

Department of Communication
Communication 725
Qualitative Research Methods

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Spring 2018
T 4:30pm – 7:10pm
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In its fundamentals, the practice of qualitative social research is simply about producing detailed descriptions and interpretations of human behavior and social interaction, foregrounding the perspectives of those studied, and then communicating these findings to others. Qualitative methods are especially appropriate when the goal of the researcher is to understand both the *meanings* individuals and groups attach to their behavior and their lifeworld, and social and historical *contexts* within which these meanings and life-worlds are produced.

The main goal of this course is therefore deepen our understanding of the process of conducting qualitative communication research. In lectures and seminar discussions, we will discuss the philosophical foundations of interpretive social research, as well as its relationship with positivist and critical research. We will also discuss readings designed to deepen our understanding of the most widely-used methods of qualitative communication research, with a particular focus on interviews and participant observation.

Finally, all course activities will also be tailored to help students achieve the major goal of this course: designing, executing, and reporting an original piece of qualitative communication research. To complete these studies, students will be asked to choose and define a research problem, review relevant literature, and propose a researchable question. Each student will then work individually to investigate this question using qualitative methods. Along the way, course activities and assignments will guide students through each step of the process, with an emphasis on forming research questions, constructing conceptual frameworks, developing a flexible research design, collecting and analyzing data, and, finally, writing and presenting the final report.

Course Objectives

- To *learn* about the practice of qualitative communication research—the “how to” of research design, data collection, and data analysis—primarily by *conducting* an original research project.
- To gain in-depth knowledge of the strengths and limitations of qualitative research methods—again by using these methods to design, execute, and complete an original study.
- To hone our ability to evaluate and critique examples of published qualitative research.
- To explore the ethics and politics of qualitative research, and to discuss the ethical and political dilemmas inherent in different research designs and decisions.
- To provide students, upon completion of the final project, with a piece of original research that can potentially be published or presented at an academic conference.

Required Readings

- Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York: Crown.
- Gibbs, M. G. (2008). *Analyzing Qualitative Data (vol. 6 of SAGE's Qualitative Research Kit)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kinder, K. (2016). *DIY Detroit: Making do in a city without services*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

These required texts are available at the GMU bookstore. [Additional required readings \(see the week-by-week list below\) will be made available to students via our class Blackboard page.](#) These readings include both introductions to qualitative research methods as well as the examples of qualitative/interpretive research we will discuss in lectures and seminars.

Assignments and Evaluation Breakdown

Statement of goals and RQs	5%
Project proposal	20%
Participant observation exercises	15%
Final report	35%
Final presentation	5%
Course participation	20%

Course Schedule

Week 1 (January 23) Course Overview and Introduction

Discussion – Course introduction, review assignments

Workshop – Choose topics for research projects

Week 2 (January 30) The Logic and Aims of Qualitative Research

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 1

Anderson, J. A. (1987). Ch 9: An introduction to qualitative research (read pp. 237-254). In *Communication Research: Issues and Methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill. [[Blackboard](#)]

Neumann, W.L. (1998). Ch 4: Meanings and methodologies. In *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Perspectives*. Essex, UK: Pearson. [[Blackboard](#)]

Grasmuck, S. (2014). The clubhouse and class cultures: “Bringing the infield in,” In M. Duneier, P. Kasnitz, and A. Murphy (Eds.), *The urban ethnography reader*. New York: Oxford University Press. [[Blackboard](#)]

Best, A. (2014). Race-ing men: Boys, risk, and the politics of race. In M. Duneier, P. Kasnitz, and A. Murphy (Eds.), *The urban ethnography reader*. [[Blackboard](#)]

Recommended:

Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 2 (pp. 52-69)

Christians & Carey, “The logic and aims of qualitative research” [[Blackboard](#)]

Geertz, “Thick description” [[Blackboard](#)]

Discussion: The methodological and ethical commitments of qualitative inquiry.

Workshop: Discuss goals and research questions.

Week 3 (February 6) Comparing Qualitative Traditions

Read: Cresswell, J. (2012). Chapter 4: Five qualitative approaches to inquiry. In *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Blackboard]

Bruan, V. & Clarke, V. About thematic analysis.

<https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/thematic-analysis/about-thematic-analysis.html> [Link on Blackboard]

Charmaz, K. (1987). Struggling for a self: Identity levels of the chronically ill. *Research in the sociology of health care*, 6, 283-321. [Blackboard]

Geertz, C. (1972). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. *Daedalus*, 1-37.

Yeoh, B. S., & Huang, S. (1998). Negotiating public space: Strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore. *Urban studies*, 35, 583-602.

