

Introductory meeting for ESRC Research Methods Programme

Background paper to the meeting

Research quality

One of the underlying rationales for the Methods Programme is concern over the quality of UK research methods. The ESRC document explaining the need for a new Methods programme makes clear the importance of identifying methodological excellence and promoting it, distilling it so that the UK nurtures a younger generation of social researchers with high quality research skills. The paragraph below is a short extract from the scoping document for the programme:

Background: The Need for a New Programme

- 1.1 *The ESRC exists to fund high quality social science research, which meets the needs of users and stakeholders, with rigorous methodology and valid and reliable results. To do this effectively, there has to be an adequate number of people who are well trained and well skilled in social science methodology, both qualitative and quantitative. The demand for such skilled personnel is not restricted to the academic research community. There is also a growing demand for high-quality social researchers from the private and voluntary sectors and particularly from government, as the move towards evidence based policy has gathered momentum.*

The new Programme will form part of the Council's broader strategy aimed at improving the standard of research methods across the UK social science community.

Judging research proposals

As with all research that is peer-reviewed and competitive, a judgement is made on the quality of the research proposal. Typically this encompasses the research design and how well it relates to the research questions to be answered, as well as the specific methods of data collection and analysis. Assessments of research proposals are littered with the word 'quality'. However, whilst there is, in general, a high level of consistency amongst referees there are often marked differences in what is judged 'high quality'. Why is this? Does this represent disciplinary differences? If so, why? Should we expect 'quality' to be recognised across disciplines? Or should we expect that what is judged as high quality by one discipline may be unacceptable to another?

Does an apparent disciplinary difference *actually* represent a failure to judge a proposal in terms of the aims of the research? For example, if the research aim is *not* to generate data that is representative of a wider population then it is inappropriate to judge it on that criterion.

Assessing the quality of research evidence

The quality of research evidence is routinely judged through submission to academic journals and this, of itself, raises questions of disciplinary differences in the assessment of quality. But running through this is the more fundamental question:

Is research evidence assessed in terms of its adequacy to answer the questions that it poses?

In most empirical research the questions posed can never be fully answered. In standard hypothesis-driven research the evidence, at best, *supports* the hypothesis. Using inductive methods one generates explanations that are grounded in the empirical evidence.

If research evidence cannot be judged against an absolute, how do we establish the point at which the quality of evidence is acceptable? At one end of a spectrum we reach a point where evidence is so poor that no significant claims can be made. But how do we judge the point at which evidence is of sufficient quality? Sufficient for what?

The growth of evidence-based policy has brought a more sharply focussed spot-light to the quality of evidence. This is particularly apparent in the area of systematic reviews that have developed within a medical arena where randomised control trials are the accepted method of obtaining high quality evidence. Incorporating evidence based on other methods into systematic reviews immediately raises questions about the quality of research evidence that is based on a different paradigm (ie where there are not only disciplinary differences but also differences in terms of the nature of evidence). In addition, government is increasingly commissioning social research from academics. This raises further questions of how research quality is judged and whether there are differences in perspective between researchers in academia and government.

The Research Assessment Exercise assesses research quality by peer review. In this example, too, a great deal of effort has been spent in developing criteria by which quality can be measured and in making transparent the way in which the criteria have been implemented. However, there are evident differences between disciplines in the level of importance given to particular criteria. How does one then make comparisons across disciplines? What problems are posed for inter-disciplinary research?

The Methods Programme provides an opportunity to bring together unrivalled expertise across a wide range of disciplines and a wide range of epistemological and methodological backgrounds. Through the programme meetings there is an opportunity to debate issues of research quality and, perhaps, produce some recommendations to inform assessment procedures.

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