Methods of Observing Human Behavior: SESP 225-372
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University
Course Syllabus – Fall 2005

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Class meets Mondays and Wednesdays 9:30 – 10:50 AM in G02
Office hours: by appointment (before and after class)
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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 for 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 TEXTS:

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 field work 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;

  2. demonstrate an acceptable level of competence in field observation by writing and submitting field notes based on the observations;

  3. prepare and present orally and in writing an analysis of the information gained through field observation as recorded in the field notes;

  4. develop and use an ethics protocol statement for an interview;

  5. construct an interview guide for the topic of interest;

  6. demonstrate command of basic interviewing technique by conducting, recording, and transcribing two or more qualitative interviews;

  7. demonstrate the basic techniques involved in field observations by conducting at least two observation, writing jottings and then field notes,

  8. prepare and submit a rudimentary written analysis of qualitative data obtained from verbatim interview transcripts and the field observations;

  9. participate as a small group research team member by organizing, coding, and analyzing data, generating a final written research report in academic style including an executive summary and policy recommendations;

  10. make a formal oral presentation to the class.

- In the domain of **Values** students will

  1. explain why well-designed, carefully conducted research, uncontaminated data, sound analyses of data, and unbiased conclusions that results in published findings can be critically important and to whom;

  2. give written and oral explanations of why even the most rigorous qualitative research cannot be totally “objective”;

  3. 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;

4. demonstrate a level of self-awareness of his/her epistemological stance, including an explanation of why self-awareness is essential for qualitative research in the field in which you have particular interest;

5. examine personal attitudes about the topic being researched and write a brief paper identifying those biases and how you plan to prevent your views from contaminating the observations, interviews and findings;

6. develop an appreciation of well-crafted qualitative research by reading and critiquing one ethnography and several shorter examples.

School of Education and Social Policy Academic Integrity Statement, March 2004. 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.edu/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/

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, a class project is assigned that is of general interest. This assignment allows for easy access and quick organization. Students are organized into groups of 4 to 6 and focus on one aspect of the larger project. This organization fosters interaction and gives the student the experience of participating, discussing, and developing a more complex and deeper understanding of the process of gathering, coding, and analyzing data as well as a deeper appreciation of the systematic work that is required in qualitative research.

CLASS PROJECT: The president of a prestigious mid-western residential university, in reviewing the university’s current publications for recruiting potential applicants, finds that the materials adequately catalog and present the range of clubs, activities, and recreational opportunities available to undergraduates, but that they fail to capture and convey the richness, vibrancy, significance, importance, and quality of student life as it is experienced. Believing that the quality of student life outside the class room is as important to potential applicants as the quality of the academics (the faculty, library, laboratories and other resources), she would
like to see these recruitment materials rewritten to better reflect the reality of campus life. She
decides to ask an undergraduate qualitative methods class to investigate various aspects of
campus life and to report their findings.

The Many Worlds of Northwestern University Evanston Campus
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. You will work on the topic in small groups of 4-6 students. At a
minimum you will do field observations and write comprehensive field notes, hanging out and
observing students and staff as they go about their daily/work lives on campus, and conduct and
record several qualitative interviews using open-ended questions developed and pilot tested by
your group members in advance. In addition you may use with permission digital photographs,
camcorders or other media. At the end of this systematic and qualitative data gathering
experience you will be expected to write a paper summarizing your findings, including making
recommendations for improvement and an oral presentation for your classmates.

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). For each world you need to
generate a list of questions that you want to answer or at least address, as well as a list of your
bias, impressions, stereotypes, etc. before you start the research. 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 Intercollegiate Athletes: Men or Woman, certain sports
- The World of Ethnicity: South or East Asian, African-American, Hispanic…
- The World of Religion on Campus: Evangelical, Catholic, Jewish, Islam…
- The World of Greeks (you cannot be Greek): Men or Women
- The World of Substance Abuse on Campus
- The World of Sexual Activity
- The World of Eating Disorders on Campus
- The World of University Support Staff:
  - Maintenance
  - Landscaping
  - Safety
  - Food Service
  - Library services
  - The Undergraduate Admissions Office
  - The Development Office on Ridge
  - Others

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:
Note: In assigning points, slightly more than half of your points will be earned individually for
attendance and for work you turn in with your name only. These include the paper on self-
awareness, the book review, and at a minimum two lengthy interviews and two field
observations pertaining to your topic. 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. All written assignments should be submitted to
BlackBoard on the date they are due. In addition, hard copy of papers must be handed to the teacher on the day they are due. Skipping class to finish a paper will cost points on the grade. If you have scheduling conflicts, 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. So please keep in touch.

**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 your background affect what you see and hear?  
**Due: September 28  
2 pages 15 individual points**

**Assignment 2** As a small group, write all the preconceived thoughts, biases, positive and negative assumptions and impressions you have about the topic you will be exploring. Make this list as specific and as explicit as you can.  
**Due: October 5  
2 pages 10 group points**

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

**Assignment 3** As a small group write out the exact questions you want to answer by interviewing and observation. At this juncture, more is better; you can always edit the list later. Think about tentative relationships within the groups of interest as well as their relationship with the larger campus and its groups. Decide on how you are going to find people to interview and sites to visit. If possible, create a sampling frame. Make a plan so that you gather as much data as you can.  
**Due: October 10  
2 pages 15 group points**

**An example of qualitative research: Book review**

**Assignment 4** Using the criteria for a “good read” handed out in class, read and evaluate Elliot Liebow’s ethnography *Tell Them Who I Am*.  
**Due: November 4  
2-3 pages 20 individual points (Get started on this early).**

