Overview

This seminar explores a variety of research strategies available to students of politics, focusing on those that make use of empirical evidence but do not require quantification of data. In the social sciences today, the term “qualitative” is typically used as a remainder category: It includes a multitude of research strategies deemed to fall outside the dominant category, “quantitative,” regardless of their differences. (In this sense, it functions like the racial term “nonwhite.”) At present, our department does not offer a full sequence of “qualitative” coursework, as it does for “quantitative” training. So, students should take note: This seminar is a survey course, designed to cover the waterfront. It explores a wide range of methodologies – comparing and contrasting their logics, specifying their strengths and weaknesses, and so on – but does not provide intensive training in any single approach.

Learning Goals: My hope is that participants (including me!) will leave the seminar with the following: (1) an expanded sense of the strategies available to us when we pursue empirical and theoretical research, (2) a deeper understanding of how to design and carry out “qualitative” research projects, (3) a stronger grasp of the logics that distinguish methodologies and the creative possibilities for their assembly, (4) a greater appreciation for the interplay of methods and methodologies, and (5) a sharpened capacity to read, understand, and evaluate the diverse forms of scholarship produced across the social sciences.

Three features of the course merit special note. First, we will focus on questions of practice and adopt an explicitly comparative approach to questions of design, analysis, data collection, inference, interpretation, critique, and so on. In this manner, we will aim to clarify the assumptions, possibilities, and challenges associated with specific strategies and, thus, their strengths and weaknesses for particular kinds of research projects. Second, we will treat the seminar as an opportunity to discuss general issues related to the logic, conduct, and significance of social science inquiry. Throughout the course, we will tack back and forth between technical matters and more foundational questions regarding epistemology, ontology, ethics, politics, and the societal and global role of the social scientist. The latter topics should concern all of us, regardless of our choices among methods.

Third, it can be comforting to imagine that “proper methods, rightly applied” will eventually lead to good scholarship. I encourage you to resist this temptation. As a site of intellectual labor and practice, social science is far more interesting, creative, and fun than this procedural view admits. I have not organized this seminar as a research practicum or as a step-by-step guide to “correct” practice. Nevertheless, you will find that our readings and discussions include a significant “how to” component. Technique matters, and we will devote considerable attention to the nuts and bolts of research practice that allow scholars to turn good ideas into compelling scholarship.
Class Preparation and Seminar Meetings
The course will be structured as a seminar. I will pose discussion questions and present brief lectures to clarify methodological issues. In the main, though, our meetings will emphasize student participation and dialogue. For this format to work, you will need to read with a critical eye and think about how the readings relate to your subfield. As you prepare for class, try to be proactive in connecting the readings to your specific interests (e.g., your ideas for a dissertation topic). I also invite you to think more broadly about topics for discussion. At root, this course is about the things social scientists do with their professional lives. Any issue related to this topic strikes me as fair game.

At the risk of stating the obvious: We differ considerably in our scholarly interests, methodological commitments, and previous training – not to mention our positions in social, economic, and political life. Please show respect for these differences and try to be constructive in the ways you engage one another. You should also remember, however, that in a graduate seminar we are supposed to question one another’s ideas and explain our reasons for agreement or disagreement. If you don’t speak up when you think I’ve got it wrong, you deprive the entire group of an opportunity to learn, and you deprive me of an opportunity to address your concern (possibly to your satisfaction).

Response Essays
During weeks 3 through 14, each student will write FOUR brief critical essays in response to the assigned readings. These essays should not be “personal reaction papers,” nor should they simply summarize the readings. Your essays should:

1. Elucidate key arguments, insights, distinctions, or concepts in the week’s readings
2. Critically engage the texts and place methodological writings in dialogue with research examples. (You should also feel free to explore connections to your own subfield or specific research interests.)
3. Propose two or more questions for seminar discussion.

You will be responsible for one critical essay, on average, every three weeks and should treat it as a significant course assignment. Your essay should be no more than two pages (single-spaced) and should be sent to the entire class as an email attachment no later than 24 hours before our class meeting.

Response group assignments will be handed out in class. The relevant response group is indicated on the heading for each class meeting. You are responsible for keeping up with the dates on which your response essays are due. Your postings will count toward seminar participation. The address for the class email list is qual-meth-8160@googlegroups.com.

