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# Qualitative Research Like Politics Can Also Be Local: A Review of Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research

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## Qualitative Research Like Politics Can Also Be Local: A Review of Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research

### Abstract

The political nature of defining what constitutes standards of rigor and quality in qualitative research comes to the forefront again in Lamont and Whites' (2008) new report, *Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research*. Based upon a 2005 National Science Foundation (NSF) funded workshop for representatives from NSF's Cultural Anthropology, Law and Social Science, Political Science, and Sociology programs, Lamont, White, and their colleagues share perspectives on what they see as strengths, standards, and opportunities for qualitative research today and in the near future. Although this manuscript might not allay the fears of those in the field concerned over the "conservative challenge" that such federal policy reports can issue, the work does offer some promising contrasts to some similarly oriented reports of the recent past

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Quality Standards, Conservative Challenge, National Science Foundation

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## **Qualitative Research Like Politics Can Also Be Local: A Review of *Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research***

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*The political nature of defining what constitutes standards of rigor and quality in qualitative research comes to the forefront again in Lamont and Whites' (2008) new report, *Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research*. Based upon a 2005 National Science Foundation (NSF) funded workshop for representatives from NSF's Cultural Anthropology, Law and Social Science, Political Science, and Sociology programs, Lamont, White, and their colleagues share perspectives on what they see as strengths, standards, and opportunities for qualitative research today and in the near future. Although this manuscript might not allay the fears of those in the field concerned over the "conservative challenge" that such federal policy reports can issue, the work does offer some promising contrasts to some similarly oriented reports of the recent past. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, Quality Standards, Conservative Challenge, and National Science Foundation**

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It seems as long as there has been qualitative research there have been attempts to arrive at a consensus as to what constitutes quality across the wide array of methodologies, methods, disciplines, and fields. Of late, this pursuit has been a favourite choice for the United States federal government. For example, in the National Research Council's 2001 report, *Scientific Research in Education*, a group of prominent scientists, educators, and policy makers attempted to set a research agenda for those investigators studying education. At the heart of the initiative was the effort to define what rigorous research is, and maybe more importantly, what research approaches should be funded and whose findings should be accepted as evidence of quality education. As can be imagined, the narrowing of what constitutes quality research by one community of scholars did not sit too well with many other circles of researchers including many who practice some form or another of qualitative research. Norm Denzin and his colleagues (e.g., Denzin & Giardina, 2006) have been prominent critics of such "legitimization" efforts being issued from a perspective they see as being a conservative point-of-view of science and inquiry.

The contextual factor in these efforts and counter-efforts reminds me of the old saying of Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, the late U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives who was fond of saying, "All politics are local." In the case of these governmental initiatives, I am always curious as to who gets invited to the caucuses from which these reports emanate and of course, who does not get invited and thus deprived of voting in the local election on these nominated standards.

The latest federally-funded report in this long and sometimes controversial process is the National Science Foundation's (NSF) *Interdisciplinary Standards for*

*Systematic Qualitative Research* (Lamont & White, 2008) which presents the results of a workshop held on May 19-20, 2005 and organized and attended by prominent scientists representing four NSF programs: Cultural Anthropology, Law and Social Science, Political Science, and Sociology. Building upon the foundation created by Ragin, Nagel, and White's 2004 report, *Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research*, the twenty-four attendees were charged to

- (1) articulate the standards used in their particular field to ensure rigor across the range of qualitative methodological approaches;
- (2) identify common criteria shared across the four disciplines for designing and evaluating research proposals and fostering multidisciplinary collaborations;
- and (3) develop an agenda for strengthening the tools, training, data, research design, and infrastructure for research using qualitative approaches. (p. 3)

In making this charge the NSF also acknowledged these four disciplines have “different research design and evaluation cultures as well as considerable variability in the emphasis on interpretation and explanation, commitment to constructivist and positivist epistemologies, and the degree of perceived consensus about the value and prominence of qualitative research methods” (p. 3).

In preparation for the workshop the participants were asked to draft brief reports in which they were to address three topics: assessing the current landscape of qualitative research standards and evaluation criteria, as well as anticipated future needs and opportunities for qualitative research and researchers. These papers, which are all collected in the NSF report (Lamont & White, 2008), along with ensuing workshop deliberations, led to a set of findings re-presented in four sections: “Qualitative Research Design and Methods; Standards for Qualitative Research across Disciplines (in Anthropology, Law and Social Science, Political Science and Sociology); Recommendations for Producing Top Notch Qualitative Research; and Promising New Research Areas and Topics” (p. 3).

