Qualitative Field Research
PLSC 505/SOC508
Spring 2015
Fridays 1:30-3:20, RZK 202

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Office hours: Tuesdays 10am-12 pm.

Course Description:
In this graduate seminar, we will discuss and practice qualitative field research methods. The course will cover the basic techniques for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing ethnographic data with an emphasis on the core ethnographic techniques of participant observation and in-depth interviewing.

Topics include ethics in field research, choosing a research site, developing informants, keeping notes, evaluating reliability, addressing common obstacles in field research, and using qualitative data in social science scholarship. Participants will also read and assess contemporary scholarship that uses field research methods.

In addition to participating in the seminar, participants will carry out a field research project on a topic of his or her own choosing. The site must be accessible from New Haven. In consultation with the instructor, each participant will develop a research plan to collect data on his or her chosen topic using a variety of ethnographic methods. Participants are encouraged to choose non-Yale field sites. Participants interested in American politics may find it useful to explore some aspect of their dissertation topic for their project, while others will ideally choose a topic that is thematically related to their research interests. For example, a student who intends to study the environmental regulatory bureaucracy in Sweden could carry out research and interviews within the Hartford bureaucracy. A student interested in ethnic solidarity might focus on a local setting where ethnic identities are expressed. Projects may include archival research and/or quantitative data collection, but must include significant ethnographic research. Participants will be expected to spend 3-5 hours each week at their field site.

Seminar participants will also consider the merits of qualitative approaches more generally. Questions that we will discuss include: What place should qualitative research have in a research design? Can qualitative research test hypotheses, or only generate them? Can qualitative research explain social phenomena, or only interpret them? What are the disadvantages and advantages of qualitative approaches compared to quantitative approaches? For what kinds of research questions are ethnographic techniques best suited? Is replicability possible for ethnographic field research? What criteria of evidence and analytical rigor apply on this terrain?
**Course Pre-Requisites:** This course presumes a grasp of research design at the graduate level. Permission of the instructor is required.

**Email Etiquette:** The instructor aims to be responsive to student emails. Please do not expect to receive email response over the weekend, however.

**Requirements:**
Participants will carry out and write up a series of field assignments based on a project of their own design in the local area. The assignments are detailed below. Participants are also expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings and their experiences in the field. Attendance and participation is required. The course grade will be based on: class participation (20%); field assignments (40%); final paper (40%).

**Field Assignments:** All assignments should be submitted in electronic format using the “drop box” function on the Classes*v2 server by 9am on the day of class. The field assignments are designed to facilitate ongoing work in the field throughout the semester. Late assignments will not receive detailed comments and may be subject to penalty.

1. **IRB Training:** Complete by January 30.

2. **Initial fieldwork plan:** Due February 6. Short description of research to be conducted (max 1 page), including initial choice of field site, a clear statement of the descriptive or causal research question the project seeks to address, methods to be used, and initial hypotheses about what the researcher expects to find.

3. **IRB application:** Due February 6. If the project does not involve risk to human subjects or vulnerable populations, this will take the form a one-paragraph description of the project along with a form, which will be included in the course IRB request. If the project does involve risk or vulnerable populations, the student will need to work with the IRB separately.

4. **Cold calls.** Complete by February 20. Practice making initial contacts by making 3-7 calls regarding your topic of interest. Plan an introduction and several questions. If relevant to your project, ask if you may contact them again to schedule an interview.

5. **Participant Observation:** Completed by March 6. For a few hours, observe some scene related to your project, take notes.

6. **Interview Questions and Protocol:** Draft due March 6. Prepare questions for a structured or semi-structured interview. Include questions designed to follow up on particular responses. Also prepare a protocol for interviewing (self-presentation, request for consent, exit lines).

7. **Field Notes:** First set due April 3; updated notes due with final paper. Include a copy of all the notes you have taken, whether by hand or on computer: interview transcripts &
notes, field observations and reflections. These are not turned in as a final, edited paper, but for the professor to see your general process.

Keep detailed notes as you carry out your project, both during interviews as possible and afterward. Notes should clearly distinguish between observation, interpretation, analysis, self-criticism, and methodological and theoretical reflections. Practice recording interviews in different ways: conduct at least one informal interview (where you jot down notes during the interview or right after) and one formal, recorded interview.

**Final Paper:** Due Monday May 4th.
The paper **must** include page numbers, citations, and a bibliography, and use the *Chicago Manual of Style* author-date format.

