

SOC 615: Qualitative Methods

Rutgers University
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Class Time: Wed. 4.10-6.50
Room: Davison
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Introduction

This course is designed to familiarize you with the theory and usage of qualitative methodology in the social sciences, with a special focus on the discipline of sociology. There are two main goals that I hope you will achieve in the course of the next fifteen weeks. First, I anticipate that you will become acquainted with the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative methodology. To that end, we will examine some of the discussions and debates surrounding the use of different types of qualitative methods and how researchers formulate research questions, and choose the best methodology to answer them. In addition to the general conduct of research we will learn about ethical considerations of doing research with human subjects, and you will have the opportunity to be certified to conduct research. Second, I hope that you will become proficient at two main strands of qualitative methods, namely observation and in-depth interviewing. Much of the course will be oriented towards providing you with hands-on experience in the crafts of observation and qualitative interviewing. I focus primarily on these two approaches because they are the areas with which I am most familiar as a practitioner, and where I can best impart to you what I have learned doing research. Any research project, regardless of the methodology is one where you will make mistakes. For instance, you might not ask the right questions; you might miss an opportunity to probe respondents further in interviews; you might spend too much time analyzing a phenomenon of little import; you might enter the field with preconceptions that prevent you from seeing some important emergent phenomenon. All of this is to be expected and if you are not prepared to make mistakes you probably should never do serious social research. So, prepare to make mistakes in this course because, as clichéd as it sounds, you will only truly learn when you make mistakes. I still strive to design and execute the perfect study. It will never happen, but that will not prevent me from trying.

This is a course for the committed. I am committed to giving you the best possible grounding in qualitative methods that I can, and, in turn, you should be committed to being a regular and active participant, to doing the readings, contributing to class discussions, and completing all of the assignments on time. The amount of reading will vary from week to week, as some topics are dealt with more in a hands-on fashion, while others require a large amount of reading. Some classes will be primarily discussion based, while others will have a

mostly practical focus. There is also a considerable writing and critique emphasis in the course. I am assuming that many of you aspire to academic posts or to professions where you will be routinely required to write a great deal and comment on other people's work. Several of the assignments described below entail you reading and critiquing the work of your peers in this class.

Required Books

Alford, Robert R. (1998). *The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods and Evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Becker, Howard S. (1998). *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Merriam, Sharan B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Weiss, Robert S. (1994). *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.

Recommended Books

You don't have to buy these books. However, they will prove very useful to you in your sociological careers, especially if you plan on using qualitative methodology for your dissertation work, or generally useful for writing, as in the case of Becker's book.

Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Emerson, Robert M. (2003). *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*. [2nd edition] Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Van Maanen, John (1998). *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The following are three ethnographies that you should have on your book shelves. Each is a classic in its own right and they are notable for their clear discussion of method. The classic methodological statement of Whyte from the second edition of *Street Corner Society* is the gold standard of methodological appendix and his clear style and frank discussion is as relevant today as when he wrote it. Though Clifford Shaw did not lay bare his methods, the discussion by Howard Becker in the revised edition of the *Jack-Roller* is at once appreciative and thought-provoking, and is a great way to think about in-depth life history and narrative research. Finally, the more recent work by Jay McLeod is perhaps the trail-blazer in the second great age of sociological ethnography. McLeod was not the only one doing urban ethnographic work with vulnerable populations (the work of Paul Willis [1981], for example, is a clear influence), but his discussion of his ethnography and the comparative focus of the study did break new ground.

McLeod, Jay (2004). *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations of Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. [3rd edition] Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shaw, Clifford R. (1966). *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Whyte, William Foote (1993[1943]). *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. 4th Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Requirements

There are five graded assignments that make up the bulk of your grade in this course (85% in all). The remaining 15% of your grade is awarded for your overall engagement in the course. The engagement grade is for attendance, contribution and your general élan. A crucial part of the engagement grade is the effort you put into reading and commenting on the research questions and fieldnotes of your peers (see assignments 1 and 3 below). All assignments are to be uploaded to the course web site no later than 5PM on the date on which they are due. It is especially important to upload your assignments in a timely manner because you are responsible for reading other people's assignments before class, and your delay compromises their ability to give you informed comments.