Please note: We will begin each class with a brief comment from each essay writer, typically highlighting a single argument or question raised by the essay. Also, I invite students to respond to postings, share links to supplemental readings and news items, or initiate other course-relevant conversations on the list. You should see the listserv as an opportunity for ongoing discussion between seminars. Finally, if you’d like to get feedback on your response essay or discuss the issues you’ve raised, please drop by office hours or set up an appointment. I’m always happy to have one-on-one conversations!

Major Paper
To tailor the course to their own needs and interests, students may select one of three options for their final seminar paper. This assignment will require steady work throughout the semester. It is due on
Friday, December 18, at 4pm.

The Research Proposal. Propose a thorough design for a do-able, dissertation-size research project on an important question in your field. (You might think of this as a “dry run” for a dissertation prospectus.) Over the course of the semester, you should plan to have at least two one-on-one meetings with me: an early one to discuss and refine your preliminary question and research strategies and a second one at mid-semester to discuss your readings of relevant literature and your updated plans for a research design. Your full proposal should be 15-20 pages. It should include a clear statement of your research questions and goals (as well as their significance), a focused analytic review of relevant literature, a clear explication of your research design (i.e., methodology and methods), a discussion of feasibility and ethics, and estimates of the project’s timetable and funding needs. A more detailed set of instructions for this assignment will be handed out in class.

The Double Book Review: Choose two published books in your field that share a research focus but employ different “qualitative” approaches. Your assignment is to use these two books as “cases” for a comparative study of methodology in your field. After briefly summarizing the authors’ research questions and key contributions, your essay should draw on relevant course material to compare and contrast (a) the underlying logic of each study and the authors’ key analytic moves, (b) the mode of explanation and/or critique pursued in each study, (c) the strengths and weaknesses of the authors’ approaches to gathering and analyzing empirical materials. In light of our readings and the authors’ questions, how well has each chosen, executed, and presented her/his/their research approach? How do their methodologies shape, limit, and enable their conclusions? In what ways does each study succeed or fail (a) in relation to the other and (b) in relation to the standards you see as most relevant for the methodology in question? Your paper should be no longer than 20 pages.

The Practicum: For a research question of your own choosing, collect and analyze “qualitative” observations drawn from at least two different approaches to data gathering. I do not expect you to conduct a full-scale research project. Rather, the goal is to conduct a small amount of research to facilitate a comparison of methods. For example, you might compare the strengths and weaknesses of four interviews vs. two focus groups. Or you might contrast the standpoints offered by archival research into an organization’s documents, interviews with two key personnel, and a small amount of participant observation with staff. As early as possible and prior to any observations, you should plan to have a one-on-one meeting with me to discuss your preliminary research question and plan for securing IRB approval. For this meeting, you should bring a printed copy of your question, a strategy for observations, and a preliminary draft of a consent letter soliciting participation. For subsequent meetings (which should occur throughout the semester), you should send me a copy of any relevant materials (e.g., an interview protocol) a few days in advance of our meeting so that I can prepare comments. The final report on your practicum should include (a) a statement of your research question and its significance, (b) a substantive analysis similar to (but briefer than) what you would present in a conference paper, (c) a comparative evaluation of your methods, and (d) a critical reflection of your efforts to employ them. In an appendix, you should provide your consent letter, materials used to conduct your research (e.g., interview protocol), and your IRB approval. Excluding the appendix, your full paper should be no longer than 20 pages.
Unless prior arrangements have been made, late papers will be penalized one unit immediately, and then again for each 48 hours after the due date/time. For example, an “A” paper will be lowered to an “A-” if turned in after the due date/time, and then to a “B+” 48 hours after the due date/time.

**Grades**
Seminar attendance and participation (20%), response essays (10%), and seminar paper (70%)

**Readings**
Readings for this course consist mostly of journal articles and book chapters. All readings can be downloaded and printed from the Wilson Library Course Reserves ([https://reserves.lib.umn.edu/](https://reserves.lib.umn.edu/)), which you can access directly through our course Moodle site at: [https://ay15.moodle.umn.edu/local/library_reserves/lister.php?course_id=2807](https://ay15.moodle.umn.edu/local/library_reserves/lister.php?course_id=2807)

**Accommodations**
I am eager to hear from anyone who may require accommodations in this class for reasons related to ability, life circumstances, or religion. Please let me know if I can help by modifying seating arrangements, deadlines, or other features of the class so that appropriate arrangements may be made. I also encourage students to ask for reasonable and timely accommodations for religious observances. Please review the syllabus closely to determine if your religion will present scheduling conflicts.

