Introduction to Qualitative Social Research Methods

SO2310

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3 College Green, Dame Street (over Starbucks)
Office hours: Thursday 10am to 12noon or by appointment.

This course is designed to introduce you to the principles and methods of qualitative research. At the beginning of this course, we will examine the place of qualitative research in the field of sociology as well as the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methodology. Over the course of the semester, we will examine some of the main methods used by qualitative researchers in the social sciences such as participant observation, interviewing, discourse and conversational analysis. We will analyze the comparative strengths and weaknesses of each method. You will also have the opportunity to gain experience using one of two approaches in two hands-on assignments that are part of the assessment for this part of the course.

This course has several primary objectives. One goal is to familiarize you with the methodological and epistemological debates concerning qualitative research. The second is to give you a number of practical, applied tools during the course of the semester. The third objective is to give you an opportunity to practice and implement these tools. The fourth is to read and discuss work by qualitative researchers, especially focusing on the lessons they learned and the challenges they faced. The final goal is to help you understand how to move from project design, to project implementation, to data analysis and reporting.

Readings

The following textbook is used in the course and there are several copies in the library.

Also used extensively:

These and assigned readings are on Reserve in the Library. The following books are classics in qualitative research, are also in the library but are inexpensive and are worth buying if you are going to continue in Sociology.

They are all relatively easy to read and I recommend that you try to read as many whole books as possible, but particular chapters/sections/pages will be specified for each topic.
Lectures
There are two lectures per week: Thursdays at 12 noon (2039) and Fridays at 4.00pm (2037)

Tutorials
Each student will be allocated to a tutorial group which will meet every week throughout the term. Your Teaching Assistant is Valia Theofilopoulou.

Assessment
End of Year Examination (Introduction to Social Research Parts 2) 90%
Indepth interview 5%
Ethnographic observation 5%

The practical assignments are to be conducted in class time (but not in the classroom) at specified dates throughout the semester. The assignments will not be graded, but if they are not completed in the time frame specified, and handed in to the Teaching Assistant, the 5% will be forfeited. In the week after completion of each exercise, the assignment should be brought to the tutorial, where they will be discussed and then handed in to the TA. The object of the exercise is to get you some practical research experience which can be shared and discussed in a structured way.

Social Studies students: Instead of the summer exam, you will be do a take home exam which will be an essay of 2,500 words. The titles will be given out at the end of Week 9. It will be worth 90% of the mark for this module, equivalent to the summer examination.
COURSE CONTENT

WEEK 1
1. (Thurs 16 Jan) Introduction.
2. (Fri 17 Jan) What is Qualitative Research?
   *** Bryman. Social Research Methods, Chapter 1 and 2
   • How is qualitative research different from quantitative research?
   • What role do objectivity and subjectivity play in qualitative research?
   • What do reliability and validity mean in qualitative research?

WEEK 2
   *** Bryman, Social Research Methods Chapter 14
   *** William Whyte Street Corner Society Appendix A
   ** Emerson et al., Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes Chapters 2-4.
   ** Geertz “Thick Description” in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973)
   • Is it useful to distinguish between observation and participant observation?
   • Is there ever a point, ethically or otherwise, when an observer should become a participant observer?

WEEK 3
5. (Thurs 30 Jan) Preparation for Ethnographic Observation exercise
6. (Fri 31 Jan) Ethnographic Observation exercise.

WEEK 4
7. (Thurs 6 Feb) Ethics and Politics in social research
   *** Bryman, Social Research Methods Chapter 25
   * William Whyte, Street Corner Society, Appendix A, pp. 357-373.
   • Why are ethics an issue in qualitative research?

8. (Fri 7 Feb) Processing Fieldnotes.
   *** Whyte Street Corner Society. Part 1: Corner Boys and College Boys.
   Part III: Conclusion.
   • What are the steps you need to take to get from a mass of data to a completed ethnography?
   • What is the difference between a deductive and an inductive approach?
• What are the steps in building a theory?

WEEK 5

9. (Thurs 13 Feb) Life Histories
   *** Thompson, Paul. The Voice of the Past, Chapters 1, 5, 7 and 9.
• Why take a life history in an interview?

10. (Fri 14 Feb) Interviewing in Qualitative Research
    *** Silverman, Interpreting Qualitative Data, Ch.4 Interviews.
    *** Bryman, Social Research Methods Chapter 15 “Interviewing in Qualitative Research”
• What is the difference between an open-ended question and a closed survey question?

WEEK 6

11. Interviewing in Qualitative Research cont.
    ** Arlie Hochschild The Second Shift. Appendix “Research on Who Does the Housework and Childcare” and Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9.
    ** Rubin, Irene, and Herbert J. Rubin, Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data (Sage, 1995).
• What is the relationship between observation (or participant observation) and interviews?
• Is there a difference between researcher-provoked data and naturally occurring talk?
• What is the difference between working from a transcript versus the actual recording?

12. Exercise - Doing an Interview

WEEK 7 - Reading Week 24-28 Feb

WEEK 8

13. and 14. (Thurs 6 Mar and Fri 7 March) Feminist Scholarship
• According to Patricia Hill Collins, what is “outsider within” status and how might it be useful for social science?
• What is Black feminist thought and how is it related to research methods?

WEEK 9

15. and 16. (Thurs 13 March and Fri 14 March) Eresearch
   *** Boellstorff, Tom. Coming of Age in Second Life. Chapter 1 & 3

***Wesch, Michael. The Anthropology of YouTube documentary available on YouTube.

** WEEK 10 **

17. (Thurs 20 March) Conversation Analysis
*** Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*: Ch. 6 “Naturally Occurring Talk”
*** Garfinkel, Harold. Chapter One in *Studies in Ethnomethodology.*

18. (Fri 21 March) Qualitative Research of Elites
** Morrill, Calvin. *The Executive Way* Appendix

• What are the distinctive research challenges when studying elites?

** WEEK 11 **

19. (Thurs 27 March) Content Analysis
*** Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, Chapter One in *Reading National Geographic*

20. (Fri 28 March) Visual and Documentary
*** Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*: Ch. 5 Texts, Ch. 6 Naturally Occurring Talk, Ch. 7 Visual Images
*** Rose, Gillian: *Visual Methodologies*. Chapters 1, 4, 7 and 8.
** Documentaries: *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty)

** WEEK 12 **

21 & 22: Exam Preparation

** Assignments **

** Exercise 1: Participant-Observation/Observation **
Or if you prefer to start doing some observations and note taking…Find a site where you can observe some activity or interaction, and if you are unsure whether it is appropriate, let me or Valia know what it is, so we can be sure that you will see enough to work with. Take notes on as much of what is going on as you can. If it is a location or event where you need permission, or if you want to tape record an event e.g. a meeting, check with the appropriate authority in advance. Fill in your notes after the observation or meeting as best you can.
Exercise 2: Conducting an Interview
A chance to try your interviewing skills. For this assignment you need to do one interview. Formulate questions on the topic, be sure to listen to the answers, follow up with questions of more depth. Consider whether you want to or are able to record the interview. If so, should you also take notes at the same time?