An interesting feature of this report is the acknowledgement and preservation of differences within and across these four disciplines. For example, the final report includes two categories of qualitative research standards: one, common or key standards pertinent to all four disciplines; and two, standards determined to be critical by two or three disciplines represented at the workshop. In reading the individual papers at the end of the report I came away with the impression the organizers of the meeting encouraged differences of positions and opinions while at the same time appeared to facilitate consensus when it could be achieved. Of course one could argue that by virtue of who was selected to attend, the NSF helped to create a local set of politics and politicians increasing the chances that the group might achieve a somewhat harmonious set of results, but nonetheless, there did appear to be healthy dialogue within and across the groups as far as standards were concerned.

This notion of who participated and who did not can quickly be seen with a search of the report to see that qualitative research conceptualized and conducted from a social justice perspective seemed to be absent from the volume. Although Lamont and White (2008) made it clear they and their colleagues focused on methodologies and procedures such as “ethnography, historical and comparative analysis, textual and discourse analysis,

focus groups, archival and oral history, observational studies, interpretation of images and cultural materials, and unstructured and semi-structured interviews” and “constructivist and positivist epistemologies” (p. 3), the lack of inclusion of critical, performative, and transformative concepts and procedures when it comes to discerning qualitative research standards will most likely be of a concern to those researchers working from those orientations. So, despite Lamont and White’s best efforts to note the report suggests standards only for “systematic” qualitative research from the perspectives of representatives from the four NSF program areas, many consumers of this work may attempt to “generalize” far beyond the limitations articulated by the authors of the report. Such practice may suggest that although most politics are local, the results of even local elections can have national and international implications.

Leaving the world of politics aside for a moment, when I examined the standards promulgated by the workshop representatives, I could see that the group worked to focus on those criteria that I would say are commonly held by those qualitative researchers who practice from the aforementioned disciplines, theoretical orientations, and methodologies upon which the workshop was oriented. Starting by articulating what standards (scientific) qualitative and quantitative methods have in common was rhetorically valuable for our qualitative research colleagues who work within the more-scientific flavored genres. I also liked how the group was able to state that although the ways qualitative researchers address sampling in terms of size and strategies and generalizability may differ from those practiced by their quantitative colleagues, these approaches were nonetheless rigorous and valid in their own rights.

The workshop attendees then went on to share standards held in common across the four disciplines in terms of how to (a) frame research projects (e.g., building upon existing scholarship and clearly articulating the research focus), (b) design research studies (e.g., providing detailed and transparent depictions of methodological choices), (c) analyze data (e.g., considering disconfirming evidence), and (d) write and present results (e.g., producing clear and coherent accounts). As general as these standards were articulated, I could appreciate the inclusiveness in which they were offered to the larger qualitative research community.

I can also say the same for those standards not shared by all four disciplines in that the general nature of the prescriptions also lent to their potential appreciation beyond these specific disciplines. Ones that had particular appeal to me as an editor, teacher, and researcher were “Articulate a detailed and theoretically informed justification for case selection and sampling procedure,” “The simple mention of the use of qualitative analysis software packages is insufficient,” “The design and analysis should link clearly to answering the research question,” and “Demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills to complete the project, in particular cultural fluency and language skills” (Lamont & White, 2008, p. 14).

In the rest of the report Lamont and White (2008) share the participants’ ideas for ways to improve qualitative research and emerging areas for qualitative researchers to explore in the four disciplinary areas. The calls for more funding and training opportunities were good ones as improvement strategies go, but I would worry if what constitutes appropriate methods to fund and learn becomes too narrowly defined, we could be sacrificing innovation and diversification. I found the workshop attendees also did well when suggesting promising areas of research because in the four years since the

meeting was held, many of the topics certainly have become more prominent in their respective disciplinary publications.

Overall, I think those colleagues of mine who favor positivist to constructivist theoretical orientations to qualitative research will find *Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research* a welcomed addition to the “what constitutes quality in qualitative research” body of work. Qualitative researchers seeking funding from NSF will also find this work to be an indispensable guide for proposal development and report writing. I also hope members of Institutional Review Boards carefully read this monograph to appreciate how sampling and generalizability can be different in qualitative research, yet also worthwhile and fitting in their own rights.

Will this tome change the minds of those colleagues of mine who worry of the government’s “conservative challenge”? I think the answer might be “maybe.” I say this for a couple of reasons. One, I think the inclusion of the brief papers at the end of the report is a step forward when it comes to transparency. The authors’ debates within and across the papers helped me to appreciate the struggles these researcher have when it comes to reflecting on the state of contemporary qualitative research, albeit one that did not include their critical and artistic colleagues. In addition I also valued Lamont and White’s (2008) hedging style when it came to characterizing the breadth of what was presented as qualitative research in the report. They made every effort to remind us as readers that these findings were for a particular type of qualitative research within the specific scope of four disciplines and from an NSF perspective. In doing so they helped to remind us that although such activities as federally-organized workshops and their resultant reports remain political, they can also encourage us to remember that they in the case of this report are local too.

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### Author Note

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