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EVST 555.01: Research Methods for Social Change

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EVST 555: RESEARCH METHODS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Fall Semester 2005
Liberal Arts Room 307

INSTRUCTOR:

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Office Hours: Tues. 3:45-5:30; Wed. 2:30-4:10, or by appt. if necessary

PURPOSE OF THE COURSE:

In recent decades, there has been a methodological revolution in the social sciences, reflecting an increased interest in interpretive, qualitative approaches to research and theory. Qualitative research includes a complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions. This course is designed to introduce you to this exciting topic, which has become a field of inquiry in its own right. Perhaps most importantly, you will have an opportunity to engage in a field research project of your own during the semester and to try out the methods we will be covering in the course.

We will explore the role of qualitative methods in social science research and in social change efforts outside of the academy. We will study several major approaches to data collection and analysis that fall under the broad umbrella of qualitative research. For the most part, we will look at qualitative inquiry from the perspective of doing research that analyzes and/or facilitates social change. Emphasis will be placed on qualitative research as a process of better understanding human experience in a complex world in order to (1) inform a theoretical argument and/or (2) take action based on that understanding. The course will also raise important issues regarding the practice of science, the relationship of knowledge to democracy, the ethics of research, and the potential for community and professional researchers to collaborate.

Objectives:

1. To introduce you to the epistemological foundations of qualitative research and some approaches to qualitative inquiry.
2. To develop your understanding of how qualitative research can help to build theory and/or generate knowledge that will result in concrete changes in people's lives and socio-ecological situations.
3. To learn about the development of appropriate research design and the stages of qualitative research – from crafting research questions to writing up findings.
4. To develop your understanding of data collection techniques, with an emphasis on participant observation, interviewing, and community-based action research.
5. To review ways of recording, managing, and analyzing qualitative data.
6. To encourage you to think about your own perspective on research ethics and practice.

REQUIREMENTS:

1. Reading. A schedule of the readings for this course is attached. A required text and faculty packet are available in the university bookstore. The required text is (please be sure you use the same edition):

Berg, Bruce L. 2004. *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

In addition, there will be a small packet of materials (required) based on some of my research, which will be available in the bookstore soon.

2. Class Participation. Regular attendance and participation are crucial. You are expected to do all of the assigned reading and come prepared to discuss it in class. As you read, please make notes of topics

and/or questions you would like to bring up during our discussion. Have a conversation with what you read – talk back to it – and be prepared to share your thoughts with your colleagues. I will do what I can to help keep our discussions “on track,” but this is also the responsibility of everyone in the group.

3. Research Project. Research is most effectively learned through hands-on experience. Thus, over the course of the semester, you will carry out a qualitative research project utilizing one or more of the following methods: participant observation (see last page of syllabus for more information on this technique), individual interviews, focus group interviews, review of documents/material artifacts, and/or some other qualitative data collection technique that you feel would be useful and interesting to try out. Ideally, a research project utilizes more than one method for purposes of triangulation, as we will discuss.

A major objective of the research project will be to link your fieldwork to a small sample of relevant literature (i.e., five or more scholarly works) in order to extend existing theory and/or to make recommendations for action. I strongly encourage you to pick a topic that is relevant to some literature you are already familiar with or that you are studying in another course this semester. This will make your task much easier.

This course gives you an opportunity to learn and try methods out in a supportive atmosphere. It is designed so that we will be reading about and discussing various steps as you go through the process yourself. These steps are described below, as are detailed evaluation criteria. See page 303, Figure 12.1 in Berg for a useful schematic describing the elements of a research report.

Note on participatory action research projects: Community-based or participatory action research may be of interest to you, and we will learn about it in this course. This approach is more difficult to negotiate during a semester unless it is part of a larger project you are pursuing, such as your thesis or dissertation. Many of the research activities are similar to other methods of inquiry; however, it is typically the stakeholders in a community, school, workplace, or organization who define the problem to be studied, often participate in data collection and analysis, and decide what action is to be taken as a result of the research findings. Often “trained researchers” are not involved.

