Advanced Qualitative Research: Methodology and Epistemological Foundations for Planning and Geography

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Office hours: Tuesdays 3-5 by appointment
Class meeting: Tuesday 1-3pm, Room 5016G

Course description
This course arises out of the interest of doctoral students in the Department of Geography and Planning seeking to acquire rigorous qualitative research skills that support their research interests, assist in developing their dissertation proposals, and contribute to preparation for a career as educators and scholars in academia and beyond.

The course aims to develop a deep understanding of a range of qualitative research methods and their epistemological foundations, with an emphasis on ethnographic approaches. Readings and discussions will be oriented to probing the epistemology and ontology of knowledge in support of the formulation of robust research design. Readings reflect an understanding that doctoral planning and geography students commonly conduct ethnographic research in transnational and multicultural settings, which requires an ability to read and interpret complex meanings, as well as attend to the politics of knowledge production.

A fundamental premise of the course is that good research is rooted in clear and explicit articulation of the relation among theory, design and method. Thus the course addresses basic qualitative research methods (such as interviews and discourse analysis) and approaches to analysis (including the use of qualitative analysis software) in relation to an overarching concern with research design and epistemological foundations. Debates surrounding the production of ethnographic data will also be emphasized, including those concerning researcher positionality, reflexivity, ethics and writing.

The course is organized as a seminar with a heavy emphasis on collective analysis of course materials; several (ungraded) in-class exercises are designed to put research methods to work in practice for our collective review.
Marking schemes and due dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking scheme</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seminar participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>In class weekly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading reflection and seminar presentation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outline of dissertation proposal OR Ethnography review</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Week 5 (5 February)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposal or review draft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Week 11 (21 March)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer comments on partner draft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Week 12 (28 March)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final assignment</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Week 13 (2 April)</td>
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Seminar participation (20%)
Classes will be conducted as seminars. The success of the seminar will depend to a great extent on everyone’s participation. The weight of the course grade assigned to participation reflects the importance of meaningful discussion and mutual learning to the objectives of the course. You should come to class each week prepared to discuss the readings, ask questions, reference materials outside the class, or draw our attention to key quotes or sections from the readings. You must read the assigned readings before class each week—as well as the short reading reflection posted by the student who will make the seminar presentation for the week. Effective participation requires good listening and respectful engagement with others, not just contributing your views to a discussion. Students of course come to the class with different experience and backgrounds, as well as levels of comfort speaking in seminar discussions. Evaluation of your participation will be based on the significance of your contributions, your practice of engaging with peers and your role in creating a supportive and productive intellectual community.

Reading reflection and seminar presentation (20%)
Each student will choose one week in which to present reflections and questions about the readings. By noon on Monday prior to class, you should post a reflective essay (approx. 500 words) about the readings as well as 2-3 critical questions you wish to pose to the class. A reading reflection is not a summary of the readings. Rather, it critiques the texts, identifying their strengths and limits, connections and contradictions, their epistemological underpinnings, and/or their uses. In class you will make a presentation, approximately 20 mins, in which you provide some contextual background for the readings, assess the reading/s in terms of argument/methodology/style, identify key themes and threads that connect the readings, and pose probing questions that will facilitate discussion. Please plan to consult with me during the week prior to your presentation (plan to schedule the appointment during the previous class). Finally, you must lead a class discussion on the basis of the questions in your reflective essay or others that arise from your presentation.

Your assessment will encompass the presentation, reading reflection, and discussion facilitation.

Two options for major course writing: Note that the major course writing entails a choice between 2 options listed below, and 4 elements in the writing process: an outline, a draft,
comments on draft of another student’s submission, and revision of your own writing in response to comments.

[a] Dissertation proposal (outline (10%) + peer review (10%) + proposal (40%)): This option is for those who wish to use the course as an opportunity to develop their dissertation proposal.

