BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
Heller School for Social Policy and Management

HS403b – QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
Spring 2016; Wednesdays 2-4:50PM

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 5-6PM & by appointment

Course Description (from the Bulletin): Open to PhD students only. Acquaints students with the theory and practice of qualitative research. Readings and discussions focus on epistemological and theoretical foundations of qualitative research, how to conduct qualitative research, and its relevance for social policy. Provides students with experience in direct observation, participant observation, and interviewing, as well as in writing field notes, memoing, and transcribing. Qualitative research from study design to analysis and presentation is approached as an iterative and interconnected process. Ethical issues are addressed, with emphasis on requirements for institutional review board applications for projects involving qualitative research methods. Students planning to go on to HS 411b typically prepare an IRB application for a project of their own design.

Additional Description: We examine qualitative research as a process in which various stages overlap and inform one another from research design to data collection, analysis and presentation. A key focus is the interdependence of epistemology, theory and method. We examine differences and similarities in approach and applicability between qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as their complementarity. Research ethics are of central concern and are therefore discussed throughout the semester.

In keeping with The Heller School's interdisciplinary nature, readings are from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, education, law, nursing, public health, social policy, social work and sociology. Readings are a mix of works on methods, including philosophical underpinnings and practical guidance (the why and the how to), and examples of substantive work based on qualitative research and analytical approaches (the what), including explorations of policy-relevant issues in the United States and abroad.

Our work in the course includes critical reading and discussion of readings, hands-on practice using various qualitative research methods and individual and collaborative reflection on these exercises. Topics considered include ethical obligations and dilemmas, research design, the politics of research, taking field notes, transcribing, interpreting qualitative data and presenting findings. Approaches discussed include framework analysis, ethnography, institutional ethnography, autoethnography, case study, participatory action research, interviewing and focus groups.

The course is a seminar, which means that active participation by everyone is needed. The optimum interaction is a conversation among the group rather than a conversation structured like spokes in a wheel, with the professor at the hub. Ask questions of yourselves and of one another, not just of me, the professor. Challenge yourselves, one another and me. Given the size of the class, it is important for all of us to be aware of differences in interactional styles. Some people are comfortable talking in a group; others are not. Those who are comfortable are invited to be mindful of leaving, indeed making, space for those who are not. Those who are not are invited to contribute to the discussion, not only to practice speaking in a group but also to share questions and views. We all learn more when we join together to articulate, interrogate, explore, challenge and support our understandings.

Given that classroom time is limited and we have lots to cover, I invite all of us to consider when a conversation is best continued in class and when it might be moved elsewhere. Possible places to continue a conversation are the LATTE discussion board, a one-on-one conversation with me if an issue is central to one student or a small group conversation that we can have at another time, for example, over coffee, for a topic of broad interest.
These reflections on style in a seminar are not intended to inhibit discussion but, rather, to help it to be as fruitful as possible for everyone.

**Academic Integrity:** In accordance with Section 4 of the University’s *Rights and Responsibilities* student code, “Every member of the University community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. A student shall not submit work that is falsified or is not the result of the student’s own effort. Infringement of academic honesty by a student subjects that student to serious penalties, which may include failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension from the University, or other sanctions (see section 20.). A student who is in doubt regarding standards of academic honesty as they apply to a specific course or assignment should consult the faculty member responsible for that course or assignment before submitting the work. Students may not drop or withdraw from a course while an allegation of academic dishonesty is pending. Instructors may require students to submit work to turnitin.com (plagiarism detection software)” (p. 19). (See [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/rr/index.html](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/rr/index.html) for more information and to access a pdf of the *Rights and Responsibilities* student code.) If you have any questions about the instructions for any assignments in this course, ask me.

**Accommodation:** If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have reasonable accommodation made for you in this course, please see me as soon as possible.

**Readings:** *On this syllabus, assigned readings are listed under the date on which they will be discussed.* Additional reading is also required for the final paper (see Requirements). Assigned readings that are articles or book chapters are available electronically on LATTE. A request has been submitted to have the assigned books placed on reserve at the Brandeis Library. The Charmaz and Weiss books have been used in previous years, so second-year students have copies they might be willing to loan, but the Zloniski book was not. To purchase copies of any or all of the assigned books, each student is on her/his own.

**Textbooks:** The following books, listed in the order in which they are assigned.


**Requirements:** You are expected to read assigned materials thoroughly and thoughtfully in advance of the class in which they will be discussed. Evidence of critical reading, relevant comparison across readings and cumulative learning from readings and discussions should be apparent in class participation and written work.