Proposal. In a two to three page proposal, due Thurs., Sept. 22, describe the research question you are interested in studying and the methods you plan to use to gather data. Your specific research problem will develop as you proceed. Your project might involve questions about social movements and activism; about power and inequality; about difference among genders, classes, racial/ethnic groups; about education; about attitudes toward a particular issue or situation; or whatever interests you.

Let your curiosity and knowledge of literature guide you in your topic choice, but here are a few things to keep in mind. First, while you are encouraged to pick a topic that is related to a literature you are familiar with, I discourage you from picking one that you are too close to (e.g., it’s very hard to interview friends or family). Second, students from previous courses have recommended in their evaluations that I stress the need to ask a fairly simple research question because of the time constraints of a semester. I agree, but would also add that narrowing your research topic is important for all projects (and it is often difficult!), whether bounded by a semester time frame or not. Hopefully, one of the things you will learn from this course is how to get a sense of a project’s scope. Lastly, feel free to choose a topic related to your own thesis/dissertation projects, but please let me know if that is the case.

In the proposal, push yourself to get as specific as you can, to begin to review the literature (include a preliminary bibliography), and to describe how you will gather data (e.g., number of interviews you will conduct, how you will select sample, what field site you will study). The more specific you are, the more helpful I can be. The more you jump start your project at the beginning, the more satisfied you will be with your work in the end. Please keep in mind the ethical considerations discussed below. If you are planning on using participant observation (which I encourage you to do!), your prospectus should identify

the “field site” you intend to study, and you should try to have gained permission to “enter the field.” See comments on the last page of the syllabus on getting started with participant observation.

Research Ethics: We will learn about the ethics of research. Each of you will do the online course on human subjects (more information will be given in class). I will review your research proposals for ethical considerations. You must get permission from the appropriate person to do research in a field site, to conduct interviews, etc. You will not be able to do covert research in this course. Unless there are unique circumstances, you probably will not be able to study vulnerable populations, as defined by the Institutional Review Board (i.e., infants and minors, prisoners, physically and developmentally disadvantaged, military members, and mentally ill persons).

Please note: if you do work that turns into your thesis or dissertation, you must get your research plan approved by the Institutional Review Board. In other words, my approval of your plan for purposes of this course is not sufficient to cover your future work.

Draft interview guides: Think about the principles of interviewing we have been learning, and develop an interview guide you intend to use as part of your research project. It is due on Thurs., Oct. 6. Be prepared to distribute copies to the instructor and to each of your teammates for comment. If you are not conducting interviews as part of your research, please see me to make an alternative arrangement.

Preliminary Literature Review and Data Samples: A preliminary literature review is due Thurs., Oct. 22 to all of your teammates and to the instructor. In this short paper (~ 5-7 pages), begin to refine your research topic and examine how others have already thought about and researched the topic. Discuss the existing literature (five or more scholarly works) and use it to help you describe and frame your research question more specifically than you did in the initial proposal. The literature review should also provide a rationale for the study; in other words, explain what other scholars or practitioners have contributed to the topic and how you expect your work to extend or add to that previous work. You will likely incorporate this preliminary literature review into your final paper in some form.

Data Samples: On Oct. 27, you will distribute a sample of your data to your teammates and to the instructor. These might be excerpts from your interviews (e.g., where research participants each discuss a similar topic) or perhaps they will be excerpts from your field notes that you suspect illustrate a particular concept or theme in your observations. Do not provide entire transcripts or extensive field notes. Five pages should be sufficient. Be selective and focus on particular concepts or themes you are developing in your analysis. Leave wide margins so that we can comment on your data. Again, you will give your teammates feedback on what they share.

