

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
School Of Education

E10.2140 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH I

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Overview and Intro to Interpretive Inquiry

E10.2040 is the first of a two course sequence that introduces students to the nature, purpose, theory, and methods of a family of approaches to social science and educational research variously called ethnographic, participant observation, qualitative, case study, naturalistic, or interpretive. Throughout this course, we will draw on resources in educational inquiry, anthropology, and sociology to explore a variety of issues central to understanding the epistemology and methodology of interpretive work.

The field of qualitative inquiry is extremely rich and diverse and encompasses several different conceptions of its aim and methods as influenced by the Chicago School of Sociology, the traditions of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, and the ethnographic tradition in cultural anthropology. More recently, ideas from philosophical hermeneutics, postmodern theory, feminist theory, and critical social science have contributed to this mix. It is important to recognize that the roots of interpretive inquiry date to the 18th century. However, in social science methodology broadly and education specifically, interpretive inquiry has gained prominence as an alternative to traditional empiricist social science methodologies only in recent decades.

I will generally refer to all of these approaches to inquiry as “interpretive” rather than “qualitative” because the term interpretive denotes an affiliation with a long intellectual tradition of understanding and making sense of social phenomena. Further, the term “interpretive” avoids the simplistic and erroneous connotation that these approaches to inquiry differ from quantitative research only in that they do not employ quantification.

It is my hope that this two course sequence will unfold in such a way that students will fully grasp the complexity of the research endeavor and not merely the dissected, disconnected parts of research methods and instruments. Toward this end, we will discuss the philosophical foundations of knowledge and seek to understand the assumptions underpinning

interpretive inquiry. People differ in their views of the nature of knowledge, their preferred sources of knowledge, and in their ways of assessing the validity or legitimacy of knowledge.

Defining a qualitative field study as a particular kind of epistemology or way of knowing helps to distinguish this kind of work from the fairly routine practice of generating qualitative data through interviews, observations, and document analysis, methods that featured in many kinds of empirical investigations of social phenomena. It also helps explain why qualitative field study is not simply a method or collection of techniques but is inextricably linked to various interpretive frames of reference or ways of viewing human action. Over the course of this semester, we will examine these issues in greater depth.

PURPOSES

Specifically, the purposes of this course are to: (a) acquaint you with the methodological literature so that you might better understand the nature of and purposes for interpretive approaches to inquiry; (b) develop your conceptual and analytical skills as readers of qualitative research; and, (c) provide some preliminary insight into how the assumptions of interpretive inquiry inform the methods and processes we use for gathering data and making sense of social phenomena.

The second half of this course will be taught in this same time block in the fall semester. It will more fully engage you framing an interpretive study and in doing field based research. In Qualitative Research II, you will conduct an interview study that will help you to understand the nature of data and data gathering using the assumptions of interpretive inquiry. We will interpret interview transcripts, stories, and observations. Through an integrative memo, we will begin to develop the skills needed for synthesizing information and for interpreting text.

Of course, we cannot develop a complete understanding of interpretive inquiry in a two course sequence, but we can identify the issues that shape and define the purposes of interpretive studies and provide opportunities for you to practice the art of making sense of interpretive data. With these understandings you will be better equipped to explore these matters through further independent reading and study. A brief bibliography of recommended readings on the methodology of interpretive work as well as examples of good field based studies will be distributed as an aid to further study.

COURSE FORMAT AND READINGS

This course consists of mini-lectures, small group discussion, and small group research sessions. Mini-lectures are used principally to present material dealing with the methodology of interpretive work. Discussion sessions are

used for exchanging ideas and insights gleaned from course readings and mini-lectures, and small research groups will be used for discussing and developing specific skills critical to interpretive inquiry as well as for sharing various products from field studies in progress.

Required Readings (all of these books are available at the NYU bookstore).

The following texts are required for this course:

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (1999) The Landscape of Qualitative Research.
Merriam, S. Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education.
American Psychological Association (APA) Style Manual, 5th Edition.

Recommended Reference Texts:

Schwandt, T. (2001). Qualitative Inquiry: A dictionary of terms

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Each student's attainment of course objectives will be demonstrated through three primary means of assessment:

Class Contribution and Evidence of Scholarship (ongoing)
Methodology Journal of Key Concepts (bring to class each week)

Analysis and Critique of Qualitative Studies (pick two studies from your field).