There are 2 options:
1) Write a paper that summarizes and critiques the field research project (15-20 double-spaced pages. The paper should explain your research question, its relevance, your method, your findings, as well as the project’s limitations. The paper should include an explicit self-critique where you reflect on problems encountered during the project; changes you would make if you were to repeat the experience. as well as a conclusion that discusses how one could go about answering questions that the project raises.

2) Write an article draft using your field research and other material. Include all elements of a social science article. In addition, write a brief self critique of your field research.

**Books Available at the Yale Bookstore (all other readings are linked to the syllabus, or in the resources folder, or course reserves on the classesv2 website)**


Course Outline

Week 1 (January 23) Introduction

Required Readings:

Read student project papers by Dawn Henning, Christopher Price, and Alicia Steinmetz under Resources/reading wk 1 on the classesv2 server.

Guests: Dawn Henning, Christopher Price, Alicia Steimetz,

Assignment: Go to http://www.yale.edu/training/, select Human Subjects Research, click the “Courses” button under Human Subjects, and go through the Human Subject Protection Training, a Yale web-based training program.

Week 2 (January 30) Ethics and Field Research

Required Readings:
Info for Yale students at: http://www.yale.edu/hsc/Investigator/Student_projects.pdf


Guests: Brandy Dionne and Carrie McDaniel, Yale Human Subjects Committee

Recommended:


Week 3 (February 6) Research in New Haven

Required Readings:

Student paper: Carolyn Hoyle, plus Anonymous Student self-critique in resources

Guest: Tariq Thachil (read his paper).

DUE: Initial fieldwork plan; IRB application.

Recommended:

Week 4 (February 13) Getting into the Field

Required Readings:


**Guest:** Rebecca Nielsen (read her paper)

**Assignment:** Making Cold Calls

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**Week 5 (February 20) Participant Observation**

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended:**


**In class:** Report back on cold calls.

**Assignment:** Observe for a few hours some scene related to your project, take notes.
Week 6 (February 27)   Field Notes, Interviews, & Coding

Required Readings:

  “Interviewing: Unstructured and Semistructured,”
  “Structured Interviewing I: Questionnaires”
  “Structured Interviewing II: Cultural Domain Analysis,”
Also skim Chapters 16, 17 and 18


Recommended:


2010. Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience, ed. James Davies, Dimitrina Spencer, especially chapters 5 and 7 in part II, “Political emotions in the field.”

Assignment: Draft interview protocol and questions.
Week 7 (March 6) Interviewing and Oral History

Required Readings:


Recommended:


DUE: notes of participant observation exercise. Come prepared to discuss your project status and bring draft of interview protocol and questions.

Assignment: Begin interviews
Week 8 (March 27**) Challenges in the field
**Note: we will need to reschedule our meeting time

Required Readings:

John Lofland, David Snow, Leon Anderson and Lyn Lofland. 2006. Chapter 4 from *Analyzing Social Settings*.


Lawrence, Adria. 2014. “Repression and Activism among the Arab Spring’s First Movers.” Working paper, Yale University.


Recommended:

Williams, Christine L. and Heikes, E. Joel. “The Importance of Researcher’s Gender in the In-Depth Interview: Evidence from Two Case Studies of Male Nurses.” *Gender & Society* 7:2 (June 1993), 280-91.


Week 9 (April 3)  
**Project Presentations**

**DUE:** First set of field notes (project notes to date).

Week 10 (April 10)  
**Project Presentations**

Week 11 (April 17)  
**Contributions of Qualitative Research I**

**Required Readings:**

Dunning, Thad. Forthcoming. “Natural and Field Experiments: The Role of Qualitative Methods” In *Qualitative Methods*.


**Recommended:**
Goertz, Gary and James Mahoney. 2006. “A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research.” *Political Analysis* 14: 227-49.


Week 12 (April 24)  
**Contributions of Qualitative Research II**

**Required Readings:**
Mahoney, James. 2010. “After KKV. The New Methodology of Qualitative Research.” *World Politics* 62, 1: 120–47


Dunning, Process Tracing. TBD.

**Recommended:**

Waldner, David. 2010. “What are Mechanisms and What are They Good For?” Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall), pp. 30-34.


Mahoney, James. 2007. “Qualitative Methodology and Comparative Politics.” *Comparative Political Studies* 40: 122-44.

*Final Paper Due May 4th*