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

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Course description
This course supports students in attaining rigorous qualitative research skills that will complement their research interests, assist in developing dissertation/thesis proposals, and contribute to preparing 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>Task</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seminar participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>In class weekly</td>
</tr>
<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 (4 February)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposal or review draft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Week 10 (10 March)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer comments on partner draft</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Week 12 (24 March)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final assignment</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Week 13 (29 March)</td>
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Seminar participation (20%)

Classes will be conducted as seminars. The success of the seminar will depend 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/experiences 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 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 7: Reading Week
Week 8: Ethnographic methods II: Text-based – Discourse analysis and archival research
Week 9: Field notes (Writing the world, writing culture)

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

Week 10: Preparation of proposal drafts
Week 11: Data management, analysis, and interpretation
Week 12: Participatory research methods
Week 13: Writing and disseminating – workshopping final papers

**Week 1: Introduction (7 January)**

--- Foundations ---

**Week 2: Research design (14 January)**
*Objective: To understand the art of research design as a dynamic articulation among research problem, theory, questions, method, and evidence*


Recommended

**Week 3: Epistemology (21 January)**
*Objectives: To explore paradigms of knowledge production in relation to their methodological implications*


Choose one:
Week 4: Ethics, positionality, reflexivity (28 January)
Objectives: To understand these three words; to discuss challenges of entering, being in, and leaving the field.


Recommended
- Proudfoot, J. (2015). Anxiety and phantasy in the field: The position of the unconscious
in ethnographic research. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 33(6), 1135-1152.


--- Instruments & methods ---

**Week 5: Qualitative methods and Ethnography in Planning and Geography (4 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 9.

**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 (11 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 (18 February)**

**Week 8: Ethnographic methods II: Text-based – Discourse analysis and archival research (25 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.


Notes: Note passages from the Caro piece 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 9.

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 (3 March)**

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

- IOD guidelines on writing fieldnotes
• We will also discuss the passages from ethnographies selected in week 5 and week 7, which should be re-read for week 9.

Recommended
    http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ThesesonHistory.html

Note:
Exercise on writing fieldnotes

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

**Week 10: Data management, analysis, and interpretation I (10 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.

Choose 4 out of 5:

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

Note:
Draft proposals/ethnography reviews due
Exchange proposal/review draft with partner for commenting
Exercise on coding
Recommended


**Week 11: Proposal/Ethnography Review draft preparation (17 March)**

This week class time will be used to work in pairs or small groups on the development of research proposals or ethnography reviews.

**Week 12: Participatory Research Methodologies (24 March)**

*Objectives: To learn participatory methodologies, and the strategic utility and pitfalls of using them in planning/geography research projects*


*Note:*

*Peer review comments due*

*Workshopping 2: discussing draft proposals/ethnography review*

Recommended


**Week 13: Writing and disseminating (31 March)**

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

**Note:**
Final proposals/ethnography reviews due two days before class, March 29; each proposal will be read by half the class and discussed by turn in the final class meeting.

An alternative plan (if final student work will not be ready in time) is that recommended readings could also be read in lieu of research proposals, for a discussion on transition back to university after research and writing up research.

Recommended

- The selected passages from Miraftab.

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**FURTHER RESOURCES:**

- Craft of research
- 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
Routledge.


**What is “ethnography”?**


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


**Different approaches to doing fieldwork**

**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