- **Dissertation proposal outline (10%)**: For this assignment you will prepare an outline of your dissertation proposal encompassing an introduction to your topic and its importance to planning/geography, your research question(s), a brief description of your proposed methods, an outline of the proposal’s structure and organization, and a short annotated bibliography. 1000 words. Bring 2 hard copies to class.
- **Complete draft of dissertation proposal**: The completed draft will not be marked. Instead, it, along with the proposal outline, will be reviewed by one of your peers.
- **Peer review of dissertation proposal draft (10%)**: For this assignment, you will review and comment on the dissertation proposal draft of one of your peers. Further instructions on peer review will be discussed in class, and resources will be made available on Blackboard.
- **Dissertation proposal (40%)**: The final dissertation proposal should be 5,000-6,500 words in length; it should be a fully-referenced proposal that engages with course material and recent scholarly literature relevant to your research topic. It should include an introduction to your topic and its importance to planning/geography, your research objectives and question(s), the context of your research topic, a brief literature review including what your research adds to this scholarship, an in-depth discussion and justification of your methodology, and a realistic timeline. For more information on the content of a good proposal, and how to write one, refer to Michael Watts (2001). The proposal should conform to humanities or social science citation and formatting conventions as explained in the *Chicago Manual of Style* or *Turabian’s Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. You will have an opportunity to present and discuss your proposal with a peer and the instructor in week 11.
  

[b] Ethnography review essay (outline (10%) + peer review (10%) + essay (40%)): This option is for those who wish to explore a particular planning/geography theme by reading ethnography, and to gain experience writing a formal review essay geared to publication.

- **Ethnography review outline (10%)**: For this assignment you will prepare an outline of your ethnography review, encompassing titles of three ethnographies on related topics/themes, the key question or argument animating your review, an outline of the review’s structure and organization, and a short annotated bibliography which includes
the sources you will draw on in your review of the three ethnographies. 1000 words. Bring 2 hard copies to class.

- **Complete draft of ethnography review:** The completed draft will not be marked. Instead, it, along with the outline, will be reviewed by one of your peers.
- **Peer review of ethnography review draft (10%):** For this assignment, you will review and comment on the ethnography review draft of one of your peers. Further instructions on peer review will be discussed in class, and resources will be made available on Blackboard.
- **Ethnography review (40%):** Choose three ethnographic monographs that can be related by their topics or genre of representation. Write a critical review of the selected material, 3,500-4,000 words in length. Your review should address methodological and epistemological issues raised in the course—for example, the nature of the ethnographic encounter throughout the fieldwork process, and how this is represented. What indication is given about how field research was done? About how fieldwork was transformed into textual material? How do the author(s) transform their observations and other material into analytical claims? Which theories do they employ to substantiate their assertions? Your paper should be a fully-referenced review that engages with course material and recent scholarly literature relevant to your topic. Refer to Loïc Wacquant (2002) as a model for conducting and writing an ethnography review. The review should conform to humanities or social science citation and formatting conventions as explained in the *Chicago Manual of Style* or *Turabian's Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. You will have an opportunity to present and discuss your review with your peers and instructor in week 11.


**Course schedule**

Week 1: Introduction

--- **Foundations ---**

Week 2: Research design
Week 3: Epistemology
Week 4: Ethics, positionality, reflexivity

--- **Instruments & methods ---**

Week 5: Qualitative methods and Ethnography in Planning and Geography
Week 6: Ethnographic methods I: Fieldwork – Interviews and participant observations
Week 7: Ethnographic methods II: Text-based – Discourse analysis and archival research
Week 8: Field notes (Writing the world, writing culture)

--- **From data to analysis and writing ---**

Week 9: Data management, analysis, and interpretation I
Week 10: Data management, analysis Interpretation II: Coding and other “analytic devices”
Week 11: Writing and disseminating
Week 1: Introduction (8 January)

--- Foundations ---

Week 2: Research design (15 January)

*Objective: To understand the art of research design as a dynamic articulation among research problem, theory, questions, methods, and evidence*


Recommended

Week 3: Epistemology (22 January)

*Objectives: To explore paradigms of knowledge production in relation to their methodological implications*


Choose one:
Recommended


Week 4: Ethics, positionality, reflexivity (29 January)

Objectives: To understand these three words; to discuss challenges of entering, being in, and leaving the field.


Recommended

--- Instruments & methods ---

**Week 5: Qualitative methods and Ethnography in Planning and Geography (5 February)**

Objective: To learn contexts, debates and examples of using ethnographic approaches in planning/geography research projects and/or in urban settings.