Preliminary Analysis: Near the end of the term – on Tues., Nov. 17 – you will share a preliminary analysis of your data (around 5-7 pages). In essence, this will be a draft discussion of the central argument you will make in your final paper. Use the data you have collected to back up the argument. Share what you feel would be most useful to get feedback on. Feel free to pose problems that you want the instructor and your teammates to help you with. Do not repeat the literature review section of your paper here, but you might want to begin to link your central argument to the literature (e.g., how does your work relate to what others have shown previously?).

Final Product and Appendix: Your research will be reported in a 20 to 25-page paper due by Mon. Dec. 12 at the start of our final exam period, during which we will also hold the last session of final oral presentations. The final paper will also include: (1) an abstract of no more than 250 words, to be included at the front of the paper; and (2) a brief appendix (3-5 pages). In the appendix, reflect on your research experience: What are your take home lessons? Where did you stretch yourself? What were your successes? What research issues arose for you that relate to material we covered in the course? Please note: it is not necessary to put your final papers into report covers or folders (in fact, it is kind of a pain). A binder clip is sufficient.

4. Team discussions on fieldwork: In addition to discussing the common readings, we will spend some time in class discussing and working on your projects. You will be assigned to a team of your colleagues whom you will work with during the semester. You will be depending on feedback from other students, and they from you. Hence, your active participation is crucial. In the past, students have found this teamwork very rewarding and useful. Please feel free to work together outside of class and beyond the basic requirements of the course.

Distributing your fieldwork and presenting: At several points during the semester, you will share your emerging work with the other students in your team and with me. The specific format for sharing your literature review, a small selection of your data (2-4 pages), and your preliminary analyses will probably vary among the class participants depending on the methods you are using. Most importantly, you will try out your “hunches” on your teammates, as you work to build a conceptual framework for your study. In your teams, you will make a short presentation, simply telling your teammates what you find interesting, troubling, new or otherwise noteworthy about your observations, interviews or your ongoing analysis. In turn, your teammates will offer feedback (see below).

Due dates: The specific schedule is noted on the syllabus; please mark your calendars. Your material will be ready for distribution to each of your teammates and to me on:

- (1) Draft interview guides: Oct. 6 for the work session on Oct. 11.
- (2) Preliminary literature review Oct. 20 for the work session on Oct. 25
- (3) Samples of data: Oct. 27 for work session on Nov. 1
- (4) Preliminary analyses of data: Nov. 17 for the work session on Nov. 22

Writing comments on your teammate’s fieldwork: Write comments that you think will assist your colleague’s project. In your feedback, you might ask or offer hunches about your colleague’s observations, offer an alternative interpretation of some material, or make other appropriate suggestions. Later on (probably the second presentation), you might critique a developing argument by suggesting a new pattern in the observations, ways to strengthen the argument, or useful research literature. You might jot these comments in the margins of the materials distributed, but please also write one or two paragraphs at the end or on another sheet. Your comments should be ready for your colleagues in class on the day of their presentation in the work session.

Evaluation of your team: After the final, in-class meeting of your team (feel free to continue to help one another outside of class), I will ask you to write up and turn in to me a brief evaluation of each of your fellow teammates. Do not summarize for the team as a whole. This helps me better assess the contribution that each person made to the team. Your comments should focus on each teammate’s participation in the group, rather than what you think about the quality of their research. Was your teammate consistent and timely in giving feedback? Did he or she give detailed feedback on your work? Did you find it helpful? Why or why not? I will review these evaluations and summarize them for each student in the final evaluation memo (discussed below). Also, please evaluate your own contribution to the team along the same lines.

5. Final Oral Presentations. At the end of the term, each class participant will give a short (~10 min.) oral presentation of their work to the entire class, summarizing the central argument you are making in your paper, emphasizing how you collected the data you did, and noting one thing you learned about research during this process. We will allow about 10 minutes for discussion following each presentation.

