publications/Bulletins; retrieved June 15, 2004).

Information and Data Archive Service for the Social Sciences, which collects descriptions of ongoing and completed research projects in Switzerland. The goal was to promote better transparency about who does what and where, and to identify some trends thereby preparing the floor to find new partners for research collaboration and mutual exchange.¹⁰ [16]

To improve the network of qualitative researchers in Switzerland, we organized an invitational workshop in the fall of 2004. Some core issues were discussed: how to reach a consensus on the minimal training requirements in qualitative methods which a student of our different disciplines should fulfill; how to set and implement certain quality standards for qualitative research; and how to deal with inadequate judgments of reviewers who are in charge at the Swiss National Foundation. Several working groups were formed to debate these questions. They will discuss proposals electronically and in a follow-up workshop in the near future. [17]

For the summer of 2005, we have organized a workshop on mixed methods in which ways will be explored as to how qualitative and quantitative methods can be fruitfully combined in one research design. In our view, this is an alternative and as yet under-explored avenue for raising the profile and acceptance of qualitative inquiry in the scientific community and for presenting the potential and limits of both groups of methods to a wider audience (e.g. public funding agencies). There is still a long way to go. [18]

4. Why Choose the Social Science Policy Council as a Platform?

It may surprise many that we did not restrict this initiative to one discipline, for example sociology, but chose the Social Science Policy Council as a platform. Indeed, the field of sociology would have been diverse enough to justify a skeptical attitude about finding agreements on methods, quality standards or teaching requirements. How much more difficult will this be when people gather from 8-10 different disciplines? On the other hand, the traditional limits of the single disciplines have long been crossed, and many a scientist may find the work of a colleague from another field closer to his or her own than the work of other colleagues from the same discipline. Future research funding seems to favor transdisciplinary projects. Transdisciplinary research networks are the road to the future. It would be wise, in fact it is essential, that we begin to find out if, and what, and how much we want to deal with each other and how we can devise some basic working agreements. In my view, it is worth to try. [19]

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¹⁰ Cf. EBERLE and ELLIKER (2005).

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