Sociology/Rural Sociology 754

Qualitative Research Methods in Sociology

“Sociology...is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences.”—Max Weber, 1920.

What is the difference between a wink and a twitch? What do “equality,” “nature,” and “God” mean to different people? How does it feel to be discriminated against? What is life like in the small towns and small neighborhoods of rural and urban Wisconsin? What is the significance of the Harry Potter books and movies for their audience? What is really going on behind the front doors of families today? How do people themselves understand how and why they do what they do?

This course provides some of the research tools for answering questions such as these, the tools often described as qualitative methods of social inquiry. Generally speaking, qualitative methods are those that seek, as Max Weber put it, an “interpretive understanding of social action.” The goal of this class is to broaden and hone students’ interpretive skills by presenting a range of qualitative methods, their epistemological standing, their sociological utility, and the practical and ethical problems associated with them. To this end, our course will pass through five parts:

- methods of knowing (the epistemological and ethical foundations of qualitative research);
- methods of looking (gathering social evidence through observation);
- methods of talking (gathering social evidence through conversations);
- methods of reading (gathering social evidence through reading texts, broadly conceived);
- methods of telling (performing qualitative research through writing and other means).

The format of the course will be a cross between a seminar and a workshop. We will meet once a week in seminar format to discuss the readings, and once a week to try out various qualitative methods for ourselves. Our focus, then, will be both on the intellectual underpinnings of qualitative methods and on the practical doing of the stuff. Along the way, there will be numerous small workshop assignments, as well as a weekly intellectual journal, all of which students should keep gathered in a course portfolio. A few times during the semester I will collect and grade the portfolios. The final assignment will be to write up a qualitative research proposal on something you might actually study, or are already studying. There will also be two short assignments to help you develop your thoughts on your proposal. The course will conclude with a series workshops on the research proposals.
Course Readings

Books


Other Readings

All other readings for the course will be available either on-line or in a course pack, available at Bob’s Copy Shop.

Course Requirements

Your grade will be based equally on the following: your portfolio, your research proposal, and your class participation.
COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 Introduction
9/3 Seminar
  No reading.

9/8 Workshop: Interpreting a Scene

Methods of Knowing

Week 2 The Promise of Qualitative Methods: Two Qualitative Classics
9/12 Seminar


9/15 Workshop: Observing a Scene

Week 3 The Case for Thick Case Studies
9/19 Seminar


9/22 Workshop: Participating in a Scene
  Emerson et al. Chapters 3, 4, and 5: “From Field to Desk,” “Creating Scenes on the Page,” and “Pursuing Members’ Meanings”

Week 4 Standpoints and Representations
9/26 Seminar


9/29 Workshop: Taking Yourself into Account

Week 5 Grounding Research
10/3 Seminar

10/6 Workshop: Autoethnographic Methods

Week 6 Action and Collaboration
10/10 Seminar

10/13 Workshop: Ethics and Institutions
Sample submission to the UW-Madison Social Science IRB. (To be assigned.)
Research proposal topic statement due.

Methods of Looking

Week 7 Observing
10/17 Seminar

10/20 Workshop: Studying the Presentation of Selves
No reading.
Week 8 Participating
10/24 Seminar

10/27 Workshop: From Participant Observation to Participatory Research

Methods of Talking

Week 9 Interviewing as a Social Act
10/31 Seminar


11/3 Workshop: Conducting Focus Groups

Week 10 Power and Interviewing
11/7 Seminar


11/10 Workshop: Transcribing Interviews

Research proposal epistemological statement due.

Methods of Reading

Week 11 Reading History
11/14 Seminar

11/17 Workshop: Coding Qualitative Evidence
Week 12 Reading Culture
11/21 Seminar

Methods of Telling

Week 13 Performing a Narrative
11/28 Seminar

12/1 Workshop: Voicing Qualitative Evidence

Week 14 Narrative as Artform
12/5 Seminar


Proposal Writing Workshops
12/8, 12/12, 12/15: Workshops on student research proposals.

Reading for this period will be each seminar member’s draft proposal, due electronically 48 hours before the class in which it is discussed.