Recommended:

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. [Blackboard]

Discussion: Comparing varieties of qualitative research – grounded theory, ethnography, critical research. Discuss observational exercise #1.

Workshop: Present statement of goals and RQs

Due in class: Statement of goals and RQs, due February 6th.

Week 4 (February 13) Research Design I: Building Conceptual Frameworks

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 3

Becker, H. (1998). Chapter 2: Imagery (pp. 10-20; 35-44), In *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Maxwell, J. (1994). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapters 3- 4 [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Heiman, R. (2015). *Driving after class: Anxious times in an American suburb*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, Chapters 1 and 2.

Discussion: The role of theory and “the literature”; research imagery and presuppositions; refining your research questions

Workshop: Discuss observation exercise #1; re-constructing Heiman’s conceptual framework; making headway on research proposals.

Due in class: Observational exercise #1, due Feb. 13th

Week 5 (February 20) Research Design II: Sampling and Gaining Access

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 4

Becker, H. (1998). Chapter 3: Sampling. In *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Feldman, et al., “Gaining Access”, Chapters 1, 3-4 [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Discussion: Sampling in qualitative research; ethical issues in qualitative research; strategies for recruiting and gaining access.

Workshop: Research ethics workshop

Due in class: Research Proposal due via email prior to 4:30pm on February 20

Week 6 (February 27) Data Collection I: Interviews and Focus Groups

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 6

Kinder, K. (2016). *DIY Detroit: Making do in a city without services*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Introduction and Chapters 1, 3 and 4.

Press, A. & Cole, E. (1999). *Speaking of abortion: Television and authority in the lives of women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chapter 3 [[Blackboard](#)]

Discussion: Discuss interview studies. Practical strategies for conducting interviews.

Workshop: Revising the interview guide

Week 7 (March 6) Data Collection II: Ethnography and Communication

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 5

Carbaugh, D. (2008). The ethnography of communication. In W. Donsbach (ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. [[Blackboard](#)]

Philipsen, G. (1992). *Speaking culturally: Explorations in social communication*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. Chapters 1-2 [[Blackboard](#)]

Basso, K. (1996). Chapter 1: Stalking with stories. In *Wisdom sits in places*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. [[Blackboard](#)]

Recommended:

Philipsen, et al., "Speech codes theory" [[Blackboard](#)]

Discussion: The ethnography of communication; practical strategies for participant observation research

Workshop: Go over ideas for observation exercise #2

Week 8 (March 13) Spring Break – No Class

Week 9 (March 20) The Politics and Ethics of Ethnographic Research

Read: Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York: Crown.

Workshop: Discuss experiences with observation exercise #2

Due: Observation exercise #2, due March 20

Week 10 (March 27) Coding I: Data Preparation and Initial Coding

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 8 (pp. 241-271)

Gibbs, G. *Qualitative data analysis*, Chapters 2-4

Saldana, J. (2013). Chapter 1: An introduction to codes and coding. *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications. [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Recommended:

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Discussion: Finish discussing observation exercise #2. Data preparation and initial coding techniques

Workshop: Getting prepared for coding

Week 11 (April 3) Coding II: Memos, Theoretical Sampling, and Theory Building

Read: Gibbs, *Analyzing qualitative data*, Chapter 6

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapters 4-5 [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Saldana, J. (2013). Chapter 2: Writing analytic memos. In *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [\[Blackboard\]](#)

Discussion: From codes to categories to explanations/theories; the role of analytic memos

Workshop: Introduction to NVivo

Week 12 (April 10) NVivo Workshop

Read: Gibbs, *Qualitative data analysis*, Chapters 8-9

Workshop: NVivo workshop

Week 13 (April 17) Narrative Analysis

Read: Gibbs, *Qualitative data analysis*, Chapter 5

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). Chapter 3: Narratives and stories. In *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Frank, A. (2011). Practicing dialogical narrative analysis. In J. Holstein and J. Gubrium (eds.), *Varieties of narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [[Blackboard](#)]

Katriel, T. (2011). Analyzing the social life of personal experience stories. In J. Holstein and J. Gubrium (eds.), *Varieties of narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [[Blackboard](#)]

Discussion: Role of narrative and metaphor in qualitative data analysis

Workshop: Looking for stories and metaphors in your data

Week 14 (April 24) Quality in Qualitative Research I: Questions of Validity

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 8 (pp. 271-281)

Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapters 5-6, 10 [[Blackboard](#)]

Lareau, A. (2011). Reflections on longitudinal ethnography and the families' reactions to Unequal Childhoods. In M. Duneier, P. Kasnitz, and A. Murphy (Eds.), *The urban ethnography reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Discussion: Strategies for building validity in qualitative research; the promise and limits of "member checks"

Week 15 (May 1)

Quality in Qualitative Research II: Writing and Rhetoric

Read: Lindlof & Taylor, Chapter 9

Geertz, C. (2008). "From the native's point of view": On the nature of anthropological understanding. In *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books. [[Blackboard](#)]

Radway, J. (1986). Identifying ideological seams: Mass culture, analytical method, and political practice. *Communication*, 9, 93-124.