GRADING AND EVALUATION: Your final grade in this course will be based on the following:

- Engaged participation in class, including regular attendance (and being on-time and staying through the period), contribution to discussions of the readings, and active participation in the teams = 30%
- Preliminary materials distributed at various points during the semester (i.e., proposal, interview guide, literature review, and fieldwork samples) = 10%
- Final oral presentation = 10%
- Final paper = 50%

I expect all assignments to be turned in to your teammates and me on time.

Evaluation of Research Project: I will evaluate your paper based on all of the following factors. Toward the end of the term, I will distribute to you a list of tips for writing up your research.

1. An abstract of 250 words or less should clearly and accurately summarize the entire paper.
2. You should make a clear argument and support your position with specific and convincing evidence from your data (e.g., observations in field notes, quotes from interviews). You must anchor your argument in what you actually saw, did, heard, and so on.
3. Your paper should also link your data to 5 or more scholarly works (articles or books) relevant to your project. I do not expect you to produce dazzling results in such a short time – I will be more interested in the process and your grasp of the essential linkage between data and theory and/or action.
4. There should be a discussion of your methodology, a rationale for your choice of data collection methods (i.e., the strengths of your approach), an appendix with your interview guide(s) or other data collection instruments, and a thoughtful reflection on the limitations of the methods you chose. Describe your data collection processes (e.g., describe in detail the numbers and characteristics of the participants; how you identified interviewees; how many people said “no;” how long the interviews were on average or using a range; how many events/hours you conducted participant observation at; were people receptive or reluctant to participate; and so on). Describe your data analysis procedures. As appropriate, the methods section should cite relevant materials on methodology (such as those used in this course).
5. In reviewing your appendix (of 3-5 pages), I will be interested to see how much you have reflected on your experience and grappled with the research issues raised during the semester. Bring in the literature we have read this term and relate it to your experiences, as appropriate.
6. Your entire paper (of 20-25 pages) should be well organized, written clearly, and grammatically correct. You should also include complete references in a consistent style. No report covers necessary.

Evaluation memo: I realize that I ask you to work hard – very hard! – in this course. In exchange for that hard work, I will provide you with a detailed memorandum evaluating your final paper based on each of the criteria outlined above. Please provide me with information on how I can most effectively get a copy of your memo to you following the course.

GETTING HELP: Fieldwork is an exciting but, at times, very challenging experience. In order for us to get to know each other and for me to be of assistance, I urge you to come see me during office hours, which are listed at the top of the syllabus. To facilitate my office hours, I post a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board across from my office door. Please sign up in advance. If my office hours do not work for you, please make an appointment.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Subject to revisions as necessary

I. Introduction

Tues. Aug. 30 – Getting started: Introduction to the course and to each other

Thurs. Sept. 1– The big umbrella: What is qualitative research?

Read the entire syllabus carefully. We will begin to discuss your research ideas.

Read: Berg, Chapter 1, Pp. 1-14, Introduction

Tues. Sept. 6 – Approaches to social science

Neuman, W. Lawrence. 2000. The meanings of methodology. Pp. 63-88 in *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Thurs. Sept. 8 – Two approaches to research for social change

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. [1985] 1996. Appendix: Social science as public philosophy. Pp. 297-307 in *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Gaventa, John. 1991. Toward a knowledge democracy: Viewpoints on participatory research in North America. Pp. 121-131 in *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*, edited by Orlando Fals-Borda and Moahmmad Anisur Rahman. New York: Apex Press.

In class: Disseminate instructions on ethics online course.

II. Data Collection, Ethics, and Literature Reviews

Tues. Sept. 13 – Research design, literature reviews, and overview of data collection methods

Berg, Chapter 2, Pp. 15-42, Designing Qualitative Research.

Thurs. Sept. 15 – Searching the literature. MEET AT THE LIBRARY.

In class instruction on accessing the literature by Barry N. Brown, Associate Professor, Science Librarian and Access Services Coordinator, Mansfield Library. Meet at Mansfield Library student learning center (the SLC is one floor down on the right hand side; ML 283).

