

NCRM Collaborative Project

Innovations in Social Science Research Methods: an International Perspective

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Summary

One of the aims of the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is to identify and foster methodological innovation in the UK. The aim of this project was to identify methodological innovations outside the UK and draw NCRM's attention to them. The project sought out research practices that have not yet filtered through to typical research methods courses or that impact on the research process in novel ways. These usually entailed (i) technological innovation, (ii) the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in new ways and (iii) interdisciplinarity.

The project's focus on innovative research practices ranged from data collection to analysis and covered disciplines such as (social) psychology, sociology, social work, socio-legal studies, political science (including public health and public policy) and international studies, (social) geography (area studies, demography, environmental and urban planning), (social) anthropology, (socio-)linguistics, education, communication studies, economic and social history, economics (management and business studies), science and technology studies, statistics, methods and computing.

The work was conducted between October 2008 and March 2009 and written up in April and May 2009. The project gathered evidence by reviewing previous reports, carrying out desktop research, conducting an e-mail survey with academics, practitioners, research methods experts and others (N=215) - registering data entries in the form of nominations of experts, institutions and links to explore (N=670) - and holding interviews with gatekeepers (N=36) and telephone interviews with nominated experts (N=40).

The project concluded, firstly, that innovative methodologies usually entail the use of one or more technological innovation(s) (visual, digital or online). This could be the advent of new software or the development of online methods and the use of the Internet to conduct research. Secondly, innovative methodologies often entail crossing disciplinary boundaries. This is observed in combinations of disciplines and methods such as in ethnography, anthropology and psychology. Thirdly, innovative methodologies often entail the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in reformed or mixed and applied ways. This is observed in participatory methods, action research, professional work, social and consultancy work. Finally, innovative methodologies reside both inside traditional academic institutions (universities) and outside (research centres, institutes, consultancy agencies and organisations), yet even in the latter methods developers and experts usually have academic backgrounds and previous or current affiliations, status or posts.

Overall, psychology figured prominently in methodological innovations and developments followed by survey methodology, ethnography, sociology and management. These developments were classified into mixed (N=8), qualitative (N=7) and quantitative (N=7) types of research. The institutional structures identified as 'hosting' these developments are primarily Academic followed by both Academic

and Professional, then Research Centres and finally Professional and Consultancy institutions. The majority of the innovations are a consequence of working across disciplinary boundaries, followed by developments within methods and disciplines and then by developments in technology. Innovations were mainly spotted in North America – the USA and Canada – Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.

The full report includes summary descriptions of the methodological innovations located by the project. As a follow up to this project a workshop will be organised to bring together some of the developers and experts identified of these innovations. The workshop is planned to be adjacent to the NCRM Research Methods Festival to be held in July 2010.

Full Report

A full report on this project is available from the NCRM ePrints series at <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/804/>