Discussion: Voice and reflexivity in writing up qualitative research

Final Report – Due via email, by 11:59pm on Friday, May 11th.

Final Presentations – in class, May 15, 4:30pm – 7:10pm

Course Assignments

(1) Statement of Goals and Research Questions (5 points)

In this assignment, students will begin their projects by writing a short, 2-3 page (double-spaced) statement of research goals, ending with the articulation of at least one research question. To compose these statements, students should:

- Define the key research problem to be addressed (that is, answer the question: "what is it that you wish to understand better by conducting this study?").
- Describe why you have become interested in this question, drawing previous research and theory related to the problem (cite at least two key sources).
- State your main goals (both intellectual and practical) for the project (that is, what contributions do you think your project will make to ongoing scholarship or practical action?)
- Articulate one research question that will guide your research throughout the semester.

Note: no projects can involve participants defined as "vulnerable populations" by the GMU Institutional Research Board. This includes minors.

(2) Project Proposal (20 points)

In this assignment, students will compose a 7-8 page (double-spaced) proposal containing the following elements:

- An introduction which describes the *research problem* addressed by the project, the researcher's practical and intellectual *goals*, and the *guiding research question* which will guide the project (drawn from your statement of goals).
- A brief (approximately 3-4 page) review of previous research conducted on this research question, along with a discussion of the *conceptual and theoretical framework* that you are using (at least provisionally) to structure your thinking about your project (see Maxwell, 2005, chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of "conceptual frameworks" along with helpful examples).
- A list of specific *research questions* (i.e., restate your guiding research question here, along with any sub-questions that relate to it).
- A brief discussion of your proposed *methodology* (interviews and/or observations), including a justification for this choice and a discussion of who or what you plan to observe/interview. Discuss also your access to these participants and/or settings.
- A draft of your interview questions.

(3) Final Report (35 points)

See the assignment sheet for specifics, but the final report should be between 15-25 pages (double-spaced), including the following sections:

- *Introduction* – containing a statement of the research problem, goals, and guiding research question (from proposal).
- *Literature review and conceptual framework* – containing a review of previous research and theory related to your research question, ending with specific research questions investigated in the project (from proposal).
- *Methodology* – a statement of how you conducted your research, with a justification of the choices you made.
- *Findings* – reporting the patterns and themes in the data you collected via interviews and/observations during the course of your investigation. In this section you describe and interpret the patterns you found in your data.
- *Discussion* – reporting your reflections on the conceptual significance of the patterns and themes reported in your findings.
- *Limitations and future research* – what are the strengths and limitations of your research? What would you do differently next time? How do you think future research on your questions should proceed?

(4) Final Presentation (5 points)

Students will be asked to give a 5-10 minute presentation on the results of their research at the end of the semester. Students will be organized into panels, in much the same format as an academic conference.

(5) Participant Observation Exercises (15 points total)

To inform our discussion of participant observation and the ethnography of communication, students will be asked to choose a public communication setting, event, or situation (e.g., karaoke night at a local bar) during which they conduct two separate 1-2 hour observations. For the first observation students will simply log in situ notes (turning in copies of their raw notes) and come to class prepared to discuss their observations (5 points). For the second observation, students will log and transcribe fieldnotes according to the system laid out by Lindlof & Taylor. See chapter 5 for details (10 points).

(6) Course participation (20 points)

The key to our success in this course is the active participation of all involved. To this end, students will be evaluated on their ability to contribute constructively to class discussions. Good seminar participation requires bringing discussion questions, actively contributing to discussions and research workshops (speaking, asking follow-up questions, responding to others' contributions, etc.), showing evidence of having completed the readings, and treating the ideas of colleagues with sensitivity and respect. Students may also be asked to complete small tasks during and ahead of class discussions. Cheerful and constructive completion of these tasks will also be an important factor in participation grades. Finally, although active participation in discussions is crucial to receiving a strong participation mark, it is not sufficient. A pattern of contributions that are not on point or that are disruptive in some way will not help, and may even detract from, one's participation grade.

