

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY 382:
QUALITATIVE INQUIRY WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS
WINTER 2013, TERM 1

Instructor: Dawn Currie
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:30-2PM
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By appointment

Teaching Assistant: TBA

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course is an introduction to qualitative research with human subjects. Taught from a feminist perspective, we will explore the development of an empirically rigorous research agenda. Although linking this agenda to epistemological debates and issues informed by a social constructionist approach, the bulk of the course is dedicated to developing the practical skills necessary to carry out empirical research. Given the limitations of the venue for this course, I will introduce observational research and focus group discussions, but will focus on interviewing as the method of data generation most widely used by qualitative researchers working with various methodologies.

The lecture component is organized around the tasks and related decisions that researchers face at each stage of a systematic research programme: the identification of a topic and formulation of research questions; consideration of ethical issues of research with human subjects; data generation through observation and how to keep good field notes; data generation through interviews and focus group discussions; management and analysis of qualitative data (with a focus on interview data); and writing up qualitative research. Students will have the opportunity to explore these topics through participatory class exercises and graded assignments. The pedagogical goal is to enable students to design and implement an independent research programme; student participation and assessment reflect this goal.

Students who are not prepared to engage with classmates in a student-centered environment or to carry out independent research activities are advised to look for a different course.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

As noted above, while including lectures, the emphasis of this course is development of your skills as a qualitative researcher. This course is designed to enhance your capacity to:

- identify research questions that are suitable for qualitative researching;
- carry out ethically sound research with human subjects, particularly on topics that are sensitive and emotionally-laden;
- generate observational data;
- conduct open-ended interviews and facilitate focus group discussions;
- organize and analyze interview transcripts;
- design a qualitative study;
- assess published qualitative research.

In order to meet these objectives, this course employs student-centered, curiosity-based learning that develops the capacity for independent critical thinking but also equips learners to work collaboratively. It is the responsibility of the instructor to help students reach these goals by maintaining high standards of academic performance and helping students develop their research skills.

It is the responsibility of students to complete assigned work (including weekly readings) according to the course schedule, and to conduct themselves in a manner that is respectful of others and conducive to learning as a process that requires continual interrogation, of both received knowledge and our own understandings. This course is designed on the principle of students as active learners rather than recipients of knowledge; students are responsible for maintaining a suitable learning environment for this course.

REQUIRED READING:

The **required** textbook is available at UBC Bookstore:

Warren, Carol A. B. and Tracy Xavia Karner (2010) *Discovering Qualitative Methods: Field Research, Interviews, and Analysis*. Second Edition. New York: Oxford University Press

For further reading I also **recommend**:

Ritchie, Jane and Jane Lewis (2003) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. SAGE Publications

Mason, Jennifer (2002) *Qualitative Researching. Second Edition*. London: SAGE Publications

Kirsch, Gesa E. (1999) *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication*. State University of New York Press

Van Den Hoonaard, Deborah (2012) *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer*. Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford

The recommended books have been placed on Reserve in Koerner Library.

COURSE POLICIES:

Attendance

Following UBC regulations, regular attendance is expected of students. Students who neglect their academic work and assignments may be excluded from final examinations. Students who are unavoidably absent because of illness or disability should report to their instructor on return to classes.

The University accommodates students with disabilities who have registered with the Disability Resource Centre. The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled assignments. Please let Dawn know in advance, preferably during the first two weeks of class, if you will require any accommodation on these grounds. Absence for varsity athletics, family obligations, or other similar commitments will not be accommodated as a matter of course; students should discuss these commitments with Dawn before the date that allows students to drop courses without penalty. Students missing classes are not entitled to personal 'tutorials' to catch up on missed lectures.

Late Assignments

When exceptional circumstances will prevent you from completing an assignment on time, you may request an extension; where possible and appropriate an extension will be permitted. In the absence of an approved extension, a 1% reduction of grade will be assigned for each day an assignment is late beyond the required due date.

Academic Dishonesty

Review the UBC Calendar "Academic Regulations" for the university policy on cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty. All forms of academic dishonesty are serious and can result in a failing grade.

Students should retain a copy of all submitted assignments (in case of loss) and should also retain all their marked assignments in case they wish to apply for a Review of Assigned Standing. Students have the right to view their marked final assignment (a Research Proposal) with their Instructor or Teaching Assistant, providing they apply to do so within a month of receiving their final grades. This review is for pedagogic purposes. Final examinations (or their equivalent) remain the property of UBC.

COURSE TOPICS AND READING SCHEDULE:

In order to accommodate Orientation on September 3rd, our first class meeting will be held on Thursday September 5th. It is important that we move through the course material at a pace that encourages student participation and maximizes learning; the dates indicated below may be adjusted.

September 5: Introduction to Course

September 10 and 12: What is qualitative research? Why is qualitative research important in sociology?

