

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY SAAB GRANT PROGRAM

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One of the most difficult tasks of SAAB is determining whether a grant applicant's research is methodologically sound. In order to assist grant applicants with their methodology, SAAB has compiled basic expectations for qualitative, quantitative, and scientific research methods. Methodology is **very** important to SAAB—simply stated, if you cannot answer your research question or your methodology is flawed you are unlikely to receive grant monies.

**If your research involves human subjects, the Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC) must approve your project. Contact [irb@clark.edu](mailto:irb@clark.edu) with any questions about the approval process.**

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### Qualitative Research Methods

#### Participant Observation

Participant observation is considered the foundation of fieldwork in anthropology. The term participant observation refers to a set of skills that are used in field research, which include gaining entry, developing a rapport, finding and cultivating participants and recording field notes. Qualitative data is gathered by listening and observing, taking into account the various societal elements that participants use in sharing and interpreting their experiences. It is sometimes appropriate to formulate a specific research question to explore. However, it is also appropriate to use general questions to develop research target areas instead, which enables more flexibility in collecting and analyzing data.

Generalizability is achieved by obtaining a quasi-random sample or many different samples to approximate a representative population. Participant observation does not necessarily strive to make generalized statements and therefore does not need a representative sample. Generalizability is often related to a breadth of understanding, yet participant observation research tends to be more interested in depth. For certain studies, this will be a crucial concept, but it is not required for all research

#### Conducting Interviews

The initial purpose of an interview is to discover the everyday lived world of the participant, which is followed by an exploration of the key meaningful themes of this world using ordinary, qualitative language. An environment of deliberate openness is cultivated by the researched to obtain information about the participant's life. There are three basic interview formats: standardized, unstandardized and semi-standardized. Whichever interview format is used, it is important that questions are phrased in a manner that does not introduce bias. Questions should never imply an anticipated response in their phrasing, as this can have a significant effect on the participant's reply. Closed questions should also be avoided, as they limit the natural responses of the participant.

## **Question Design**

The order, phrasing, level of language, adherence to subject matter and general style of interview questions should be tailored to the participants. The traits that should be considered include educational and social level, ethnic or cultural traits, and age. There are four types of questions that are included in interviewing: throw-away, essential, extra, and probing. Throw-away questions are used in the beginning of the interview to obtain basic demographic information and develop a rapport with the participant. Essential questions address the central focus of the research. Extra questions are used to check reliability of responses or test the influence of wording by repeating a previous question with different phrasing. Probing questions are used to obtain more complete stories by asking the participant to elaborate on a previous response.

## **Interview formats**

Standardized (formal or structured)- Uses a formal structured schedule of interview questions, which are answered directly by the participant. This technique enables direct comparison between participants, because it does not allow for deviation from these questions to tailor the interview to the participant's responses. It assumes the formulated questions are sufficient to obtain all the relevant information and are worded in a manner that is clear and equally meaningful to each participant.

Unstandardized (informal or nondirective)- Conducted based on the assumption that the full range of appropriate questions cannot be known prior to the interview. For this method, a comprehensive set of questions is not developed. Questions arise from the particular interaction with the participant, and are developed and adapted during the interview to obtain information for the general purpose of the research.

Semistandardized (guided or focused)- Contains elements from both standardized and unstandardized methods. Some questions are predetermined, but the interviewer is given the freedom to stray from these questions as the participant's responses unfold. The interview is not limited by the initial question set. This form of interview is open-ended, but guided by a general script and list of topics.

## **References**

Crane, Julia G, and Michael V. Angrosino

1992. *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*. Lake Grove: Waveland Press.

Shank, Gary D

2006. *Qualitative Research: A Personal Skills Approach*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc.

Bernard, H. Russel

2002. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

Berg, Bruce L

2004. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

## PROJECT PROSPECTUS

The *Project Prospectus*, which will be revised periodically during the term, should be considered as a working draft of what will become a project proposal. Your first draft is neither immutable nor complete. Each subsequent draft will be revised and lengthened. Your prospectus must be divided into the following sections, each with the title indicated. Include all titles, even if you leave some the sections blank:

**1. Project Title.** The title should reflect the site of your research as well as the argument you will be forwarding.

**2. Research Question and Hypothesis.** This section will be organized around the relationship between your research and previous research.

**3. Primary Field Site.** Provide information about your field site (e.g. name of organization, name of business establishment, address). You should also include information regarding your accessibility to the site, including how you intend to travel.

**4. Contact Information.** Provide the name of your primary contact at the field site. Describe the official position and/or the significance of this person to your project.

**5. Research Plan.** This section must include both: 1) practical information and 2) demonstration of the validity of your research method.

a. *People.* What kinds of people will you be interacting with during the course of your research? What kinds of people do you plan on interviewing? Who do you think will be your most important informant?

b. *Place.* Aside from your primary field site, where else do you expect to conduct research? For example, will you be conducting interview off-site? Will there be events occurring elsewhere?

c. *Events.* What events do you expect to attend as a participant observer?

d. *Activities.* What kinds of research methods do you plan to use (e.g. participant observation, interviews, life histories, surveys, textual analysis etc.).

e. *Validity.* How will your research plan provide you with information that will adequately address your research question?

**6. Research Calendar.** Research must extend over the course of at least six visits to your research site, for a total of fifteen hours. If you are volunteering at the site, at least three of your visits, for a total of five hours, must be undertaken for sole purpose of research. Indicate the tentative dates and times of your research visits.

**7. Bibliography.** Compile a short bibliography of scholarly works (4 - 8) relevant to your research.

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## Quantitative Methods for the Social Sciences

What departments are in the social sciences?

In general, Communication, Economics, International Affairs, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology/Anthropology are considered social sciences, but what really defines the area is the use of the social scientific method to explain how people behave. Any project that seeks to collect data to explain some social phenomenon falls under this division.

Checklist for research projects:

Hypothesis- it can be phrased as a question or a possible answer to a question, but either way it should be clear and concise. There should be a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. Often the hypothesis is in the form, "Does a change in the *independent variable* cause a change in the *dependent variable*?"

Evidence- if the project involves collecting data, students should take precautions so that observations are random. One example of sampling bias is if someone was doing a phone survey and only called people in rich neighborhoods, or didn't call people with Hispanic names. If the outcomes from the research will be applicable to other situations, you must sample randomly.

Outcome: Often the evidence evaluated is statistical in nature. Does the evidence answer the question? The dependent and independent variables should be measured in a way that can be studied statistically (i.e. numbers). If someone collects data and uses statistical analysis, they should be able to support the thesis or reject it.

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## Quantitative and Qualitative Research using the Scientific Method

*"Science is best defined as a careful, disciplined, logical search for knowledge about any and all aspects of the universe, obtained by examination of the best available evidence and always subject to correction and improvement upon discovery of better evidence"* – James Randi

In order for quantitative research to be considered legitimate and hence receive funding, it must follow the scientific method. If quantitative methods are not feasible/desirable, an observational method is also acceptable.

The proposed research project must follow these or equivalent steps:

- Observation – critical and unbiased observation
- Hypothesis – proposed theory explaining a question or phenomenon, falsifiable
- Prediction – formal method to test hypothesis
- Experiment – experimentation, with control, in order to potentially falsify hypothesis and test predictions, gather quantitative results
- Analysis – what the data tells the researcher, modifying original hypothesis, and potentially prompting further testing

A visual representation:

Observations → hypothesis → predictions → testing →

Consistent results? → theory

Inconsistent results? → Repeat, until consistent results are found → theory

Yay! The universe is in order.