Notes:

*Note passages from the ethnography that you find particularly effective or provocative, as well as those that reveal issues related to writing fieldnotes and transforming them into text. We will select 1-2 short passages as a class to discuss in Week 8.*

Proposal/review outlines due

*Exchange proposal outlines with partner for commenting*

*Workshopping 1: Discussing proposal outlines (30 minute extended class?)*

Recommended:

**Week 6: Ethnographic methods I: Fieldwork – Interviews and participant observation (12 February)**

Objectives: To learn about interviews and participant observation; to understand the strategic utility and pitfalls of using them in planning/geography research projects.

- IOD documentation

Notes:

Peer comments on outlines due

Exercise on interviewing

**Recommended**


**Week 7: Reading week, no class (19 February)**

**Week 8: Ethnographic methods II: Text-based – Discourse analysis and archival research (26 February)**

Objectives: To learn about discourse analysis and archival research; to understand the strategic utility and pitfalls of using them as part of ethnographic approaches in planning/geography research projects. Two articles and selections from two ethnographies.

Chapters 5-6.


Note passages from the ethnography that you find particularly effective or provocative, as well as those that reveal issues related to writing fieldnotes/notes on the archive and transforming them into text. We will select 1-2 short passages as a class to discuss in Week 8.

Recommended

- Small, M. L. (2009). How many cases do I need?' On science and the logic of case selection in field

Week 9: Field notes: Writing the world, writing culture (5 March)

Objectives: To learn how we organize fields notes in relation to theoretical frameworks and overall research design


- We will also discuss the passages from ethnographies selected in week 5 and week 7, which should be re-read for week 8.

Recommended

    http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ThesesonHistory.html
Exercise on writing fieldnotes

Week 10: Proposal/Ethnography Review draft preparation (March 12)
This week class time will be used to work in pairs or small groups on the development of research proposals or ethnography reviews.

--- From data to analysis and writing ---

Week 11: Data management, analysis, and interpretation I (19 March)
Objectives: To explore how to connect data, research questions and theory through analytical tools; to examine how we prepare for our return to the university after fieldwork, or how to begin writing up the research.

- IOD interview protocol and guidelines; directions docs on data management, reflective summaries.

Draft proposals/ethnography reviews due
Exchange proposal/review draft with partner for commenting

Recommended

Week 12: Data management, analysis Interpretation II: Coding and other “analytic devices” (26 March)
Objectives: To explore how to connect data, research questions and theory through analytical tools; to examine how we use coding and other analytic devices to explore our research questions

**IOD codes**

Notes:

*Exercise on coding*

*Peer review comments due*

*Workshopping 2: discussing draft proposals/ethnography review*

*Note that an alternative scenario would be to drop readings in week 13 and devote that week to reading all proposals/ethnography reviews for a final 2-hour workshop in which each is discussed in turn.*

**Recommended**

- Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge (2006) “Using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to develop a grounded theory project” *Field Methods* 18(3): 245-266.

**Week 13: Writing and disseminating (2 April)**

*Objectives: To learn strategies and processes of writing up from data and analysis; to explore the ethics of representation*


*Final proposals/ethnography reviews due*

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**FURTHER RESOURCES:**

- Craft of research
Mills, Assessment ON: Oxford University Press.

- How To Do Your Dissertation in Geography and Related Disciplines By Senior Lecturer Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department of Postgraduate Medical Education Tony Parsons, Tony Parsons, Peter G Knight

**WHAT IS “ETHNOGRAPHY”?**

**Body as Object and instrument of knowledge The use of experience in ethnography**

**Different approaches to doing fieldwork (from Rutgers Univ)**
Narrative tradition (”classical” Anthropology)

**Urban ethnography (Chicago School)**
Disasters

Events
- Roth, Wendy and Jal D. Mehta. 2002. “The Rashomon Effect: Combining Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches of Contested Events.” Sociological Methods and Research 31: 131-173. [NOTE: This doesn’t quite address events from an ethnographic approach, but may offer some interesting insights]

Institutional and Organizational ethnographies

Historical ethnography

Virtual ethnography


**Theory and Ethnography**