Assignment 1: Research Question (10%)

We will spend the first few weeks in the course discussing some of the general issues in the conduct of research and how to choose a topic, formulate a research question and use the best methods to answer the question. Your first assignment is to write up a research question that you will seek to answer in your final paper/proposal. You should plan on meeting with me at least once to discuss your research question, and the expectation for this assignment is that you have a clearly thought-out research question, either one based on gaps in previous research, or an as-yet undiscovered contribution to the field. The research question should include a rationale for doing the research, i.e. what we can hope to learn from your project, and your assessment of what methods are best suited to gathering the data to answer that question. You should be aware that as with the conduct of research generally (see above) the question is merely an opening salvo, one that, with revision, will improve. In our class where we will workshop the research questions, each student will comment on the research questions of three of their peers in the class, and we will spend 10 minutes discussing each person's question.

Assignment 2: Ethnography Critique (10%)

The second assignment is for you to critically evaluate an ethnography. Here I use the term ethnography in a wide sense to include traditional monographs (e.g. *Street Corner Society*), anthropological studies, ethnodramas, or postmodern ethnographies. You can choose any stand-alone study as long as ethnography is the primary methodological approach used by the author(s). You are not required to summarize the work. Instead, you are to evaluate the ethnography by outlining the question that it sets out to answer, assess the appropriateness and use of qualitative methodology used to answer the question, and how the overall argument coheres or not. The expected length of the ethnography critique is 1,500 words.

Assignment 3: Fieldnotes (15%)

The third assignment is for you to hand in a set of completed fieldnotes, that is, typed up and analyzed for themes. You may do the observation of any site, though, if you plan on using observation data for your final paper/proposal, you should probably do your observations there. We will discuss fieldnotes and practice observation, and the requirement for this assignment is that you complete a 30 minute observation of a site, and write up your descriptive and analytical fieldnotes. That is, you will describe what you observe and make an attempt to analyze and interpret the data. Once again, each class member will read and comment on three of their peers' fieldnotes and we will discuss these comments in class on March 8.

Assignment 4: Transcribed and Theme Coded Interview (15%)

This assignment entails you completing an in-depth qualitative interview, regardless of whether you are using this method for your paper, and transcribing and theme coding the transcript. Because not everyone will be using interviews you are expected only to highlight general themes in your coding of the interview. I will try to make some transcribing machines available for general use, though I will not have enough machines for everyone in the class.

Assignment 5: Final Paper/Proposal (35%)

The final paper or research proposal (for those who want to use this class to help prepare their dissertation proposals) should be a comprehensive, journal-length research article that is suitable to be sent out for publication in a major peer-review journal. There is little point in expending the effort that is expected of you in this class and having something less than a potential peer review publication to show for it. All projects will be undertaken after several consultative meetings that we will have during the course of the semester, where we will discuss your project and choose the approach best suited to answering your question.

The paper should have the following elements:

- (1) Statement of the research question or problem. This will include references to the body of literature whence the question/problem arises.
- (2) Description of the methodology/research design. This will include a discussion of the method(s) you used to collect data, why you used them, the problems you had during data collection, and any ethical issues that you encountered. You will also talk about how you analyzed you data.
- (3) For observation studies your methods section will have to speak to how you gained access to your site, and any issues you encountered during your observations. You will also need to document how many hours of observation you undertook, and estimate the amount of fieldnotes you generated.
- (4) For interview studies you will have to document the how you chose your sample, how you gained access to your sample, how long the interviews were, how many were transcribed and coded, and what, if any, software was used to code the interviews.
- (5) Data presentation. Here you will present your findings and discuss them using the pertinent literature for your field. What did you find? How does this relate or not to past research? What were the limitations of your study? What are the implications for future research, or for public policy?
- (6) Conclusion. Where you draw together the threads of your project and also critically reflect about your own use of methods in your project.

Class Schedule

January 19: Introduction: Thinking about Doing Research

Reading: Alford, Introduction and Chapter 1; Becker “Tricks.”

Please come to class prepared to talk about your research interests and how they might be enhanced by taking this class. You will each be expected to talk about your research interests and what you hope to gain from doing this class.