Complete online course on research ethics, “Option 2 – Human participation in research.” Instructions on how to access this will be given out in class. Turn in your certificates of completion to me at the library!

Tues. Sept. 20 – Research ethics

Read: Berg, Chapter 3, Pp. 43-74, Ethical Issues.

American Sociological Association. 1999. Code of ethics and ethical standards. Read the principles online at www.asanet.org

Thurs. Sept. 22 – Participant observation. PROPOSALS DUE.

Berg, Chapter 6, Pp. 147-194, Ethnographic Field Strategies

Tues. Sept. 27 –Introduction to interviewing. Brief work session: Getting to know our teams and the projects.

Berg, Chapter 4, Pp. 75-122, A Dramaturgical Look at Interviewing.

Thurs. Sept. 29 – Qualitative interviewing, continued.

Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. 1995. Interviews as guided conversations. Pp. 122-144 in *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Berg, Chapter 5, Pp. 123-145, Focus Group Interviewing

Tues. Oct. 4 – Reflexivity and voice.

Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack. 1991. Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. Pp. 11-26 in *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. Edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.

Borland, Katherine. 1991. 'That's not what I said': Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research. Pp. 63-75 in *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. Edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.

Stacey, Judith. 1991. Can there be a feminist ethnography? Pp. 111-119 in *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. Edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.

Supplemental:

Berg, Chapter 9, Pp. 233-249, Historiography and Oral Traditions

III. Empowering Research Methodologies

Thurs. Oct. 6 – Action research & participatory action research. INTERVIEW GUIDES DUE.

Bring copies of your interview guides to class to distribute to each of your teammates and to instructor. If you are not conducting interviews as part of your project, please see Neva for alternate plan.

Berg, Chapter 7, Pp. 195-208, Action Research

Note: Last day to drop class is Oct. 10.

Tues. Oct. 11 – Work Session. FEEDBACK ON TEAMMATES' INTERVIEW GUIDES DUE.

Review your teammates' work and be prepared to give them both oral and written feedback in class. We will have an in-class work session to refine your interview guides and to pre-test your interview guides.

Thurs. Oct. 13 – More on PAR

Park, Peter. 1993. What is participatory research? A theoretical and methodological perspective. Pp. 1-19 in *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*.

Tues. Oct. 18 – Continued discussion of PAR.

Lewis, Helen M. 2001. Participatory research and education for social change: Highlander Research and Education Center. Pp. 356-362 in *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Edited by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury. London: Sage Publications.

Ansley, Fran and John Gaventa. 1997. Researching for democracy & democratizing research. *Change* 29(1):46-53. [Heldref Publications]

IV. Analysis, Examples, and Writing

Thurs. Oct. 20 – PRELIMINARY LIT. REVIEW DUE. Introduction to qualitative analysis.

Bring copies of your preliminary literature reviews for your teammates and for the instructor.

Tues. Oct. 25 – Work session – Focus on literature reviews. Continued discussion of analysis as time allows. FEEDBACK ON TEAMMATES’ LIT REVIEWS DUE.

Review your teammates’ work and be prepared to give them both oral and written feedback during this in-class work session.

Thurs. Oct. 27 –Qualitative analysis, continued. DATA SAMPLES DUE.

Becker, Howard S. 1998. Concepts. Pp. 109-145 in *Tricks of the trade: How to think about research while you’re doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tues. Nov. 1 – More on analysis. FEEDBACK ON DATA SAMPLES DUE.

Berg, Chapter 11, Pp. 265-297, *An Introduction to Content Analysis*.

Thurs. Nov. 3 – Analyze this: Considering the example of food democracy.

Review materials provided in packet on food democracy research, including: interview guides and surveys; selections from a sample coded interview; coding sheets; and topic/category data sheets, and the following paper, which is in the packet:

Hassanein, Neva. 2004. “Locating food democracy.” Paper presented at the 67th Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society. Sacramento, California. August.