Three assessed/graded elements, described below, are each worth a percentage of the final course assessment/grade (due dates are given in the Course Outline).

1. **Class participation (40%):** This element includes class attendance and engagement in and contributions to weekly discussions of assigned readings. It also includes participation in in-class preparation for and review of homework. There are three types of homework: (A) exercises in the use of methods, (B) steps related to writing an IRB application (although not all students write an application to Brandeis’s institutional review board [IRB] as part of this course, all students must gain familiarity with the IRB application process) and (C) preparation for writing the final paper. In the Course Outline, homework assignments are labeled by letter and title (bolded in preceding sentence). In the class prior to each homework exercise, we will discuss what is expected; in the class for which the exercise is due, we will reflect critically on the exercise. We will also briefly revisit completed exercises in the following class to give us an opportunity to share any additional reflections.
2. **Methods Exercises (40%)**: Between class meetings, you will each independently conduct a series of exercises on various qualitative research methods. Due dates are indicated in the Course Outline. These exercises are described at the end of the syllabus. They focus on engaging in research activity and reflecting critically concerning what you learned about the research process, the topic, phenomenon or question(s) under study and yourself as a researcher. The written portion of methods exercises 1-7 must be handed in in hard copy, whereas exercise 8 must be submitted electronically.

3. **Final Paper (20%)**: Each of you will choose the topic for your final paper in consultation with me. What topic is most appropriate and useful to you will depend in part on whether or not you are planning to take HS411b in Spring Semester 2017.

   All of you are encouraged to use the final paper as a step, however preliminary and tentative, in conceptualizing and concretizing your dissertation research plans. There are few, if any, topics within the broad scope of the concentrations in the Heller PhD Program about which there are no publications based on qualitative research. Those of you who are not planning on using qualitative research methods in your own dissertation research might choose to review existing qualitative literature related to your policy interests. Those of you who are considering doing a mixed methods or fully qualitative dissertation might choose to write a research proposal for a qualitative or mixed methods study of a policy-relevant issue of interest to you. Another possible topic is a critical exploration of some dimension of qualitative research that is of particular relevance to your planned dissertation research. For those students planning to take HS411b in Spring Semester 2017, an IRB application is an option for the final paper.

   Each of you must meet individually with me at least once to discuss plans for your final paper. A sign-up sheet will be passed around during class in week 3. You can, of course, meet with me additional times as you plan and work on the paper.

   There are neither minimum nor maximum page specifications for the final paper (due May 4th), but you should aim for succinctness with clarity. The paper must be typewritten with 1-inch margins, double-spacing and 12-point font. Right justification is not acceptable, as it makes the text difficult to read (at least for my aging eyes). Any standard style is acceptable for footnotes or endnotes and references, e.g., that of the American Psychological Association (APA). What style you choose is not important; what is important is consistent use of your chosen style.

   The final paper is due on May 4th by 5PM and should be submitted electronically (and will be returned electronically). If you choose to write an IRB application for your final paper, you might wish to hand it in early, so that you can revise it based on my feedback and submit it to the IRB by its May deadline (see section on IRB Application below).

**Assessment**: The assessment/grade for participation will be based more on content, contribution to the ongoing discussion, responsiveness to the thoughts of others and evidence of cumulative learning (quality) than on frequency (quantity). The methods exercises are a chance for all of us to experience and explore conducting various elements of data collection, analysis and write up, so the doing is what counts towards credit. Don’t be afraid of making mistakes! Be courageous, curious and creative and we’ll all learn more. The same holds true for in-class discussions. The assessment/grade for the final paper will be based on both content and effectiveness of communication. Spelling, grammar, organization and clarity of expression are all elements in the effectiveness of communication.

**IRB Application**: Not every student will write an IRB application as the final course paper, but all students are expected to gain knowledge of the IRB application process, especially for qualitative or mixed methods research.

Some students in HS411b do a final project that involves analyzing qualitative data. Data can be collected by the student or they can have been collected by someone else. A student who uses data collected by someone else must have written permission to do so unless the data are in the public domain. Those students who take HS411b who choose to do a qualitative research project do so to practice research methods (e.g., interviewing, participant observation) and/or to gain topical knowledge relevant to dissertation planning. Any student who plans to do data
collection of their own for HS411b must prepare an application to the Brandeis Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (BCPHS), our IRB, in advance of beginning the project.

