Methods of Observing Human Behavior: SESP 225-372
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University
Course Syllabus – Fall 2007

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This qualitative methods course is designed to develop the skills the School of Education and Social Policy students will need: 1) to identify topics suited to qualitative investigation; 2) to formulate qualitative research questions; 3) to determine the method(s) of investigation (field observation and interview data) most likely to obtain meaningful findings; 4) to gather, organize, and evaluate qualitative data including the writing and analysis of field notes and interview transcripts; 5) to organize, synthesize, and clearly present the findings of their research. Completion of this course with a grade of C- or better is required for SESP majors before they may begin their practicum. Learning these skills prepares students to write a final paper on their practicum experienced based on data collected from interviews, field observations, and other materials.

**COURSE RATIONALE:** At some point in their careers, most SESP graduates will be called upon to carry out applied research, to design needs assessments for new services, to conduct focus groups, to evaluate existing programs, to write grant proposals to obtain funding for new programs and to make policy or program recommendations. Students who master the concepts and skills taught in this qualitative methods course will be well prepared to perform these tasks.

**COURSE TEXT:**

**COURSE READINGS:**
Available on Blackboard and NUCAT. It is your responsibility to download and read the articles for the day they are assigned in class.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:** By the end of this course, students will demonstrate competencies in three domains: content, skills, and values:

- In the domain of **Content** students will:
  1. Describe the distinctions between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms of gathering data and explain what types of research questions are best addressed by each; define triangulation, explain why it is valuable and when it should be used;
  2. describe the respective advantages and pitfalls of different "scientific" methods of gathering qualitative data including: in-depth interviewing, life stories, naturalistic observation, participant observation, and fieldwork with groups of individuals, agencies and institutions;
3. know how to determine which method or methods would be most appropriate for a particular research undertaking such as an evaluation or policy study, a case study, an ethnography, a descriptive/phenomenological study, or action-oriented research;
4. enumerate and explain the significance of the special challenges of doing qualitative research; for example, gaining entry to a site, identifying key informants, the relationship between the researcher and the people being studied, knowing when enough is enough, leaving the field, etc.

- In the domain of **Skills** students will:
  1. develop and write open-ended qualitative questions about their topic or question;
  2. Construct an interview guide for the topic of interest;
  3. develop and use an ethics protocol for the interviews;
  4. demonstrate command of basic interviewing technique by conducting, recording, transcribing and summarizing two or more qualitative interviews;
  5. demonstrate the basic techniques involved in field observations by conducting at least two observations, writing jottings and then full field notes, and submitting them in written form for comment and review;
  6. Participate as a small group research team member by organizing, coding, and analyzing the data gathered in the complete set (group) of interviews and field observations;
  7. generate a final written research report in academic style including a formal literature review, an executive summary and policy recommendations;
  8. make a formal oral presentation to the class of their group’s findings.

- In the domain of **Values** students will
  1. develop a level of self-awareness of his/her epistemological stance, including an explanation of why self-awareness is essential for qualitative research;
  2. examine personal attitudes about the research topic and write a brief paper identifying those biases and how you plan to minimize the impact of those bias on your research;
  3. give written and oral explanations of why even the most rigorous qualitative research cannot be totally “objective”;
  4. explain why well-designed, carefully conducted research, uncontaminated data, sound analyses of data, and unbiased conclusions that result in published findings can be critically important and to whom;
  5. participate in class discussions on the ethical issues involved in qualitative research including an explanation of the negative effects of research that is less than conscientious can have on participants in that research and those that rely upon its findings;
  6. develop an appreciation of well-crafted qualitative research by reading and critiquing one ethnography and several shorter examples.

**CLASS ORGANIZATION:** Rather than requiring each student to design his/her own research project, gather data, analyze it, and present the findings in a 10-week term, small groups (4-6 members) chose a topic of common interest. This organization fosters peer interaction and gives the student the experience of participating, discussing, and developing a more complex and deeper understanding of the process of gathering, coding, analyzing and presenting qualitative data.
CLASS PROJECT: The Many Worlds of Northwestern University: You must pick a “world” on campus that you are totally unfamiliar with. The issues of objectivity vs. subjectivity and outsider vs. insider are involved and you should feel like an outsider and uncomfortable. At a minimum, you will conduct and record two individual qualitative interviews using open-ended questions developed and pilot tested by your group members in advance, and two individual field observations, “hanging out” and observing students and staff as they go about their daily/work lives on campus and writing two individual sets of comprehensive ethnographic field notes. In addition you may use with permission digital photographs, camcorders or other media. At the end of this systematic and qualitative data gathering experience, your group will be expected to analyze and code your combined data sets. Finally, your group will write a paper summarizing your findings, including making recommendations for change and improvement and prepare an oral presentation for your classmates delivered during the final exam period.

