



Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork: Interviewing and Participant Observation

Third-term Workshop, Academic Year 2021-2021

Dates:

Monday, 12th of April; 10:00-12:00; 13:00-15:00 Seminar Room 2 / Zoom - TBC
Tuesday, 13th of April; 10:00-12:00 Refettorio / Zoom - TBC
Friday, 16th of April; 10:00-12:00; 13:00-15:00 Cappella, Villa Schifanoia / Zoom - TBC
Wednesday, 21st of April; 13:00-15:00 Seminar Room 3 / Zoom - TBC

Instructor: Dr Caitlin Procter (RSCAS/SPS)

Administrative Assistant: Adele Battistini

Workshop worth: 10 credits

Max number of students: 15

Learning outcomes:

- Theoretical understanding of interviewing and participant observation methods
- Gaining practical skills in designing interview guides, approaching research participants, interview process, participant observation, making fieldnotes, and analysing and writing up qualitative data

N.B This course requires substantial preparation (a written assignment before the course starts; setting up an interview; and readings)

Introduction

Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork is a practice-based course that introduces some of the practical skills needed in conducting qualitative research, as well as approaches to analysis and writing-up of qualitative data. The focus in this course is on doing interviews and learning skills needed for participant observation. The course is grounded in ethnographic approaches and is primarily designed for students interested in conducting ethnography, or using ethnographically informed research methods.

This practice-based course begins with an exercise in writing an 'ethnographic portrait', which students will be asked to share and discuss with the group. During the course, students will spend time conducting observations in a public space, and making fieldnotes (N.B: this is **not** participant

observation. Rather, it is a way of starting to think about the kind of work which goes into participant observation as a method - actual participant observation is not possible within the confines of this short workshop). Students will also conduct an in-depth interview with an individual. Students will gain hands-on experience in analysing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, writing up qualitative data, and reviewing each other's work. Consequently, the workshop seeks to 'walk' participants through different stages of qualitative fieldwork focussing on the two methods of interviewing and participant observation.

The course is organised in three stages: 1) **preparation**: a short introduction to ethnographic research and using ethnographically informed research methods; designing an interview guide; and preparing to conduct an observation; 2) **doing fieldwork**: conducting an observation exercise and making fieldnotes; preparing for and conducting an interview. 3) **analysis and writing**: analysing interview transcripts and fieldnotes; and writing up qualitative data.

Course Preparation

There are **three** preparatory assignments to be completed prior to the workshop:

- **Compulsory readings:**
 - Jeffrey, C. and Dyson, J. 2008. 'Introduction' in *Telling young lives: portraits in global youth*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press
 - Tuhiwai Smith, L. 1999. 'Introduction'. In *Decolonising Methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
 - Clifford, J. 1986. 'Introduction: partial truths'. In *Writing Culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. (eds). University of California Press

- **Write an 'ethnographic portrait' of up to 1000 words related to your experience of the first lockdown in 2020.** Ethnographic portraits are a style of writing up qualitative research, focussing on the experiences of an individual to shed light on broader socio-political issues (see Jeffrey and Dyson 2008). The aim of this exercise is to get you to start thinking and writing ethnographically, allowing for a change of perspective (from researcher to being researched and thinking about your own lives and experiences more theoretically) and to understand the ethics of sharing personal information. Given the condensed time frame of this workshop, this is also the format we will use for writing up interviews at the end of the course.

The portrait should address at least two of the following themes:

- *Education*: How did you experience education during the lockdown?
- *Employment*: How did the pandemic lead to social and economic change in the place you were living, and how did this affect your ability to work during this time? What was your approach to finding/staying in work during this time? What was your experience of working during this time?
- *Personal relationships*: How do you reflect on the role of friendships or relationships with partners or family members during the lockdown? How did these change during the course of the lockdown?
- *(Im)mobility*: To what extent was your pre-lockdown life characterised by spatial mobility or immobility? How do you reflect now on the experience of immobility during the lockdown?