**Data Collection: Interviews**

**Assignment 5** Conduct and summarize two interviews based on the questions your group developed. If you are not satisfied with the quality of the data, please feel free to do an additional interview or two. Open the summary with a paragraph that captures the setting in which the interview took place, the tone and quality of the interpersonal interaction(s). At the end of the interview, write a paragraph reflecting on how the interview went in general, how you felt about it and what you would do differently next time.  
**Due: October 24  
10 individual points for each interview. Extra points if additional quality interviews are conducted and written up. Talk to the professor first.**

**Data Collection: Field Observations**
### Assignment 6
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.

**Due: November 21**  
10 individual points for each field observation.

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

**Assignment 7**  
All group members must read each other’s interviews and field observations and notes. You must perform data analysis by developing a coding scheme and then reread all the data coding for themes and patterns that emerge inductively. Develop a color with markers or a symbol key with the word/themes they stand for. Next code all the data. Then explore tentative relationships between themes and patterns. Hand the whole pile of data with the coding and the coding key for the professor’s feedback.

**Due: November 30**  
20 group points

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

**Assignment 8**  
Write a group paper in academic style addressing all the points raised in the outline for the paper provided in class.  
**Due: December 5**  
35 group points

### Oral presentations to classmates

**Assignment 9**  
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 5**  
15 group points

### Getting your Body to Class

**Assignment 10**  
Class attendance and informed participation. For the groups to work well in class it is necessary for everyone to attend.  
30 individual points

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<td>95</td>
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<td>Total Possible points</td>
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**Note:** For all papers: Learn to use the automatic header function. Last name, first name, page number and assignment must be in upper right hand corner. Assignments without the proper heading will not be accepted for grading. Ask the professor or the TA at the beginning of the course if you need help with this. Later your group may want to use the footer as well 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 of the project.

### The Course Outline in Brief:

**Part I**  
The nature and purpose of qualitative research
The qualitative and quantitative paradigm
The importance of self-awareness in doing qualitative research
Examples of qualitative research
“Objectivity” and “subjectivity” in social science research

Part II
The art of writing open-ended questions and interview protocols
The art and craft of interviewing
The design of qualitative research proposals

Part III
The craft of making and recording field observations
Separating description and inference

Part IV
Organizing and analyzing data inductively
Presenting the findings orally and in written form.

Week 1  September 21  What is Qualitative Research? A brief review
Qualitative Research as a Scientific Enterprise
Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Paradigm

Activities:  Thinking about specific topics and forming groups
Deciding what questions each group would like to investigate

Week 2  September 26  Examples of Qualitative Research
Rossman and Rallis: Chapter 1: Qualitative Research as Learning, pp1-29.
Emerson et. al., pp. vii-16.

September 28  The Importance of Self-Awareness for Qualitative Research
Is there such a thing as truly “objective” research?  Class discussion
Rossman and Rallis: Chapter 2: The Researcher as Learner, pp. 31-58.
Emerson, et al., pp.108-141.

Class Brainstorming: The initial phase of planning the research project. Issues of
sampling, importance of multiple perspectives, and multiple sources of data.

Week 3  October 3  The Ethical Researcher
Rossman and Rallis: Chapter 3 The Researcher as Competent and
Ethical, pp. 63-87.

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

Ethnography.  Vol. 22, No. 3.  Pages 267-294.  (Handout)
October 5  The Design of Qualitative Research Proposals
The Issue of Sampling in Qualitative Research
Read: Rossman and Rallis, Chapter 5, Planning the Research, pp. 111-143.
Draft of group’s plan for conducting research: Possible sites, informants, potential interviews, and other sources of data.

Week 4

October 10  Entering the Field: Challenges and Pitfalls

October 12  Interviewing: Techniques, Challenges and Pitfalls.
The Craft of Developing Open-ended Qualitative Interview Questions
Read: Rossman and Rallis Chapter 7, Gathering Data in the Field, pp.169-194.

Week 5

October 17  Transcribing and Summarizing Interviews
Rossman and Rallis Chapter 9 Issues that Arise in the Field  pp. 247-266.

October 19  Concept of Triangulation of Data, Concept of Saturation
Class time will be used and to assess how we are doing and what is going wrong (something always does).

Week 6

October 24  Field Observations

October 26  Writing up Field Notes
Emerson et al., Chapter 3, Writing up Fieldnotes: From Field to Desk. (pp. 39-65).

Week 7

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

November 4  Critique

Week 8

November 7  Sharing the Data, Coding and Analyzing
Activity: Small group meetings to share all interviews and field observations. Begin to develop a procedure for coding and analyzing the data. At this point, two observations and two interviews for each group member should be completed, written up and available for every member to read. Think about how
you want to organize your time, putting different people on different questions, material, etc.


**November 9 Drawing Conclusions**

**Week 9**

**November 14 Group Work Sessions Meeting**
Rossman and Rallis, Chapter 10, Analyzing and Interpretation Data, pp. 267-289.

**November 16 Drawing Conclusions**
Emerson et al., Chapter 8, pp. 211-216

**Week 10**

**November 21 Group Work Sessions**

**November 23 Optional Class before Thanksgiving Break.** Make an appointment to meet individually or in small groups with the instructor for feedback and questions about the class and the assignments.

**Week 11**

**November 28** Class meets in small groups to continue work on final paper and oral presentations.

**November 30** Class meets in small groups to continue work on final paper and oral presentations.

**December 5 Final Presentations. Attendance is mandatory. No exceptions. The time assigned by the university is 9:00 AM to 11 AM, not 9:30 AM.** One-page summaries of each group project must be made and handed out to every member of the class. Juice and bagels will be served.