Possible “Worlds” at Northwestern (Note: This list is not comprehensive so you can suggest something of interest to you during the first week of class). I want you to stretch yourself into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation.

- The World of Music - performance, composition, jazz, pedagogy
- The World of Theater and Performance, Dance
- The World of “Techies”
- The World of Student Government
- The World of People with Mobility/Physical Challenges
- The World of Young Republican / Democrats / other
- The World of Intercollegiate Athletes: Men or Woman, certain sports
- The World of Ethnicity: South or East Asian, African-American, Hispanic…
- The World of Religion on Campus: Muslim, Evangelical, Catholic, Jewish, Islam
- The World of the Daily Northwestern
- The World of Graduate Students: Specify discipline, MBAs, Learning Science
- The World of Greeks (you cannot be Greek): Men or Women
- The World of Substance Abuse on Campus
- The World of University Support Staff including: Maintenance, Landscaping, Safety, Food Service, Library services, the Undergraduate Admissions Office, Security

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:
Note: More than 60% of your points will be earned individually for attendance, informed participation, and for work with your name only. These include the paper on self-awareness, the book review, and at a minimum two interviews and two field observations. The remainder of the points is assigned based on participation in the group activities, the final group report, and oral presentation. Readings are to be completed on the day they are listed. Assignments are due in hard copy by 5PM on date assigned and must be placed in Pratim’s mailbox located on the 2nd floor of Annenberg in the lounge across from the elevator Do not skip class to finish a paper!! If “life happens” that is unusual conflicts or stresses (personal issues such as health or family emergencies) please notify me by e-mail. The worst thing you can do is just “disappear” with no explanation!

The self as the research instrument: the need for self-awareness

Assignment #1: It has been observed that, “Where you sit is where you stand.” In other words, how you perceive the social world depends to a great extent on your gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, religious background, and geographic locale (rural, suburban, urban). In addition, factors specific to your personal history, e.g., family of origin, health, and accidental happenings have shaped your view of the world. In brief, you need to reflect
on your stance/bias as a qualitative learner/investigator before beginning to embark on any research. How does/might your personal background affect what you see and hear. *A simple narrative biography will not suffice.*

| Due: 2-3 pages | Oct. 2nd | 15 individual points |

**Special Opportunities and Extra Credit: Mark your calendars!**

**Movie Reviews.** At 7:00PM Friday night October 12th, the “Lives of Others” will be shown in the 3rd Floor Learning Studio 345 South. **Friday November 9th at 7:00PM** “Kitchen Stories” will be shown. After each showing a discussion led by Pratim Sengupta and Prof. Gaetjens reflecting on lesson to be learned for novice ethnographers will be held. Write a review that centers on what lessons, good and bad, you learned about qualitative data collection and its effect(s) on the data collector. *1-2 pages each. 5 individual points apiece. Must be submitted before Thanksgiving holiday for grading.*

**Literature Reviews**

**Assignment #2:** Submit a summary of two or more relevant research (academic) articles that you found through a systematic search of the literature. Identify the question, the methodology including the sample, and the key findings. Group members must read all the summaries. Be precise about reference: the title, date, author, etc. One paragraph to no more than one page for each review.

| Due: 2 pages | October 11th | 20 individual points |

**Developing a research action plan: questions, sites, sampling, and informants.**

**Assignment #3** As a small group, and after reading the articles in the literature, specify the exact question(s) you want to explore. Narrow your list of questions to a main or central question with two or three sub-questions. Identify and list all the preconceived thoughts, biases, positive and negative assumptions and impressions you have about the topic/group you will be exploring at the onset. Make this list as specific and as explicit as you can. **Write a draft** of the interview guide and pilot test it. Draft and turn in an ethics protocol designed for your project. Decide on how and where you are going to find people to interview and sites or activities to do field observations. Design a research plan with a **timetable** using a spread sheet or chart with dates of scheduled interviews and field observations with the name of each person(s) responsible for collecting data. Number interviews and field observations **consecutively** at this point. Use the Interview # and Interviewer’s last name and page # in the right-justified header on each page. Orderly habits at the beginning pay big dividends as work continues. Designate the person(s) who will be responsible for synthesizing the literature review in the final paper as well as the person in charge of keeping track of all the materials.

| Due: 5 pages | October 23rd | 30 group points |

**Data Collection: 2 Interviews**

**Assignment #4** Conduct and summarize two interviews based on the interview guide your group developed. You must use a recording device of your preference. Tapes, microphones on iPods, digital recorders are all acceptable. You will have to listen to the interview at least two times and type up as much verbatim as you can.