It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations and resources for students who have documented disability conditions (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, or systemic). Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Disability Services and their instructors for a confidential discussion of their individual need for academic accommodations. Disability Services is located in Suite 180 McNamara Alumni Center, 200 Oak Street. Staff can be reached by calling 612-626-1333 voice or TTY.

**Equity, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action**
The University will provide equal access to and opportunity in its programs and facilities, without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For more information, please consult the Board of Regents Policy: [http://www1.umn.edu/regents/policies/administrative/Equity_Diversity_EO_AA.html](http://www1.umn.edu/regents/policies/administrative/Equity_Diversity_EO_AA.html)

**Mental Health and Stress Management**
As a student, you may experience a range of stressors and mental health challenges. It is not unusual for graduate students to experience increased anxiety, strained relationships, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down and perpetually tired, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. Mental health challenges and stressful events may diminish academic performance, reduce your ability to participate in daily activities, and pose a significant threat to individual well-being. Please know that University of Minnesota services are available to assist you, and please do not hesitate to speak with me if I can help with accommodations of any sort. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the Student Mental Health Website: [http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu](http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu).
READING SCHEDULE

I. Commonality and Difference in Social Science

Week 1, Sept 9
Social Science in Context and Positivist Uses of Qualitative Research

Analysis and Explanation as Situated Practices

Positivist Qualitative Research

Week 2, Sept 16
Interpretive and Critical Uses of Qualitative Research

Interpretive Qualitative Research

Critical Qualitative Research
Week 3, Sept 23 (Response Group A)
Research Ethics: Moral, Political, and Professional Dimensions

Assignment
Complete the UMN/CITI online IRB Training (CITI Group 2 Behavioral or Humanist Research Investigators and Key Personnel; duration: approx. one hour):
http://www.irb.umn.edu/training.html#.UiZKBj8jIKM

Brief Discussions of Cases for Consideration

Perspectives on Moral Dilemmas and Ethical Responsibilities

II. Methodologies: Putting Research Designs to Work

Week 4, Sept 30 (Response Group B)
Case Studies I: Conceptualizing, Theorizing, and Generalizing

Clarifying Case Studies

Conceptualizing and Theorizing

Examples

Week 5, Oct 7 (Response Group C)
Case Studies II: Process Tracing and Causal Mechanism Analysis

Causal Mechanisms, Processes Set in Motion
Peter A. Hall. 2003. “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research.” In J.


**Examples**


**Week 6, Oct 14 (Response Group A)**

**Cases Studies III: Relational and Constitutive Analyses**

**Different Questions, Different Methodologies**


**From Comparing to Locating in Relations**


**Examples**


**Week 7, Oct 21 (Response Group B)**

**Historical Analysis I: Narratives, Paths, Temporalities, and Transformations**

**Narrative Explanation**


**Timing, Sequence, and Development**


**Temporalities and Transformations**


Week 8, Oct 28 (Response Group C)

Historical Analysis II: “Critical and Effective” Inquiries

Marxian, Freudian, and Feminist Historical Analyses


Archaeologies


Genealogies


Week 9, Nov 4 (Response Group A)

Comparisons I: Variable-Based Logics of Covariance and Control

Mill’s Methods, Counterfactuals, and Causal Inference


Examples


Week 10, Nov 11 (Response Group B)

Comparisons II: Standpoints, Configurations, Typologies and Logics of Conjunction

Conjunctural Comparisons

Typological Comparisons

Comparisons for Interpretive Explanation and Critique

III. Methods: Acquiring and Working with Empirical Materials

Week 11, Nov 18 (Response Group C)

Entering the Field: Access and Selection, Dilemmas and Experiences

Paths into the Field are Personal and Professional

Gaining Access and Selecting Research Participants

Relational Identities and Methods in the Field

Politics and Reflexivity and in Field Studies
Week 12, Nov 25 (Response Group A)
Being There: Participant Observation and Ethnography

Varied Approaches

Questions of Method


Examples

Week 13, Dec 2 (Response Group B)
Say What? Interviews and Focus Groups

In-Depth Interviews


Oral Histories and Testimonies


Focus Groups


Examples


Week 14, Dec 9 (Response Group C)
Reading Residues: Archival Research

Primary Documents, News Reports, Historiographies

Beyond Written Documents: Visual Materials, Built Spaces...

Week 15, Dec 16
Making Sense of Field Notes, Transcripts, and other Evidence: In the Field and Beyond