17.878 Qualitative Research: Design and Methods

Professor Richard Locke          Fall 2007
E 52-589                        Tuesday
253-2610                        9:00 – 11:00
rlocke@mit.edu                  E51-061

Teaching Assistant:
Akshay Mangla                  E53-367
amangla@mit.edu

Course website:
http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/17/fa07/17.878/

Course Overview

This course is intended for graduate students planning to conduct qualitative research in a variety of different settings. The course aims to prepare students for research by:

1. making students aware of the ways in which choices of methodology are closely linked to broader theoretical and conceptual issues;

2. providing students with a critical understanding of the philosophical commitments and behavioral assumptions in social science research

3. enabling students to consider the appropriateness of different methodologies and types of evidence to test alternative hypotheses and to construct various arguments;

4. familiarizing students with a variety of research methods, including survey research, interviewing, participant observation, case studies, comparative analysis, and the use of documentary/primary sources;

5. showing students how to evaluate published studies in various social science fields, focusing on the logic of their argument, their methodologies, and the relationship between the evidence presented and their argument;

6. acquainting students with the types of materials, especially documents and surveys, available in the Boston area;

7. sensitizing students to the ethical issues in social science research; and

8. providing assistance in the design of a dissertation research project.

The primary goal of this course is to assist students in preparing their (Masters and Ph.D) dissertation proposals.
Readings

All the required readings for this class are available on the course website. In addition, the
following books are available on reserve at Dewey library, should students wish to consult
them further:

Company.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 195-228.)


Rowman and Littlefield

Press, pp. 49-76.

Press.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Assignments and Due Dates

In addition to regular class attendance,

1. Students are required to complete weekly assignments. These assignments are explained after each week’s readings. They are due at the beginning of the appropriate seminar session. They will not be accepted after the due date. Essays are to be brief - three or four pages. I am looking for analytically sharp, well-reasoned essays, with precisely defined concepts and testable hypotheses and which demonstrate a grasp of the relationship between methodology and theory. Students should be prepared to summarize their main points in class.

2. Students will present 15 minute oral presentations of their research proposals on November 20, December 4, 11. On the Monday prior to the oral presentations a one or two page summary of the research proposals should be distributed to all participants in this class. Students will also be expected to provide written comments (positive feedback) on the proposals of their peers.

3. A 15-20 page dissertation research proposal is due by December 11.

Schedule Overview

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September 11 Introduction and Course Rationale

- Course overview and rationale
- Why qualitative research?

**Required**

**Assignment**
Come to class prepared to discuss your own research interests. What are you interested in studying? Why? How? Where? What kinds of methods were you thinking of using?
September 18 Philosophy of Social Science

- Philosophical commitments of social science
- Positivist vs. (and?) interpretivist approaches
- Behavioral assumptions in social science research

**Required**


**Recommended**


**Assignment**

Write a brief memo about how one's assumptions about human behavior, and various social, economic and political processes, shape one's approach to research. What questions you ask, what kinds of data you collect, what "findings" you find interesting are all shaped by these assumptions. What are your own underlying assumptions? Where do you stand on the positivist vs. interpretivist divide? Why?
September 25  Causation, Explanation, and Mechanisms

- What is causal explanation?
- Can qualitative research establish causality?
- How can qualitative research reveal mechanisms?

Required


Petersen, R. (2001). Resistance and Rebellions: Lessons from Eastern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Ch. 1 (pp. 1-27) and Ch. 6]

Recommended


Assignment:
Write a short paper (3-4 pages will suffice) on any research article or book that you believe provides a convincing explanation: what questions did the author pose, what alternative explanations were considered, what method was employed, and why in your opinion do you think the proposed explanation is convincing?
October 2  Research Discovery and Design

- Discovering a research question
- Designing qualitative research
- Triangulation

Required
   [Ch. 1 and 2]


   [Ch. 1 and 4].