January 26: The Question: How to Choose a Research Question and the Method(s) to Answer it

Reading: Alford, Chapters 2, 3, 5 & 6; Becker “Imagery.” Merriam chapters 2 and 4

PROGRAM NOTE:

Assignment 1: Research Question Due by 5PM Monday January 31th on course web site

February 2: Research Question Workshop

In this class we will workshop all of the research questions submitted to the course web site. Each student will be responsible for reading and critiquing the research question/statements of three of their peers in the classroom. We will allot ten minutes to collectively discuss each person’s submission. In addition, you will be responsible for giving one copy of your written comments to your peers, and one copy to me.

February 9: Thinking Critically about Qualitative Methods

Reading: Goodwin and Horowitz “The Methodological Strengths and Dilemmas of Qualitative Sociology.” (available online); Katherine Newman “Qualitative Research on the Frontlines of Controversy” (available online); Michael Bloor “Techniques of Validation in Qualitative Research: A Critical Commentary” (online); Silbey “Designing Qualitative Research Projects” (online); Martyn Hammersley “What’s Wrong with Ethnography?” (online).

February 16: Observation: The Basic Building Block of the Ethnographic Method

Reading: Merriam, chapter 6; William Foote Whyte “On the Evolution of Street Corner Society” (online); Jay MacLeod “On the Making of Ain’t No Makin’ It” (online); Elliott Liebow “Tally’s Corner” (online); Hannerz “being

There..and there...and there: Reflections on Multi Site Ethnography” (online); Burawoy “Teaching Participant Observation” (online).

This class period will focus on a discussion of classic observation studies and the statements by the researchers about how they went about observation, and on some of the basic steps to take as an observer.

Assignment 2: “Ethnography Critique” due Monday February 19th by 5PM on course web site.

February 23: Qualitative Case Study Research, Comparative and documentary methods
Reading: Merriam, chapters 3 and 7; McLean TBA

Guest Speaker: Paul McLean

March 2: Observation Part II: the Craft of Taking fieldnotes

Reading: Emerson, Fretz and Shaw Chapters 1-4

Assignment 3: “Fieldnotes” due by Monday March 7th 5PM on course web site

March 9: Observation Part III: Making Sense of Observation Data

Reading: Emerson Fretz and Shaw, Chapters 5-6; Cortazzi “Narrative Analysis in Ethnography” (online)

Discussion in class of the fieldnotes submitted by peers, probing for themes in data and how to make sense of primary observations. You will be responsible for reading and commenting on three sets of your peers’ fieldnotes, and you will give one copy of your comments to your peers and one to me.

NO Class Week of March 16

March 23: Qualitative Interviewing Part I: Sampling and Questions

Reading: Merriam chapter 4; Weiss Chapters 1-3; Becker “Sampling”; Biernacki and Waldorf “Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling” (online); Watters and Biernacki “Targeted Sampling: Options for the Study of Hidden Populations” (online).

March 30: Qualitative Interviewing Part 2: The Interview

Reading: Merriam chapter 5; Weiss chapter 4-5; Sherman Heyl “Ehnographic Interviewing” (online); Spradley “The Ethnographic Interview” (on reserve);

Carr Interview Guides for “Young People and the Law” and the “Heartland Study” (online)

In class we will discuss and practice qualitative interviews. We will use different interview guides to highlight different types of questions and issues that can arise during the course of an in-depth interview.

April 6: Analyzing Interview Data

Reading: Merriam, chapter 8; Weiss Chapter 6; Miles and Huberman selections from “Qualitative Data Analysis” (online)

Assignment 4: “Transcribed and theme coded Qualitative Interview” due Monday April 11th by 5PM on course web site.

April 13: Writing Qualitative Research

Reading: Merriam, chapter 10; Weiss, chapter 7; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, chapter 7; Van Maanan (online); Becker “Concepts”; skim Becker *Writing for Social Scientists*.

April 20: Building Theory from Qualitative Research

Reading: Katz “Building theory from Qualitative Methodology: The Social System in Analytic Fieldwork” (online); Burawoy “the Extended Case Method” (online); Charmaz and Mitchell “Grounded Theory in Ethnography” (online); Stewart “Perspicacity as a Goal” (online).

April 27: Reflections on Qualitative Methods and Research Generally

Reading: Merriam, chapter 9; Lareau “Common Problems in Fieldwork: A Personal Essay” (online); Molotch “Going Out” (online).

Assignment 5: “Final Paper/Proposal” due Wednesday May 4nd by 5PM on course web site.