Developing a Research Network:
The case of RN "*Qualitative Methods*"

ESA provides an ideal platform to connect people, interests and schools in a certain research area or methodology on a European scale. The RN "Qualitative Methods" has been quite a success story in recent years and it may be worthwhile to share some of our experiences.

After its foundation in 1999 (Chairs: Giampietro Gobo and Ros Edwards) the first initiative was to make the new RN known by setting up a homepage within the ESA-website (www.valt.helsinki.fi/esa/qual.htm) and collect e-mail addresses of qualitative researchers. Diverse thematic groups were designated for which we gradually found colleagues to nurture and develop. At the 2001 ESA-Conference in Helsinki we had a program with four sessions and 15 presentations. Two years later, at the 2003 Conference in Murcia, we had a program with several parallel tracks, 13 sessions and nearly 60 presentations. Many participants told us that our sessions were of high scientific quality and were among the best of the conference.

In my view, several initiatives helped to pave the way to this success. First, we tried to link our activities with those of other colleagues in the field. From the outset, we had contacts with the RN "Biographical Perspectives on European Societies." And we developed a close cooperation with the RN "Sociology of Art" (Chair: Anna Lisa Tota) where quite a number of researchers employ qualitative methods.

The results of this cooperation can be seen in: the participation of this RN at our mid-term conference, our common suggestion to invite Howard Becker to the Congress in Murcia, and a joint-session of both RNs at Murcia. In addition, we were also present at the World-Congress of Sociology 2002 in Brisbane, where we organized a joint session with the ISA-Research Committee 33 "Logic and Methodology." All these institutional links proved to be very fruitful.

A big success was our mid-term conference on "ethnographic organizational studies" at the University of St Gallen in Switzerland. Instead of having a mid-term conference on qualitative methods, in general, we decided to focus on one particular thematic field and set a particular focus within this field: ethnographic organizational studies - which is a hot and growing topic.

The conference was a great success: Nearly 60 researchers came to St Gallen from many European countries - Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland - but also from other parts of the world: from Israel, Canada, the United States, and even from Australia. We invited four prominent keynote speakers - Paul Atkinson (Cardiff University), Gary Alan Fine (Northwestern University), Jaber Gubrium (University of Missouri) and David Silverman (Goldsmith College) - who introduced each half day with a fundamental contribution, and 24 more researchers presented their work-in-progress. This conference showed that there is much ethnographic research going on in organizations, but there is still a lot to do in this field - theoretically, methodically, and conceptually (cf. the conference report by Max M. Bergmann (Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung, Volume 4, No. 1, January 2003, www.qualitative-research.net/fqs).

Our mid-term conference was a big step in developing our RN and in making it known to researchers world-wide. However, it also revealed a structural weakness of ESA, which we should tackle in the near future: ESA was only able to support us with 500 Euros, which covered about 5% of our costs. The organization of the conference was only possible by substantial contributions of the University of St Gallen, the Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Swiss Sociological Association.

Furthermore, the experiences in the past years also showed that ESA-RNs are fairly autonomous units. In the future, ESA should give some consideration to how its RNs can get a stronger structural position within its organization. It would be particularly fitting that ISA stand as a model in this respect.

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News for Research Networks

1. New Research Networks:

Society and Sports
Coordinator: Paul Martin
Email: *Martinp@edgehill.ac.uk*

Sociology of Sexuality Research
Coordinator: John Vincke
Email: *John.Vincke@rug.ac.be*

Sociology of Emotion
Coordinator: Jack Barbelet
Email: *jmb34@leicester.ac.uk*

2. Guidelines:
We will develop guidelines for running a research network. They will be discussed at the next executive meeting in October.

3. "Rethinking Inequalities":
RNs are invited to actively engage in preparing the next ESA conference in Torun, Poland, September 09-12,2005, "Rethinking Inequalities".

4. "Teaching Sociology with a European perspective":
ESA wants to collect syllabi on "Sociological Issues - taught with a European perspective". Please ask your members to send respective syllabi to us - we will decide upon publishing such syllabi on the ESA web-site.

5. News and Updates:
Please, do not hesitate to inform us about ongoing activities, changes etc.

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