When a student prepares the application is variable, as the study design needs to be clear prior to writing the application. A student planning to take HS411b who intends to begin her/his research in the summer following this course should submit the IRB application as soon as possible, hopefully prior to the BCPHS’s May deadline. If you are planning to take HS411b and to conduct your own qualitative research for that course but choose not to write an IRB application as your final paper this semester, I will consult with you on your application plans and read and comment on drafts of your application during the summer and/or fall (the sooner, the better).

A Heller PhD student who writes an IRB application in preparation for entry into HS411b—or at any other time or for any other reason, e.g., dissertation research—should deliver a hard copy of the version submitted to the IRB in its entirety to Cheryl Sweeney, who maintains the PhD Program’s file of IRB applications. In addition, hard copies of all substantive correspondence with the IRB should also be provided to Cheryl Sweeney. Such correspondence includes any requests for revisions, revisions submitted and the approval email. Students from other programs, e.g., the Anthropology or Sociology PhD Programs, should follow whatever procedures are in place in their program for documentation of IRB proposals. If, according to your research Protocol, you will not be including names of organizations or people mentioned in your IRB application in whatever oral and written presentations are done on the findings, you are responsible for protecting confidentiality by blacking out or otherwise deleting those names from the IRB materials submitted to Cheryl Sweeney (or another program). Doing this is extremely important. Materials in the Heller or other program IRB file are, in essence, in the public domain, since other students preparing IRB applications consult them. To make such consultation easier at Heller, ask Cheryl Sweeney for an IRB Summary Sheet and complete it for inclusion in the file. The purpose of this Sheet is to help others preparing IRB applications to identify approved applications relevant to their own project design, study population, topic and ethical concerns.

Learning Objectives: Students who complete this course will have demonstrated some ability to:
1. Evidence knowledge of epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research.
2. Design a qualitative study or the qualitative portion of a mixed methods study of a policy-relevant topic.
3. Collect data qualitatively through direct observation, participant observation and interviewing.
4. Assess strengths and weaknesses of reports and publications based on qualitative research.
5. Exhibit understanding of ethical issues in qualitative research.
6. Show familiarity with the IRB application process.

Course Outline (subject to revision)
REMINDER: On this syllabus, assigned readings are listed on the day on which they are to be discussed.

January 13
Week 1: INTRODUCTIONS

January 20—Brandeis Monday—NO CLASS

January 27
Week 2: EPISTEMOLOGIES AND ETHICS; QUALITATIVE SOFTWARE
READING – Due Today


**HOMEWORK – Due February 3rd**

(A) METHODS: Exercise I: Direct Observation I & II

**February 3**

**Week 3: EPISTEMOLOGIES CONTINUED; FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS**

**READING – Due Today**


**HOMEWORK – Due February 10th**

(A) METHODS: Exercise 2: Participation Observation I

(C) FINAL PAPER: Write a brief preliminary description of your proposed topic (a paragraph to a page).

**CIRCULATED:** Sign-up sheet for one-on-one meetings to discuss your final paper. If no available slot works for you, please speak with me so we can find a mutually convenient time.

**February 10**

**Week 4: THEORY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, SELF AND REFLEXIVITY IN RESEARCH**

**READING – Due Today**


IN-CLASS EXERCISE: Brainstorm on approach to reading monograph.

HOMEWORK – Due February 24th

(A) METHODS: Exercise 3: Participant Observation II

REMINDER: Start reading Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists and Learning from Strangers.

February 17—Brandeis Vacation—NO CLASS

February 24

Week 5: ETHNOGRAPHY

READING – Due Today


HOMEWORK – Due March 2nd

(B) IRB APPLICATION: Access the BCPHS website at http://www.brandeis.edu/osp/hsintro.html.

(B) IRB APPLICATION: Read the IRB materials handed out in class.

(B) IRB APPLICATION: I am assuming that you have each done the Citi Training as part of your Fall Semester coursework. Find your certificate! If you haven’t already done so, create a file for your certificate, as you need to maintain a record of having completed the training.

HANDED OUT: Forms and guidelines from the BCPHS handed out in class.

March 2

Week 6: INTERVIEWING

READING – Due Today


HOMEWORK – Due March 9th

(A) METHODS: Exercise 4: Interviewing I

REMINDER: Start reading Constructing Grounded Theory.

March 9

Week 7: CASE STUDIES AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

READING– Due Today


2. Fyvbjerg, Bent, Five Misunderstandings about Case Study Research, Qualitative Inquiry, 12(2)(2006), pp. 219-245.


4. Read one of the following:


**HOMEWORK – Due March 16th or earlier**

(A) METHODS: Exercise 5: Interviewing II (I will hand back your revised guides with comments as quickly as I can.)