The portrait should explore how these themes connect to broader social dynamics and processes. Please do not write about any intimate matters that you do not wish to be shared with the whole group.

Send your ethnographic portrait to the instructor by Thursday 8th of April, 6pm. Each participant will be assigned a discussant whose portrait they should read for the first class, and we will discuss the portraits and experience of producing them in small groups.

- **Contact of an individual to interview.** The person, as well as the topic of your interview is your own choice (but it should not be a friend or family member). You might strategically think of a respondent who aligns in some way with your own ongoing research interests. For instance:
 - If you are doing research on activism, try making contact with a local activist
 - If you are working on civil society, try contacting a local organisation
 - If you are working with young people, try interviewing a young person
 - If you are planning to conduct research in another language, this is a good opportunity to try and find someone to interview in the language you plan to work in; or if you plan to work with the help of a translator or assistant, you might like to try and do this interview with a translator.

Contact must be made ahead of the class, and consent gained to conduct an interview. An interview date should be agreed on either April 14th or 15th. You should inform the interviewee of the subjects you wish to discuss/reasons for the interview; and gain their consent that you record this interview. You will be writing up this interview as an ethnographic portrait for the final assignment of the workshop.

DAY 1: Monday, April 12

Assignments: Preparatory course reading ; ethnographic self-portrait; making contact with an interview participant

Session 1; 10:00-12:00: "Introduction to interviewing, participant observation and ethnographic portraits "

Readings:

- White, J., Drew, S., Hay, T. 2009. 'Ethnography versus case study: positioning research and researchers'. *Qualitative Research Journal* 9(1): 18-27.

This session introduces the workshop, its aims and ethos, and students will introduce themselves and their projects in brief. The practical components of the workshop (interviewing and conducting observations) will be explained in detail. During this session, we will focus on ontology, epistemology and methodology in relation to participant observation and interviewing. Then we will turn to the ethnographic portraits written ahead of class (each student will be assigned another students portrait to discuss). What are the different ways that people have written up portraits? Which are the most effective? We will discuss the value of the portrait format, and in conjunction with the White et al article, reflect on how ethnographic portraits as a tool of writing differ from similar genres such as case studies or life histories.

Session 2; 13:00-15:00: "Participant observation and fieldnotes"

Readings:

- Wolfinger, N. 2002. 'On writing fieldnotes: collection strategies and background expectancies'. *Qualitative Research* 2(1): 85-95.

This session introduces the key characteristics of participant observation, particularly as they are understood from the perspective of methodological humanism and postmodernism. We will discuss what we mean by 'insider meanings' and 'participant roles', and what it means to try to document and understand everyday life worlds. We will discuss observations, and how to document them through fieldnotes; the extent to which participant observation is really achievable; the centrality of reflexivity throughout observation work; and introduce discussions on theorising from participant observation.

DAY 2: Tuesday, April 13

Assignments: Bring an outline of an interview guide that structures the interview you plan to conduct in the following day

Reading:

- Kvale, S. 2006. 'Dominance through interview and Dialogues'. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12(3): 480-500.

Session 3; 10:00-12:00: "Structure, rapport and access in interviewing"

In this session, we address issues of power in interviewing, and discuss practicalities around the formulation of research questions in interviews; ordering questions/structuring the interview; negotiating access; and recording. Participants will present their planned interviews in pairs, along with any dilemmas or problems that have arisen in their planning.

Tuesday April 13th (afternoon); Wednesday, April 14 & Thursday, April 15

No classes but during these days, you should conduct your interview and transcribe it; and spend a day conducting an observation and making fieldnotes.

DAY 3 Friday, April 16

Assignments: Bring a transcript of your interview, and fieldnotes from observations

Reading:

- Thomas, G. and James, D. 'Reinventing grounded theory: some questions about theory, ground and discovery'. *British Educational Research Journal* 32(6): 767-795.