**Written summary:** Open the written summary of the interview with a paragraph that captures the setting in which the interview took place, how you located the person, a brief sentence or
two describing the appearance and demeanor of the interviewee, and the tone and quality of the interpersonal interaction(s). At the end of the interview, write a paragraph reflecting on how you felt the interview went in general and what you would do differently next time. The simplest format for writing the content of the interview is THE QUESTION YOU ASKED IN CAPITOL LETTERS and the Response in regular size letters. You may gather all the verbal data that is relevant to the question throughout the interview and place it under the question by cutting and pasting. But do not discard material (edit out) at this stage of the research.  *Note: You must receive written feedback from either the TA or the instructor before proceeding to the second interview. So plan on getting the first interview completed early.* If you are not satisfied with the quality of the interview data, please feel free to do an additional interview. Extra points may be awarded if additional *quality* interviews are conducted and written up. Talk to the instructor or TA before proceeding.

**Due: November 13 15 individual points for each (30 total)**

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**Data Collection: 2 Field Observations**

**Assignment #5**  Conduct and summarize two field observations based on the questions your group developed. If you are not satisfied with the quality of the data, please feel free to do another observation. At times it is appropriate for more than one group member to observe the same event, especially if there are a lot of people involved.  *Note: You must receive written feedback from either the TA or the instructor before proceeding to the second field observation. So plan on getting the field observation completed earlier.* Extra points may be awarded if additional *quality* field observations are conducted and written up. Talk to the professor first.

**Due: November 27 15 individual points for each (30 total)**

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**Data Analysis: Reading and Coding as a group activity**

**Assignment #6**  All group members must speed-read each other’s interviews and field observations. Then hold a group discussion to reach a consensus on what themes or patterns emerged inductively from the data you gathered. At this juncture something may have emerged that is different or more interesting than some of your initial questions. This is the time to consider incorporating these findings. Develop a coding scheme and a coding key using color markers or other symbols. Reread and code all the data (each member of the group should code at least two field observations and two interviews other than their own). Next explore the tentative relationships between themes and patterns using Venn diagrams and arrows, creating subsets or subsuming several patterns under a broader heading. Have the instructor or TA look over the entire data set with the coding and the coding key feedback before handing it in for grading.

**Due: December 4 20 group points**

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**Writing up the findings in academic style as a group**

**Assignment #7**  Write a group paper in *academic style* addressing all the points raised in the outline for the paper provided in class. **Due: December 10 35 group points**

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**Oral presentations to classmates**

**Assignment #8**  During the final exam period assigned by the university for this course, make a 10-15 minute oral summary of research and a one-page handout outlining the key findings and recommendations for your classmates. **Due: December 10th 15 group points**

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Observing Human Behavior SESP 372
Gaetjens Fall 2007
**Attendance and class participation**

**Assignment #9**  Class attendance and *informed* participation (this means you have read the assigned materials. For the groups to work well in class it is necessary for everyone to attend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible Individual points</th>
<th>120 (55% of grade)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible Group points</td>
<td>100 (45% of grade)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extra credit (10)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Possible points</strong></td>
<td><strong>220</strong></td>
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**Formatting:**  For all papers: Learn to use the automatic header function. *Last name, initial, page number and assignment must be in upper right hand corner on every page.* Assignments without the proper heading WILL NOT be accepted for grading! Later your group may want to use the header or footer as well with the automatic date function to keep track of the data as it piles up. This is an extremely important habit to develop when handling multiple papers, revisions, and data collections. Label everything in a consistent manner from the beginning to the end of the project.

**Tentative Class Schedule**

**Week 1**  Sept. 25  *What is Qualitative Research?*

Qualitative Research as a Scientific Enterprise

Collins, Sharon. “Affirmative Action and Me.” Blackboard Course Documents (1)

Becker, H. “What is a Crock?” Blackboard Course Documents (2)

**Sept. 27**  *Activities:*  Thinking about specific topics and forming groups

Deciding what questions each group would like to investigate.