**ANOTHER REMINDER:** Start reading *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

**March 16**

**Week 8: PHOTOGRAPHY, PHOTOVOICE AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

**READING – Due Today**


**March 23**

**Week 9: GROUNDED THEORY**

**READING – Due Today**


**HOMEWORK – Due March 30th**

(A) METHODS: Exercise 6: Interviewing III

**March 30**

**Week 10: TRANSCRIPTION AND MIXED METHODS**

**READING – Due Today**


**HOMEWORK – Due April 6th**

(A) METHODS: Exercise 7: Interviewing IV

**April 6**

**Week 11: ACTION RESEARCH, POLITICS AND POLICY**

**READING – Due Today**


**HOMEWORK – Due April 13th**

(A) METHODS: Exercise 8: Memoing

April 13

Week 12: ETHNOGRAPHY, POLICY AND PRACTICE; ETHICS REVISITED; DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND QUALITATIVE SOFTWARE

**READING – Due Today**

4. Markham, Annette, and Buchanan, Elizabeth, Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0).

**HOMEWORK – Due April 20th**

(B) IRB APPLICATION: Look at one or more of the applications on LATTE.

(B) IRB APPLICATION: Read IRB guide handed out in class.

April 20

Week 13: FOCUS GROUPS, INTERPRETATION AND PRESENTATION

**READING – Due Today**

5. Weiss, Robert S., Writing Up, pp. 151-206 (plus associated endnotes) and pp. 219-222.

April 27—Brandeis Vacation—NO CLASS

May 4: Final research paper due by 5PM electronically to kammerer@brandeis.edu.
Methods Exercises (subject to revision):

1. DIRECT OBSERVATION I & II: Complete two sessions of observation (no interviewing of people, no participation) each approximately a half hour in duration at the same venue. The observation periods must be separated by at minimum the time it takes you to write up notes after the initial period, as described in the next two sentences. During the first session do not take notes, but do your best to observe and remember. Then write up your observations as soon as possible after the session. During the second session, record detailed field notes. You now have two sets of field notes, one recorded after the fact and the other recorded during observation. Each of these sets of field notes should describe the setting, people, interactions and activities observed. Now write up reflections on your findings and the experience of doing direct observation. This write-up should address whatever you consider important, perhaps including some of the following questions. Why did you choose the setting you did? What are the differences between what you recorded during the first observation session and the second? How would you account for these differences? Would other people have interpreted the setting differently? What questions did you take into the field? Did you find what you expected to find and, if not, what accounts for differences between your expectations and what you observed? How did people in the setting react to you, if at all? Do you think your presence influenced what people you observed did? If so, how and why? What did it feel like to be an observer? Did your feelings differ in the two sessions? Which note-taking method did you prefer and why? How did the first observation session affect the second? How would you improve your observations if you were to do these exercises again? Hand in your write-up/reflections and your field notes.

2. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION I: Choose a public venue or event in which to do participant observation for a half hour or more. In choosing your field site, make sure that you think in advance about how you will be a participant and an observer as opposed to just an observer. Also, in choosing a site, make sure to consider safety issues. As with the initial direct observation session, do not take field notes. Instead do your best to remember the people, setting, interactions and activities. Write up your field notes as soon as possible after you finish the research. In your write-up, describe the people, setting, interactions and activities. Include your participation. Once you have finished your write-up, write your reflections on the exercise addressing whatever you consider important, perhaps including some or all of the following questions. Why did you choose the venue or event you did? On what basis did you think it would be a suitable field site for participant observation? Did it turn out to be as suitable as you thought and, if not, in what ways was it not suitable? What questions did you take to your chosen field site? On what basis did you formulate those questions? How did your participant observation address those questions? Why did you participate in the ways you did? How did your participation affect what you observed? What did you do well and what might you have done better in the research? What did you learn about both doing participant observation and your chosen subject? Hand in your write-up/reflections and your field notes.

3. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION II: Choose a second venue or event or return to your first field site. Conduct a second session of participant observation research for a half hour or more. This time take field notes during research about the people, setting, interactions and activities. After the completion of your participant observation session, reread your field notes and think back on the session itself. Do not alter those notes, but separately record any changes or additions you think are important. You can do this on your original notes as long as you make sure that later additions are evident, for example, written in ink of a different color. Then write up your critical reflections on the experience and on what you learned about both the enterprise of participant observation and your chosen subject. Compare the experience and results of conducting participant observation with and without taking notes concurrently. You might also choose to indicate what new or reformulated question(s) you would take back to another session at the same field site. Discuss what you did well and how you might improve your research if you were to do it again. Hand in your write-up/reflections and your field notes.