Tues. Nov. 8 – More examples

Klawiter, Maren. 2000. From private stigma to global assembly: Transforming the terrain of breast cancer. Pp. 299-334 in *Global ethnography: Forces, connections, and imaginations in a postmodern world*. By Michael Burawoy, et al. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wulfhorst, J.D. 2000. Collective identity and hazardous waste management. *Rural Sociology* 65(2): 275-294.

Thurs. Nov. 10 – Work session

Tues. Nov. 15 –The tales we tell and how we tell them

Berg, Chapter 12, Pp. 299-320, *Writing Research Papers: Sorting the Noodles from the Soup*.

Becker, Howard S. 1986. Freshman English for graduate students. Pp. 1-25 in *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book or article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thurs. Nov. 17 – PRELIMINARY ANALYSES DUE.

Bring copies of your preliminary analyses to class to share with the instructor and with each teammate. These might be a discussion of your central argument and the data you will use to back up that argument – in essence, a rough draft of the heart of your final paper. Share what you feel would be most useful with others. Feel free to pose problems that you want help with.

Tues. Nov. 22 – Work session. FEEDBACK ON PRELIMINARY ANALYSES DUE.

Review your teammates’ work and be prepared to give them both oral and written feedback during this in-class work session.

Thurs. Nov. 24 – HOLIDAY

Tues. Nov. 29 – Final presentations

Thurs. Dec. 1 – Final presentations

Tues. Dec. 6 – Final presentations

Thurs. Dec. 8 – Final presentations

Mon. Dec. 12 – Final exam period at 3:20-5:20. Final presentations. FINAL PAPERS DUE at start of exam period.

Getting started with participant observation for your project:

Participant observation (or ethnography) is a stimulating and evolving method, and I encourage you to give it a try! In a PO study, the researcher observes and to varying degrees participates in the social action being studied, *as the action is happening*. The kind of participation you carry out will depend a lot on what kind of site you study and what questions interest you.

To start out, you will choose a field site, and need to have only a general interest in a social question. A field site is the social group(s) you want to study as a participant observer. Your site might be a work-related site, a school, a political or community organization, a watershed council, a laboratory, a government office, a support group, or the like. Your site may not have one specific geographical location (e.g., a group of workers who do different temporary jobs); or then again, it might (e.g., a classroom, a town).

You should try to spend about two hours a week at your site. Following your observations, you will write field notes, which are detailed accounts of people, places, activities, and interactions that you have observed/participated in as a researcher. We will talk about how to write field notes and how they get developed into an argument.

Some initial suggestions about writing field notes:

1. Write down all of your experiences “entering the field” and asking the “gatekeeper” for access. The best way to learn about the structure of an organization or a hierarchy is to be handled through it. Nothing is too trivial.
2. It is a good idea in your first few field notes to give detailed descriptions of people and places central to your project. This will help you write about them later.
3. Systematic and analytic participant observation depends on the recording of complete, accurate, and detailed field notes. Take notes after each and every observation, as well as after casual contacts or interactions with people. Unless it is unobtrusive for you to take notes in the setting, most researchers advocate against it because it makes people uncomfortable and emphasizes “distance.” This means you must write things down as soon as possible after your time in the field, but no later than 24 hours after being in the field. This also means you must be attentive to your scheduling so that you have time to write up your notes.
4. Always write down at least a few sentences in each note-taking session of hunches, ideas to follow up on, results of having followed up on an idea, etc. I will look for these in your notes. These guesses and on-going analyses are the makings of your final write-up and help keep you focused on an evolving research problem. As your research problem crystallizes, you will come to focus on specific aspects in the field. That is, you might write more analysis, longer hypotheses, come to tentative conclusions, and be less descriptive and more analytical.
5. Write down your own feelings and reactions to participant observation. These can lead to important insights.
6. We will discuss the form of field notes in class.