Modest Interview Study (4 specific assignments).

- Assignment 1-Prospectus for mini field study/interview protocol
- Assignment 2-Transcribed formal interview/Initial coding/reflection
- Assignment 3-Case analysis of the interview (develop one major finding).
- Assignment 4-Final Interview study (approx. 15 pages).

Note: Due dates for all assignments are listed on the course outline.

• **Class Contribution and Evidence of Scholarship**

A primary purpose of this course is to develop your capacities to understand, interpret and conceptualize interpretive methodology and methods. These skills will be developed through readings as well as through class conversations, small group research discussions, practice exercises, and inquiry group workshops. Do to all of these things well, I encourage you to: A) attend all class sessions; B) read and reflect upon all assigned course readings *prior* to each class period, and C) prepare to lead, discuss, and interrogate difficult issues within the material. Please, come to each class with insights into and responses to all assigned readings (methodology journal). Minimally, this means preparing questions on areas related to the text that you would like to pursue further –as well as on any issues or concepts that seem particularly

compelling or important, or issues that are not clear to you. Note: This process of reading and reflection will take time. In this course, many of you will encounter language and material that you have not encountered previously. Therefore, *you may find that you need to read these assignments several times to understand these concepts.*

- Assignment (1) - Prospectus for a *modest* interview study/interview protocol:

A 3 page (max)typed proposal for a *mini* interview study that examines issues related to you own interests. Your choice of study may be related to your own research interests, however, you should not do anything that would require human subject approval unless you have already attained this approval through a project or for your dissertation. This means, you ought to consider somebody who would be appropriate and would be willing to talk with you as a friend rather than as a colleague, employee, etc.

We will spend much of our time this semester in work sessions in which we will examine each other's work. Therefore, you are expected to bring copies of all assignments for your inquiry team. Thus, in this first assignment, you are to bring a draft copy of your *prospectus* for each member of your inquiry group. The prospectus includes: (1) a purpose and rationale for the study; (2) a tentative problem/focus statement and one or two primary research questions; (3) a discussion of why this is an important topic to study (grounded in a conceptual framework of your choice); (5) a discussion of the methodology guiding your inquiry and the method (interviewing) that you will use to gather your data. Here, you will begin to articulate your own methodological stance as well as explain how this stance will play out in the questions you are posing, the inquiry you are proposing. In this section, you will minimally address these issues: What methodology underpins your inquiry? What do you want to know and why is an interview approach useful for addressing the questions you have posed? How will the interview method help you to achieve insight into the questions you have posed? When you interview, who will you interview, how will the interview unfold? What questions will you ask and why? Will you use semi-structured or an informal/conversational interview? Finally, (6) you will provide an interview protocol, which is a specific list of questions you will ask.

This assignment is not intended to be a comprehensive proposal for a large scale study (like a dissertation!)but rather a statement in which you briefly describe a topic that you can begin to study through an interview format.

- Practice interviews. Prior to interviewing your respondent, you will test your interview protocol and develop your interviewing skills in class. We will have a series of practice rounds prior to actually doing your formal interview with your respondent (these interview sessions will be arranged in class). Your demonstration interviews will be observed and discussed by others in the class.
- Practice observations. For this exercise, you will be asked to go to a public setting and write an observation of what you see. Your purpose in this exercise is to develop your skills as an observer. Good observers are descriptive. You want to paint visual portraits with words. Therefore, when you observe, you must stay long enough in your chosen setting to capture a good narrative description of the place, the events, the feelings you wish to convey.
- Assignment (2) – One taped&transcribed/coded formal interview & reflection: As professionals, many of you have had some practice with interviewing techniques and analysis, but now you must situate your study within a specific body of inquiry. Strong qualitative work is grounded in a historical, social, political and/or cultural context. Toward that end, you must conduct and transcribe minimally a one hour-long interview with a participant in the social setting of your choice. As with each assignment, you are expected to bring a copy of your transcribed interview (double spaced with a two inch left margin for coding/analysis) for each member of your inquiry group, as well as copies of your semi structured or structured interview protocol, and a 2-3 page (typed) reflection on your interviewing process and technique. How do you think it went?
- Assignment (3) – Case Analysis of the interview: You must prepare a written analysis (8-10 pages typed) of your interview. This analysis must be informed by prior methodological readings (such as Denzin & Lincoln, Merriam, or other handouts) and should be consistent with your own methodological stance. You are to choose one compelling finding that emerged in your study, form a logical argument to develop and support that finding, and advance your argument using evidence drawn from the interview and the relevant theory/theories discussed within your conceptual framework. Remember good analysis typically means that your findings inform theory (conceptual or theoretical framework) and theory informs the findings. This requires dialogical analysis, or a tacking back and forth between findings and theory. However, not all approaches to qualitative inquiry treat findings/data in the same manner. Therefore, you will want to clarify, for yourself and to others, how you have chosen to analyze your narratives (what methodology are you using?) and why you

