Course Syllabus
Psychology 9558A. Qualitative Research Methods (Fall 2017)

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Course Description and Schedule

An overview and in-class practice of qualitative research methods including in-depth interviewing, focus groups, naturalistic observation, content analysis, and thematic analysis of textual information. The course focuses on five qualitative research perspectives: grounded theory, descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, case studies, narrative psychology, and applied ethnography. These methods are valuable for (1) collecting rich textured data (2) discovering themes and categories from textual data, (3) developing mid-range theories that explain how people experience and work through various problems. In psychology, these methods are particularly useful in research programs investigating new concepts and fostering content and construct validity at the early stages of psychometric work. The first part of each class will consist of lecture material and discussion of theory and methodology. The second half will be dedicated to hands-on class activities such as practicing in-depth interviewing, conducting focus groups, and coding contextual data. Although much qualitative research can be done with a simple text editor, students will be exposed to special software applications such as Nvivo 11 and RQDA (in R). Note that this course is also open to third-year level undergraduate students and that performance expectations and assignment standards will be higher for graduate students. Course work and evaluation consist of an individual pilot project using interviews or existing textual data sources, three thought papers framed as summarized research proposals, and a short presentation.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Taken together, the lectures, class activities and assigned projects will help students develop skills in the areas outlined below.
The qualitative research process from start to finish. The course covers the entire qualitative research process. Students develop and complete a small empirical pilot project from start to finish. In a previous year, students have developed projects on topics of their choice such as “how two cultures affect one’s identity,” “resilience of emergency responders,” “emotion and reasoning in important life decisions,” and “body image in young women.” Opportunities also arise to work on common service projects. For example, in a previous year, students in the course conducted interviews with fourth-year psychology students about their experiences in the Psychology program at Western as part of a curriculum evaluation in the department.

Conducting in-depth interviews. Students will gain extensive experience in conducting one-on-one in-depth interviews through in practice and individual projects. Students also practice other data collection techniques including focus groups and observation methods.
Analytic skills. Data in qualitative methods consist mainly of words, whether from the transcripts of in-depth interviews or focus groups or from archival sources such as newspaper or magazine articles, speeches, songs, movie transcripts, accident reports, or field notes. The next stage is the systematic interpretation of these data using a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. The researcher typically combs through the text, word by word, line by line, or sentence by sentence to extract meaningful units of information and patterns, categories, or themes. These units are evaluated as part of a theory “grounded in the data” or simply as an emerging meaningful classification of concepts.

Critical thinking skills. Students will learn to apply validation and reliability concepts in qualitative research such as transferability, trustworthiness, inter-coder agreement, triangulation, auditing, member checks, and clarifying researcher bias through systematic reflexivity.

Writing well. Qualitative researchers need to be able to communicate interpretation and meaning from their findings, being aware and taking into account how their own lenses through which they see the world (i.e., reflexivity) probably differ from those of their participants. Students will develop their skills at uncovering themes from their data and presenting these in a research report. They will present describe their original ideas in three mini proposals that apply specific qualitative methods.

Applying ethical principles and critical thinking in the evaluation of qualitative research. We will see that the researcher-participant interaction in qualitative research can be fairly extensive and deserves particular attention. Researchers listen and have conversations with their participants in in depth interviews, often in the field (e.g., a hospital, an addiction centre, a music studio) about potentially sensitive topics.

EVALUATION

1. **Interviewer practice performance (5%).** Students will have several opportunities to practice developing their interview skills in class mock-up sessions. They will be evaluated in one of these sessions. Graduate students will be expected to show higher levels of interviewing skills especially with respect to follow up questions, building rapport, and engaging the interviewee.

2. **Project (50% total).** Students will have the opportunity to conduct an individual small project on a topic of their choice (approved by the instructor). The project will entail a collection of qualitative data from in-depth interviews (or focus groups, naturalistic observation, or content analysis), transcription, coding and data analysis using a thematic approach. Although not required, graduate students who would like to do a larger project as part of their own research should discuss it with me so that we adhere to the required procedures for ethics review. Graduate students will be required to incorporate one of the five qualitative methods within their thematic analysis.

   a. **Pilot interview and one-page report (15%, due Oct 26).** Students who select the interview method as their data collection approach will conduct one preliminary 30-60 min interview related to their topic with a participant, transcribe the interview, and write a one-page summary report summarizing the experience and suggested modifications, especially with respect to the interview script. Students who conduct observation research will be expected to report on an observation session 30-60 min and prepare a similar report. Students can also elect to do a content analysis (qualitative
or quantitative) of archival textual material. In this case, students will be expected to report on a preliminary subset of the coding and prepare a one-page summary report. Standards will be higher for graduate students with respect to depth of interview data and relevance to topic.

b. Complete project (35%, due Dec 14). Students will conduct 2 to 3 additional interviews (the total should add up to approximately 120 minutes of interviewing). Those who select other data collection methods should have comparable amount of work (i.e., comparable amounts of material in data collection, transcription, and analysis; see me for approval). The interviews or other material will then be transcribed and coded using the steps described in class for a thematic analysis. Graduate students will write a 20-page (roughly 5,000 words) report describing their findings within the framework of one of the five qualitative methods. Graduate students will be expected to develop a more advanced research question with stronger evidence of a link to psychological theory of similar quality to studies found in the journal Qualitative Research in Psychology.

3. Three thought papers (10% each = 30%). There will be five lectures each focusing on one of the following five methods: Grounded theory, Narrative research, Phenomenological approaches, Ethnography/Field observation, and Case studies. Students will be required to select three of these topics and write one-page thought papers (approximately 500 words each) of how they could use the method for a project in psychology. These will be due the week following the lecture on the topic. (See topic schedule below). Graduate standards will be higher with respect to the application of qualitative method theory from the readings and content depth.

4. Pecha Kucha presentation (15%). Students will select one of their thought papers and expand on the idea in an oral-visual presentation known as Pecha Kucha. This is a fairly new presentation format that consists of presenting 20 slides for no more than 20 seconds each (total of 6 min 40 sec). We will view some examples in class but see also: http://www.pechakucha.org/ or http://www.pechakucha.org/presentations/failure. Graduate standards will be higher with respect to presentation skills and depth of content.

CLASS SCHEDULE and SUGGESTED READINGS

Sep 7. Introduction and foundational concepts (LAB: Developing good research questions)


Sep 14. Overview of thematic analysis and five other qualitative research methods (LAB: Interviewing)


**Sep 21. Developing a research proposal (LAB: Interviewing)**

*Tri Council Policy Statement (TCPS2 2014) Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (see especially ch. 10)  


**Sep 28. Data collection and introduction to coding (LAB: Focus groups)**


Getting Started with NVivo 11 for Windows  
or  
Getting Started with NVivo for Mac (Version 11)  
http://www.qsrinternational.com/learning/getting-started/mac11

**Oct 5. Coding procedures continued and analysis of textual data (LAB: coding exercise)**


**Oct 12. No class (Fall reading week)**

**Oct 19. Validation process and writing the qualitative research report (LAB: coding exercise)**


(see especially Chapter 3—Research Methodology)

Nov 2. Narrative research (LAB: Group discussion and presentation)


Nov 9. Descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (LAB: Video and discussion of neurophenomenology and embodied cognition)


Nov 16. Ethnography and field observation (LAB: How can we use applied ethnography in psychology?)


Nov 23. Case studies (LAB: Developing a case study proposal)


| Nov 30. Student presentations |
| Dec 7. Student presentations |