

**Qualitative Methods**  
Seminar in Sociology 920:615  
Spring 2013  
Monday 1:00-400  
Sociology Seminar Room, Davison Hall

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**Description**

As social scientists, we often define our scholarship by our methodological approach. It is never simply the N of our study that defines our method, neither does the method we choose necessarily fall into one methodological category. What do we mean when we employ qualitative methodology? Of what do qualitative methods consist, and how do we choose the proper method to answer our research questions? Where do qualitative methods fit within the discipline of sociology, and, in turn, how are they disciplined by the practice of sociology? This seminar will address these basic questions, and will attempt to grapple with both the “how-to” of qualitative methods, and to provide a site where we can analyze and provide productive critiques of scholarship that has been produced through the use of qualitative methodology.

Therefore, this is a course on epistemology as well as a “how to” for methodology, and we will explore the ways in which social science scholarship is mainly an attempt to answer pressing questions, guiding our approach to methodology. We should also recognize that the methods we choose can be products of our institutional setting, our geographical location and our historical moment; in effect, the methodology of the course will call on us to analyze the scholarship itself, while at the same time reading it carefully as scholarship that exemplifies various aspects of qualitative method. To this end, we will read texts that take up a number of methodological approaches, geographical sites and historical periods, as well as texts that look at social practices, localities, political formations and historical moments in relation to one another. You will also be asked to formulate a research question or puzzle and to then design a research proposal that engages one or more methods in order to answer your central research question.

**Requirements**

You will be expected to attend class, read carefully and participate actively in the weekly discussion. 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. A crucial part of the engagement grade is the effort you put into reading and commenting on the research questions and field notes of your peers (see assignments 1 and 3 below). All assignments are to be uploaded onto the course Sakai 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 others’ 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. The ethnography you choose could come from traditional monographs (e.g. *Flammable*), 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: Field Notes (15%)**

The third assignment is for you to hand in a set of completed field notes: 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 field notes 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 field notes. 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 her/his peers' field notes 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.

### **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 your 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 field notes 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.

### **Readings**

The following books are available at the Barnes and Noble Bookstore on Douglass Campus and on reserve at Douglass Library:

Javier Auyero, *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (Durham, 2003: Duke University Press). [HV4070.B84A99 2009]

Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardl, Celia Pearce, T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton, 2012: Princeton University Press). [GN345.E745 2012]

Robert R. Alford, *The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods and Evidence* (New York, 1998: Oxford University Press). [HM48.A5 1998]

Howard S. Becker, *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It* (Chicago, 1998: University of Chicago Press). [H91.B38 1998]

Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago, 1995: University of Chicago Press). [GN307.7.E44 1995]

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, 2008: Harvard University Press). [Q175.5.L3513 1993]

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, 2000: Oxford University Press). [H61.M5 1959a]

Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2010: Princeton University Press). [Not available in the library]

Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York, 1995: New Press). [HN29.W42 1994]

## Class Schedule

January 28: **Introduction: Thinking about Doing Research**  
Please come to class prepared to discuss your research interests and what you hope to achieve over the course of the semester.

February 4: **The Sociological Imagination and Developing Research Questions**  
C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

**Assignment 1: Research Question, Due by 5PM Friday, February 8<sup>th</sup> on Sakai.**

February 11: **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 18: **Choosing Methods**  
Alford, *The Craft of Inquiry*

**Assignment 2: Ethnography Critique, due Friday, February 22<sup>nd</sup> by 5PM on Sakai.**

February 25: **Learning from Strangers**  
Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers*

March 4: **Writing Fieldnotes**  
Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*

**Assignment 3: Fieldnotes, due by Friday, March 8<sup>th</sup> by 5PM on Sakai site.**

March 11: **Fieldnotes Workshop**  
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.

March 18: **Spring Break!!!! No class meeting.**

March 25: **Tricks of the Trade**  
Howard Becker, *Tricks of the Trade*

April 1: **Qualitative Interview Workshop**  
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. Come to class ready to take a life history of your peers, with questions and equipment for taking notes.

**Assignment 4: Transcribed and theme coded Qualitative Interview, due Friday, April 5<sup>th</sup> by 5PM on Sakai.**

April 8:           **Questions and Engagements**  
Javier Auyero and Debra Swistun, *Flammable*

April 15:          **Ethnographies and Archives**  
Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*

April 22:          **Other Worlds, Other Settings**  
Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*

April 29:          **Rethinking Locations, Rethinking Methods**  
Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

May 6:            **Presentations and Conclusions**

**Assignment 5: Final Paper/Proposal, due Wednesday May 8<sup>th</sup> by 5PM on Sakai.**