Session 4; 10:00-12:00: "Fieldwork de-brief: discussing transcripts and fieldnotes"

In this session, you will be asked to give a brief (5 mins) presentation on your interviews and experience of collecting field notes, and to compare experiences with others. We will analyse

challenges faced in the process, and discuss the relationships between ethics, power and politics that played out in your mini-fieldwork experiences. Students will swap transcripts, and in small groups discuss how they might have approached each other's' interviews differently.

Session 5; 13:00-15:00: "Analysing and writing up qualitative data"

In this session, we explore the challenges and dilemmas that emerge from analysing ethnographic material. We discuss the relative value of analytical tools such as coding; and introduce the core ideas of grounded theory.

DAY 4 Wednesday, April 21

Assignments: Use the interview you conducted to write an ethnographic portrait of your interviewee (max 1,500 words). All portraits must be uploaded to Brightspace by Tuesday 20th April. One discussant will be assigned to each portrait.

Session 6; 13:00-15:00: "Reflections on Writing and Analysis"

In this final session, we will discuss the challenges faced in writing portraits, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the written work produced within the group. We will also reflect back on your self-portraits, and revisit issues of representation - particularly with reference to the debates opened in *Writing Culture*. Students will be asked to reflect on how their own personal biographies and positions played a role during the process of conducting and writing up their fieldwork.

Further Reading

Andersson, R. 2014. "Appendix: a note on method". In *Illegality, inc. Clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe*. California: University of California Press.

Behar, V. 1996. *The vulnerable observer*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. 2007. *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE.

Chakravarty, A. 2012. 'Partially trusting field relationships: opportunities and constraints of fieldwork in Rwanda's postconflict setting'. *Field Methods* 24(3): 251-271.

Cole, G. 2018. "But if Locals Are Poorer than You, How Would You Justify Additional Help?": Rethinking the Purpose of Sensitive Interview Questions'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 37(3): 328-352.

De Leon, J. and Cohen, J. 2005. 'Object and walking probes in ethnographic interviewing'. *Field Methods* 17(2): 200-204.

Dutta, U. 2020. "The politics and poetics of "fieldnotes": decolonizing ethnographic knowing'. *Qualitative inquiry* 1-10.

- Evans, A. 2017. 'Tinder as a methodological tool: #emergingdigitalpractices'. Allegra Lab (www.allegralaboratory.net).
- Faubian, J. and Marcus, C. 2009. *Fieldwork is not what it used to be: learning anthropology's method in a time of transition*. Ithaca N.Y: Cornell University Press.
- Finlay, L. 2002. "Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice", *Qualitative Research*, 2(2):209–230.
- Flvbjerg, B. 2006. 'Five Misunderstandings about case study research'. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12(2).
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.
- Idler, A. 2019. "'Appendix A: further methodological notes'. In *Borderland Battles: violence, crime and governance at the edge of Colombia's war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jorgensen, D. 2020. 'Distinctive Characteristics' (Chapter 3) in *Principles, Approaches and Issues in Participant Observation*. Routledge: London.
- Khalili, L. 2015. "'The politics of pleasure: promenading on the corniche and beachgoing'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(4): 583-600.
- Kvale, S. 2007. *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage.
- Mahmood, C. 2008. "Anthropology from the bones: a memoir of fieldwork, survival and commitment". *Anthropology and Humanism* 22(1-2): 1-11.
- Marcus, G. 2008. 'The end(s) of ethnography: social cultural anthropology's signature form of producing knowledge in transition'. *Current Anthropology* 23(1):1-14.
- Middleton, T. and Cons, J. 2014. 'Coming to terms: reinserting research assistants in ethnography's past and present'. *Ethnography* 15(3): 279-290.
- Miner, H. 1956. 'Body ritual among the Nacirema'. *American Anthropologist* 58(3): 503-507.
- Shah, A. 2017. 'Ethnography? Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis'. *Hau: Journal of Ethnography* 7(1).
- Urquhart, C. 2013. *Grounded theory for qualitative research: a practical guide*. London: Sage.
- Turner, S. 2010. "Research Note: The Silenced Assistant. Reflections of Invisible Interpreters and Research Assistants", *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51(2): 206–219.