

Guidelines for research proposals in Anthropology

Drafted by Ted Bestor, John Comaroff, Linda Garro, Gery Ryan, Susan Weller

We felt it useful to expand the existing guidelines on qualitative methodologies for applicants to the NSF Anthropology Program. In the guidelines below, we have kept the original headings, but have added questions and suggestions under each in order to help applicants describe more clearly the key elements of their qualitative research design and methodology.

- **Statement of the research problem, research questions, specific aims, propositions or hypotheses**
 - What is/are the question(s) that your research will answer?
 - Questions/aims can be:
 - Exploratory
 - Descriptive
 - Comparative
 - Model or hypotheses testing
 - Or any combination of the above
 - Make sure to specify, define, and operationalize your terms; for example, explain how you intend to use concepts like “class,” “identity,” or “subjectivity” and how you plan to identify, assess, and, if necessary, measure their relevance in the context of your research.
 - Explain clearly how you intend to posit the relationships among the key constructs, and the phenomena, to which your research is addressed; if you mean to argue for relations of cause and/or effect, give your reasons for so doing. (It is not necessary to use the language of independent or dependent variables, but you DO need to state the objectives of your project, and the means by which you intend to realize them, in terms that are transparent to other scholars.)

- **Review of the literature and significance (embedding your problem, question or specific aims in the existing general theory)**
 - Demonstrate familiarity with range of relevant theoretical, methodological, and topical literatures
 - Engage the full range of relevant methodological approaches (including, where appropriate, quantitative ones) that have been applied to this problem
 - Situate your project at its appropriate level of theory, taking care not to write it at too high a level of abstraction or generality; note, in this respect, that it is NOT necessary, every time you undertake a research project, to re-write Durkheim, Weber, Marx, or Freud.

- Do not personalize your critical arguments and, to the greatest extent possible, evince a spirit of scholarly generosity
 - It is more productive to build on the accomplishments of other scholars than to offer negative critique purely for the sake of making a claim for the importance and novelty of your work. Also, where possible, avoid justifying your project primarily on putative lacunae in the literature on your sphere of interest.
- **Preliminary studies and experience(s) by the applicant, if any**
 - Describe the following (as appropriate)
 - Familiarity with site
 - Research experience/training
 - Cultural fluency – your knowledge of the cultural and social setting(s) in which you will conduct your research, including sensitivities to local concerns, local framings of appropriate behavioral modes, and so forth
 - Language abilities
 - “E-siting,” “e-contextualization” – whether or not you have had the opportunity to make prior site visits, have you undertaken systematic (and critical) examination of relevant on-line sources of information including, as appropriate, on-line communities and discussion groups in order to understand local concerns, points of view, etc.
- **Research design**
 - Sampling
 - Describe each (class) of the following (if they are appropriate to your study) and how and why each will be selected:
 - Site(s)
 - Case(s)
 - Informants – what kinds of people will you interview?
 - Particular events or social processes (e.g., a festival, a set of funeral rituals, a political campaign) – consider both the “normal” events but also those that you anticipate may provoke or reveal “social ruptures” or conflicts which will illuminate your analysis
 - Clearly describe criteria for selection of sites, cases, informants, and/or events/processes. Why will you pick a particular site, informant, etc.? (If your plans had to change because the situation in the field has changed, how would these selection criteria make it possible for you to adapt your project to changing circumstances?)
 - Describe the degree to which each of the above levels are typical or atypical (e.g., To what degree do sites, cases, informants, or events/process capture central tendencies, margins, and variation in

- the population? To what degree do they represent extreme or unique cases?)
- Discuss issues of representativeness (e.g., To what degree will this research tell us about something larger, and what is that larger thing (a class? a region? a demographic phenomenon?)
 - Assess the feasibility of your project and how you have anticipated possible difficulties. (e.g., Can you get into the sites? Will your informants talk to you? Will you be able to observe or ask about specific events or processes?)
 - Link all of the above, explicitly, to original research aims and objectives
- Data collection
- Recognize that ethnographic research is inherently a “multi-methods” approach, and that your techniques must be stated clearly in relationship to your specific questions/aims.
 - Describe full repertoire of methods proposed
 - Do not presume that reader is familiar with them
 - Do not use jargon
 - Cite references for techniques where appropriate (do not cite anthologies of research methods)
 - Demonstrate your familiarity with the strengths and limitation of chosen methods
 - Draw comparison with other potential methods (e.g., Why did you choose these particular methods and not others?)
 - Try to balance experience-near vs. experience-distant data (e.g., distinguish between those things that an individual or community might experience as an aspect of daily life (for example, loss of landholdings because of tight credit) versus those phenomena that are more remote, abstract, or macro-level (national fiscal policies that affect agrarian credit)
 - Describe the staging of the investigation as a clear sequence of steps (and logical progression) of different phases – multi-methods are often not simultaneous but build on one another in logical ways
 - Ensure that your data collection efforts are appropriate for your research aims and objectives. (If you plan to make comparisons, you need data that are comparable!)
- Data analysis
- Describe plans for finding themes, identifying patterns, making comparisons, etc.
 - If you plan to conduct a descriptive analysis, explain how will you recognize, describe, and account for range, central tendency, and variation, outliers
 - If you plan to build models, explain how you will identify key constructs, identify the relationships among constructs, and ensure that the models are representative of the data collected

- If you plan to make comparisons, explain how you will identify the key dimensions on which the comparison will be based, how you will assess similarities and differences, and how the reader can be assured you have not biased the results
 - Do not just cite software – explain what the software does and how it will advance research objectives; demonstrate that you know the software.
 - Describe any post-data collection selection or data manipulation processes (e.g., data cleaning exercises, data management processes, elimination of outliers, etc.)
 - Address issues of falsifiability, (i.e., what kind of evidence or negative cases would allow for a reader to falsify your conclusions).
- **Timeline and research schedule**
 - Provide a clear timeline that demonstrates how the your research design can be completed in a timely fashion
 - The timeline should discuss how different phases of research—including different locations or field sites, different types of data collection, etc.—will be sequenced and integrated
- **Significance**
 - Describe how your study contributes to:
 - Theory
 - Substantive knowledge on the subject
 - Methods
 - Real world impacts
 - Bear in mind that any research may have multiple arenas of significance (for example, a study of fishing communities in Mexico may simultaneously address theoretical issues in economic anthropology, important questions about Mexican social and political history, and problems of marine environments. In presenting the significance of your own study, you should focus on the central interests of the audience/program to which you are submitting the proposal.)
- **Anticipate objections**
 - Describe the limitations of your study before reviewers do
 - Describe what you have done to minimize such limitations
 - If you have made hard choices on controversial issues, describe the controversy and explain why you made the choice