have made the decisions that you have made. Copies of this analysis will be made available to and discussed with your inquiry group.

- Assignment (4) –Final Interview Study. The ultimate ‘product’ of this final project is a 12-15 page interpretive analysis that weaves together the data you have gathered with your conceptual framework. To construct the final analysis you will combine all previous assignments into one cohesive paper. This final paper should contain: **1)** an introduction, **2)** the purpose of the study, **3)** a rationale for the study, **4)** primary research questions, **5)** a presentation of the case, **6)** an interpretive analysis of the interview, **7)** a case summary, concluding remarks, and references (APA format). Note: See Larson, *The Land of Oz* for a sample format for writing your article. As always, copies of your final paper must be made available to your inquiry group. This paper must follow the APA (5th Ed) style manual w/references.
- Finally, keep a methodology journal: This journal is for you. This course will ultimately enhance your ability to write both your methodology and methods section of your dissertation. Toward that end, you are to keep a journal of key concepts that particularly strike you as we proceed in this course. As we explore the different methodologies of interpretive work, and theories of multiculturalism, you will encounter some that align with your own view of society and your dominant philosophy of social science as well as some that do not. Your journal is a place to respond to what you read and to capture and develop those elements of interpretive inquiry that help you to make sense of the field and clarify your own interpretive stance. If you do this well, this journal will be an invaluable reference for writing your proposal and ultimately your dissertation. It should include valuable quotes or concepts. It should contain references, page numbers, and specific quotes as well as any thoughts/insights or questions that you have about the meaning of those quotes that you would like to raise in class. I will not collect this journal, but I do expect you to bring it to each class session to enrich, deepen and guide class discussion.

E10.2041: Qualitative Research I -Course Outline-

DATE	TOPIC	READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS
Part I Understanding the Assumptions of Interpretive Inquiry		
Jan 28	Introduction and overview of the course	Form Inquiry Groups
	Orientation to theories of society and the philosophy of social science	Consider ideas for interview project
	Intro to Interview-observation	
Feb 4	What is Interpretive Inquiry?	Denzin and Lincoln, Ch1-3 Be prepared to discuss interview project ideas
Feb 11	Major Paradigms and Perspectives	Denzin and Lincoln Ch4-5 continue reading
Feb 18	President's Day-No Class	continue reading Denzin and Lincoln 6-7
February 25	Major Paradigms and Perspectives	Denzin and Lincoln 8-10 Larson, Land of Oz, handout
Part II Making Sense of Social Phenomena Through Interpretive Studies		
March 4	Analyzing Paradigms and Perspectives in Qualitative Research field	Bring in one good qualitative study from your (+ copies for Inquiry group) Research Groups
	What does an interpretive case study look like? Work session on qualitative studies	Work on prospectus and interview protocol
March11	Spring Break-No Class	
March 18	Group Discussion and Critique of Qualitative Research Work Session on developing and framing a study Defining the purpose, rationale, and primary research Questions for an interpretive project. Developing an interview protocol	Draft interview prospectus/protocol due
	Practice interviews-Note: Bring all necessary equipment	

March 25 Group Discussion and Critique (cont.) **Final interview prospectus**
Practice interviews-Note: Bring all necessary equipment & protocol due

Part III Putting Interpretive Assumptions into Practice: Connecting Methodology to Methods

April 1 American Educational Research Association (AERA)
No formal class session Conduct formal interview
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April 8 Making sense of qualitative data. **Bring transcribed/coded transcript**

April 15 Sensemaking in interpretive inquiry Bring draft written analysis

April 22 Continue work session on interview analysis
Inscribing meaning in interpretive studies **Bring final case analysis**

April 29 **Work session on final paper** Bring draft of final paper

May 6 Individual debriefing on final interview paper **Final paper Due**