To facilitate discussions, every student is asked to bring at least one question from each reading assigned in the class. We will use these questions to guide our discussions each week. These questions will not be collected, but I may call on you to share your question, so please be prepared. In addition, each student will be asked to lead one seminar during the semester. Seminar leaders will be responsible for: (1) providing a short 5-10 minute introduction to the week's readings (summarizing themes and arguments, raising questions, offering constructive critiques, etc.). The purpose of this short presentation will be to "break the ice" and get the discussion started; (2) opening the discussion with a set (i.e., 2-3) of prepared discussion questions, and, if necessary; (3) placing other students' questions on the board at the half-way mark and finding ways to transition the discussion from question to question.

General Notes

(1) Human Subjects Approval and the GMU Institutional Research Board

According to the GMU policy on classroom projects, IRB review is not required for student research conducted for purely pedagogical purposes and that will not be presented in public (see <http://oria.gmu.edu/research-with-humans-or-animals/institutional-review-board/human-subjects-policies-procedures-forms-and-instructions/classroom-projects-guidelines/> for details). However, if you feel that your research will be of interest to others, and/or you have plans to turn your research into a conference paper or publication, you should submit your proposal to the IRB for review.

Another option would be to conduct the research as a classroom project and then, if you feel that the study has sufficient merit to be expanded into a conference paper and publication, submit an IRB application to use “existing data” after your research is completed. Any subsequent publication or presentation of your research would be contingent upon securing this after-the-fact approval to use existing data. In all cases, all research in this class will be conducted following the fundamental precepts of research ethics: voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

(2) Style

For the project proposal and the final project, you are required to use the referencing procedure spelled out in the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide. If you make use of on-line resources in your work, you must properly reference them. Guidelines for citing on-line resources can be found in the APA style guide.

(3) Late Assignments

Late assignments will be subject to a daily penalty. I will deduct 10 percent from your assignment for every day late (weekends equal one day). This late penalty can be waived in the case of family emergencies and should health concerns arise. However, waivers will not be given “after the fact” – in other words, you must email me prior to the due date to receive an extension.

(4) Grade Disputes

If you have a question or a concern with a grade given in the course, you should follow the following procedure to ask for a re-evaluation of the grade: (1) Wait at least 24 hours to think about the grade, (2) Write a short, one-page letter that describes your reasons for asking for a re-evaluation. In short, present a measured and articulate argument for why you deserve a better grade on your work. Then, (3) email this letter to me at tgibson1@gmu.edu. I will then re-read your work and re-consider the mark. The final decision (whether it results in an

improved grade, or, potentially, a less favorable mark) will be made before the end of the semester. Further appeals of grades should follow the procedure outlined in the George Mason University catalog. Finally, should you have a concern about the grade you received on a specific assignment, you should contact me within two weeks of receiving your grade for that assignment. I will not review grades re-submitted after this time period has elapsed.

(5) Honor Code

George Mason University students are expected to adhere to the Honor Code; please familiarize yourself with the Honor Code if you have not already done so. All assignments are to be original and prepared for this class, although a certain amount of “cutting and pasting” from your previous work in other classes is permitted, *provided it is indeed your own work*. While hired typists and proofreaders are permitted, all assignments projects must be the product of your own labor.

(6) Disability Support Services

To provide an equitable learning environment for each student, the instructor will readily adjust to those students who have special needs. If you have special needs in the classroom, please bring a letter from the Office of Disability Services confirming and describing your need within two weeks of the start of the semester. You may have ODS write the instructor directly and, in either instance, the instructor will hold the information in confidence.

(7) Changes to the syllabus

As the instructor, I reserve the right to make changes to the above syllabus, in the interest of furthering student learning and/or ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment for all students. Students will be given ample notice regarding any major changes to the course plan.

(8) Add/Drop deadlines

Last day to add (full-semester course): Jan. 29

Last day to drop (no tuition penalty): Jan. 29

Last day to drop with 33% tuition penalty: Feb. 12

Last day to drop with 67% tuition penalty: Feb. 23

For Future Reading...

- Becker, H. S. (1998). *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D., Anderson, L., and Lofland, L. (2005). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.
- Markham, A., and Baym, N. (2009). *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Orbe, M. (2000). Centralizing diverse racial/ethnic voices in scholarly research: The value of phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24(5), 603–621.
- Riessman, C. K. (2007). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

These suggested readings offer either an in-depth look into particular traditions of research we covered this semester (e.g., Charmaz's text on grounded theory), or in-depth discussions of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (e.g., Saldana and Becker), or helpful introductions to methods that we did not cover in depth this semester (e.g., Rose, Markham and Baym, and Riessman). *Keep reading and learning about methods.*