Becker, H. Marijuana Users. Blackboard (3)

Weider. Convict Code Blackboard (6)

**Week 2**  Oct. 2  *Examples of Qualitative Research continued. Paper due.*

Geertz, C. “Local Knowledge’ Blackboard (4)

Venkatesh, Sudhir. (2002). ‘Doin’ the hustle’ Blackboard (7)

**Oct. 4**  *Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Paradigms*

Emerson et. al., pp. vii-16. The Preface


**The Importance of Self-Awareness for Qualitative Research**


**Week 3**  Oct. 9  *Searching for Literature (Demonstration)*

Oct. 11  *Reporting on articles (each person on a team is responsible for summarizing two articles in writing)*

**The Ethical Researcher**

*Look on the Northwestern University website:* Institutional Review Board.

[www.research.northwestern.edu/research/oprs/irb/templates/](http://www.research.northwestern.edu/research/oprs/irb/templates/). Read the parts
that apply to social science research including: Ethical principles, Consent form templates including oral consent, informed consent, confidentiality, procedures for applying to the IRB to conduct research.

Week 4  Oct. 16  Developing Open-ended Qualitative Interview Questions
Lecture and demonstration

Oct. 18  Interviewing: Techniques, Challenges and Pitfalls.
In class exercises on interviewing technique.

The Design of Qualitative Research Proposals/Plans
Draft of group’s plan for conducting research: Possible sites, informants, potential interviews, and other sources of data.

The Issue of Sampling in Qualitative Research
Read Anton Kuzel’s “Sampling in Qualitative Inquiry” Blackboard (9)

Week 5  Entering the Field: Strategies, Challenges and Pitfalls

Field Observations: Observations and Inferences Part I
Class exercise on observation and inference: Observing and spatial distance.  View segment of *Stand and Deliver* twice with and without a question.

Geertz  “Thick Description: Blackboard (10)

Emerson et al, pp. 4-8 (3 examples of observing checkout line in supermarket and Chapter 2 : In the field: Participating, observing and jotting notes pp. 17-38.

Oct. 23  The Research Plan for each group is due.
Oct. 25  Transcribing and Summarizing Interviews

Week 6  Oct. 30  Field Observations and Inferences Part II
Pallavi Banerjee (PhD. Sociology Student at UIC in Race, Ethnicity and Gender) and Pratim Sengupta  “Lessons from the Field: Understanding in Equality.

Nov. 1  Writing up Field Notes:
Emerson et al., Chapter 3, Writing up Fieldnotes: From Field to Desk.(pp.39-65).

Week 7  Nov. 6  Kathy Charmaz on “Grounded Theory.” Blackboard (11)

Nov. 8  Continuing Completing Interviews and Field Observations
Emerson et al., Chapter 4, Writing up Fieldnotes Part 2, pp. 66-107.

Week 8  Nov. 13  Processing Fieldnotes
Nov. 15  Drawing Conclusions
Emerson et al., Chapter 8, pp. 211-216.  Conclusion

Week 9  Nov. 20  Group Work Sessions Meeting Coding Data
Triangulation of Data,
Concept Saturation
Nov. 22  Thanksgiving Day  NO CLASS

Nov. 27  Group Work Sessions Meeting Analyzing Data

Week 10  Nov. 29  Group Work Session Writing Final Paper.  Research groups 
will meet in class and instructor and teaching assistant will be available for 
consultation.

Dec. 4  Coding completed

Dec. 6  Final Paper Consultations

Week 11  Dec. 10  Final Presentations.  Attendance is mandatory.  No 
exceptions.  The time assigned by the university is 12 PM to 2 PM on 
Monday December 10th, 2007. One-page executive summaries of each 
group project must be made and handed out to every member of the class 

Students in this course are expected to comply with the policies found in the booklet,
“Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide”.  All papers submitted for 
credit in this course must be sent to Blackboard as well as delivered in hard copy.  Your 
written work may be electronically tested for plagiarized content.  For details regarding 
academic integrity at Northwestern, visit: http://www.northwestern.educ/uacc/.  If you need a 
copy of the booklet visit the SESP Student Affairs Office on the 1st floor of Annenberg Hall.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: In compliance with Section 504 of 
the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, Northwestern 
University is committed to providing equal access to all programming. Students with 
disabilities seeking accommodations are encouraged to contact the office of Services 
for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at 467-5530 or ssd@northwestern.edu.  SSD is 
located in the basement of Scott Hall.  SSD also has an excellent website viewable at:
http://www.stuaff.northwestern.edu/ssd/