4. INTERVIEWING I: In this exercise you will develop a guide for the interview that you will do in a subsequent homework exercise, in which you will interview one another. As you think about what topic(s) to explore in the interview, be sure to keep in mind that we will be discussing the guides and the interviews in class, as well as the fact that you will need to write up about the interview as part of the homework assignment for Interviewing II. Find something to explore that is interesting and complex but neither private nor potentially disturbing to your interviewee. Do not develop your guide with a particular classmate in mind as interviewee. In developing the guide, avoid using yes/no questions and also avoid introducing terms or phrases that might overly shape the interviewee’s response or would be better left to the interviewee to introduce. Think about what you wish to learn and how best to get at the topic(s) you’ve chosen to explore, as well as how to permit the interviewee...
to introduce information s/he considers relevant to your chosen topic. In preparing your guide, I encourage you to consider the interview as a process that has an opening and a closing with a rich center in between devoted to exploring the interviewee’s perspectives and experiences. I am asking you to develop the guide before you pair up for the interviews so that you will write a guide appropriate to a category of people rather than an individual. After you have developed your guide, write up your reflections on the process. Issues to consider include why you chose the topic(s) you did, how you went about forming and phrasing the topics to be explored and/or the questions to be posed and why you structured the guide the way you did. **Hand in your interview guide and your reflections.**

5. **INTERVIEWING II:** Revise your guide based on class discussion and your further reflections. Also, briefly characterize and explain the changes made. **Hand in your revised interview guide and your commentary.**

6. **INTERVIEWING III:** In this exercise, you will interview each other. In choosing interview partners, pay attention to your respective schedules, as you will need to be able to meet either for two sessions, each lasting a half hour, or for one long session. The sooner you meet and conduct the interviews the better to leave time for writing up. Approach the interview as an exploration, done with the help of your interview guide, in which attending to what you are seeking to learn does not prevent you from being profoundly attuned to what your respondent is saying. Remember that in an interview you should speak much less than your interviewee.

   - Tape record the interview but also take notes. Do **not** listen to the tape recording for this exercise.
   - The written part of this homework exercise has two parts, one for each role you played. Both should be based on your memory, and the interviewer write-up should also be based on your notes.

   1. **Interviewer write-up:** Briefly summarize what you learned about the topic(s) chosen, but focus your energy on analyzing the interview process itself. Describe the dynamics of the interview, what you did well, what you would do differently and what you learned about the interview process and yourself as an interviewer.

   2. **Interviewee write-up:** Reflect on the experience of being interviewed and what you learned from it about being an interviewee. Also reflect on the dynamics of the interview, what the interviewer did well and might have done better, as well as what you learned about being an interviewer from being interviewed and from observing someone else interviewing. **Hand in your two write-ups and your interview notes.**

7. **INTERVIEWING IV:** In this exercise, you are to do three things. First, listen to the entire tape of the interview you conducted. Second, transcribe a portion of that tape. You do not need to transcribe the entire interview, but you need to get a feel for the challenges of the task. Transcribe 2 or more pages of the interview, with at least some of the transcription in naturalistic style. Third, write up your critical reflections on the following two issues. In doing so, relate your reflections to the assigned readings and class discussion on interviewing and transcribing.

   1. **The process of transcribing:** Be sure to consider the issues and choices you encountered in the transcription process, what decisions you made and why.

   2. **How your understanding of the interview based only on your notes and your memory** (so, what you wrote up for last week’s methods exercise homework) differs from your understanding after listening to the tape of the interview and transcribing a portion of it. You should consider not only your understanding of the content of the interview, but also the interview dynamics and what you did well and might have done better as an interviewer. **Hand in your transcription and your write-up/reflections.**

8. **MEMOING:** Write a short memo (1-3 pages) on your current thoughts about the theoretical perspectives and concepts you find most fruitful and important. Questions you might address include the following: What analytical lenses do you use to understand the social issues of interest to you and to inform related policies? Why? How are these lenses relevant to your final paper for this course and/or your dissertation project in terms of shaping both your questions and your choice of methods? Note that this is an opportunity to try out memo writing as well as to do a bit of auto-ethnography in the form of interrogating your analytical framework. **Hand in your memo electronically.**