   [Ch. 1 and 4]

Recommended


Assignment
Write a brief memo describing your own research question. How did you “discover” this question? Describe the process. How do you propose to design a research project around this question?
October 16  Case Studies

- What is a case?
- Value of case study research.
- The problem of case selection
- Comparative case method

**Required**


**Recommended**


**Assignment:**

Choose a book or major article that employs a case study for testing a theory. (Do not choose the same book or article as used for the previous assignment.) How did the author decide what village, town, factory, or institution should be selected for the study? Do you think the criteria were appropriate? Is it a “crucial” case for the theory? Can any generalizations be drawn from the case? How does the author define and limit the unit for study? Might the choice of other units lead to different results? Answer these questions in the form of a brief three or four page paper.
October 23

Interviews and Documentary Evidence

- Interviews as social events
- Issues of language and power
- Using documentary evidence

**Required**


[Ch. 3].

**Examples and Recommended further Readings**


**Assignment**

Imagine that you want to answer the following research question: What determines success in academia? To carry this out, you decide it is worthwhile to collect the knowledge, opinions, and beliefs of current and aspiring academics. Your assignment is to develop a questionnaire and interview both a faculty member and a student in your department. Write a brief memo describing your interviews? How did you choose your interview subjects? How did you motivate them to provide you with the information you needed? How did you deal with stereotyped answers, evasiveness, lying? Please attach your questionnaire to the memo.
October 30 Participant Observation

- What is participant observation?
- Thick description?
- Under what conditions is this approach feasible?

**Required**
  [Ch. 1 and 2]

  [Ch. 1 “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.”]
  [Ch. 15. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.”]

  [Ch. 6.]

**Recommended**


**Ethnographies**


Assignment:
Attend a public meeting and write a brief report on what you observe. (Examples: a town council, League of Women voters meeting, a protest rally, etc.). Your task is to come up with observations and insights not ordinarily offered by journalists. You might, for example, devise a method for ascertaining the social composition of the audience; a measure of audience response to the speakers; tell us why people came to the meeting; give a content analysis of themes or metaphors presented by the speakers; tell us something about the symbols employed in the event; provide a kind of ethnographic description of the event (a la Geertz and the Balinesian cockfight); provide a “discourse analysis”; analyze the event as a “play,” a “fight,” a “religious” revival, or whatever else appears to be an appropriate metaphor. Use your imagination and ingenuity.
Required

Examples and Suggested Additional Readings


Assignment
Write a 3-4 page research proposal that could draw from existing survey data. You may want to compare attitudes in two or more countries, propose a study of changing attitudes within a single country, examine the relationship between social class, ethnicity, gender, or age to a particular set of attitudes. In your memo be precise as to the questions you propose to answer, hypotheses you wish to test, and the suitability of the data for your proposed study.
November 13 Doing Fieldwork

- Gaining Access
- Maintaining field notes
- Ethics of fieldwork

**Required**


**Recommended:**

**Assignment:**
Write a brief essay discussing the potential ethical issues raised by your proposed research project. What are the issues? How do you propose to resolve them?

**Faculty Panel:**
Suzanne Berger
Michael Piore
November 20  
December 4  
December 11  
Research Proposal Presentations

Required  

Assignment  
Prepare a 1 or 2 page single-spaced summary of your research proposal similar to the “Thesis Colloquium” abstracts circulated in the Department of Political Science. The summary should briefly indicate the research question, the hypotheses, the methods to be employed, and what the expected contribution of the research would be to the body of literature related to your topic.

A total of 30 minutes of class time will be devoted to each proposal. You must limit your presentation to 15 minutes, at which time the instructor will stop you. Fifteen additional minutes will be reserved for class discussion. It is therefore important that all students have read the proposed summaries and come to class prepared to offer constructive comments to their classmates.

Copies of your proposal should be placed in the mail boxes of all students in the class and handed to the instructor no later than the Friday preceding the Tuesday class at which you are scheduled to make your presentation.

Final papers are due no later than December 11.