Reading: Chapter One, 'Introduction to Qualitative Methods' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*

September 17: How do I ensure that my research is ethical?

Reading: Chapter Two, 'The Law, Politics, and Ethics of Qualitative Research' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*

September 19: What Constitutes 'Data'? The Social Construction of Knowledge

September 24 and 26: Watching People: How is observation 'data'?

Reading: Chapter Five, 'Writing Fieldnotes' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*
See Assignment One below.

October 1: What makes a good research topic? How do I focus my study?

October 3: What is Already Known? Online Searches

While the Internet is a valuable research tool, today the challenge is dealing with 'excess' of information. On October 3rd Sheryl Adam, Reference Librarian for Humanities and the Social Sciences, will coach us in the art of conducting a focused, yet comprehensive, library search on research topics. Bring a laptop if possible.

October 8: How do I get ready for my fieldwork?

Reading: Chapters 3 and 4, 'Field Research' and 'Roles and Relationships in Field Research' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*

October 10, 15 and 17: Interviewing: How is talk 'data'?

Reading: Chapters 6 and 7, 'The Interview' Parts 1 and 2 in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*
See Assignment Two below.

October 22 and 24: Focus Group Discussions: How are group discussions 'data'?

October 29: Coding Transcripts: What did my participants say?

Reading: Chapter 9, 'Analyzing Qualitative Data' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*
See Assignment Three below.

October 31: No class meeting – use this time to code your transcript

November 5 and 7: How do I organize all my data? Constructing a Data Matrix

November 12 and 14: Discourse Analysis: How did my participants construct meaning?

November 19: What kind of story can I tell with my data?

Reading: Chapter 10, 'Writing Well' in *Discovering Qualitative Methods*
See Assignment Three below.

November 21: How do I write a research proposal? Putting It All Together

See Assignment Four below.

November 26: How can I assess the quality of qualitative research?

November 28: Wrap-Up

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

Your final grade is based on four required assignments that provide an opportunity to demonstrate competence in the learning objectives outlined above. These assignments are 'paced' so that you complete about one every month. Because you are all 'novice' researchers, the bulk of your grade for each assignment will be based on your reflections and self-assessment as evidence of what you have learned from the exercise. In learning how to research, it is expected that you will make 'mistakes' – the issue is what you have learned from your 'mistake'. In this light, your reflections should include a discussion of what you might do differently 'next time'. I also want to see that you have incorporated lecture material and readings into your work.

Assignment One – Observational Field Notes: Your first assignment is completion of observational field notes. You will spend two 30-minute visits to your research site. The first visit is to gain an overall sense of what is going on and what is most significant. You should sketch a map of your research site on this visit. Your second visit will entail focused observations (discussed in lectures). Following your field visits, you should inscribe your jotted notes into detailed field notes. You will hand

in: your map, two pages of your field notes, and a 1 – 2 page discussion of what was most challenging, what went well and why, what did not and what you might do differently next time (total about 5 pages). Your paper is **due October 1st. It is worth 15% of your final grade.**

Assignment Two - Interview Assignment: Interviewing is the most commonly used method of data generation by qualitative researchers. Your second assignment is completion of a audio-recorded interview. This assignment will give you the opportunity to hone your interviewing skills, and to generate a transcript for data analysis exercises. Techniques of interviewing will be discussed in lectures and class time will be provided for the development of an Interview Guide and Consent Forms. The topic of your interview will be assigned. Guidelines for this exercise will be discussed during class and a detailed handout will be available. As for the previous assignment, emphasis will be given to your reflections and self-assessment. Taking into consideration the amount of time and effort needed for this assignment, it is worth **30% of your final grade. It is due November 5th.**

Assignment Three - Data Analysis: This assignment requires you to prepare a data matrix from your individual interview. You will be graded on your data matrix and a short paper (3-5 pages, 12 pitch double spaced) that tells a story from your data. One purpose of this story is to retain the presence of your participant through incorporation of interview excerpts. You will also hand in a 1 to 2-page discussion of what was most challenging and what problems you can now identify in your interview. This assignment is worth **15% of your final grade. It is due on the last day of class.**

Assignment Four – Research Proposal: In lieu of a final examination, your last assignment is a research proposal, **due December Friday 13th.** Students who are planning to apply for a Masters Programme or the Honours Programme are thus given the opportunity for feedback on a ‘first version’ of a research proposal for their graduate school application because we will return detailed comment sheets. I will discuss the preparation of research proposals in class, and a handout with instructions will be available. This assignment counts for **40% of your final grade.**

Grading:

Students in this course are not graded on a ‘curve’. Your assignments are assessed according to demonstration of both *comprehension* (understanding) of key concepts and principles and *competence* in the skills promoted by the course (that is, an ability to apply these concepts and principles as research practice). We endeavor to give you the kind of feedback that will enhance your ability to carry out independent research as a sociologist.

THE END