SOCI 477.001: Qualitative Methods in Sociology

Fall 2023 | 3 Credits | pre-requisite: SOCI 210 & 211 | Monday | 11:30AM – 2:30PM EST | LEA 808

INSTRUCTOR INFO

Alexis C. Dennis, PhD, MPH
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology
Please call me: Dr. Dennis or Prof. Dennis
Pronouns: she / her
Office: 314 Peterson Hall
Student Hours: Mondays, 10:00 am – 11:00 am; please sign up online: https://calendly.com/acdennis/student-hours
E-mail: alexis.dennis@mcgill.ca (expect a response within 48 hours)

COURSE OVERVIEW

Qualitative methods can illuminate how people interpret the world in which they live, and how their interpretations shape their motivations, behaviors, and social interactions. This course is designed to introduce you to the use of qualitative methods in sociological research, including participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and qualitative document and image analysis. We will explore these methods using the substantive field of race and ethnicity as an entry point. Students will conduct group-based research projects on the experience of race and ethnicity in Montréal, seeking to uncover such phenomenon as racialization experiences, multiracial identity, and perceptions of racial/ethnic inequality.

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, you will be able to do the following:

- Propose executable research questions.
- Understand ethical issues related to research with human subjects.
- Explore theoretical approaches to fieldwork.
- Use qualitative data-collection methods.
- Practice analyzing and presenting qualitative data.

MY TEACHING PERSPECTIVE

Welcome to Sociology 477! I am looking forward to working with you during this course. When I was an undergraduate student, my favorite classes were engaging, challenging, and provided the opportunity for me to learn from, and feel supported by, both my instructors and my peers. As your professor, my goal is to provide you with a challenging but supportive environment in which you, and every other student, have the opportunity to succeed. While mastering a discipline is an important part of the undergraduate learning experience, I also strongly believe that developing and practicing “soft-skills”
(e.g., teamwork, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, integrity) that will help you succeed beyond this course and your time at McGill is incredibly important. I therefore incorporate classroom policies, activities, and assignments that will provide you with opportunities to develop and practice some of these skills throughout the course.

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

There is ONE required text for this course:

**TEXTBOOK:**
Van den Hoon aard, Deborah K. and Lisa-Jo van den Scott. 2022. *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer, 4th EDITION.*

Available for rent or purchase at online booksellers
Available for rental at: [www.vitalsource.com](http://www.vitalsource.com)

All other required texts will be available on MyCourses. You should complete all required readings for each week prior to class on Monday.

**REQUIRED EQUIPMENT & SOFTWARE**

1. You are required to have some kind of recording device (or software) with digital audio recording capacity. Please note that cell phones are often equipped with recording ability (e.g., The “Voice Memos” App on the iPhone).
2. You will be required to use MAXQDA 2020 data analysis software for the purposes of transcribing and coding your data. You will be provided with a license to use this software (usable on Mac or PC), temporarily, for the purposes of this course. We will spend some time in the (virtual) classroom learning how to use the software. You will be expected to then work, both on your own and as a team, with it. This software has many functions and features – far more than you can ever master in this class! The goal is to introduce you to how qualitative software can support various aspects of qualitative research. If you are interested in learning more, I encourage you to peruse the resources at [www.maxqda.com](http://www.maxqda.com), most of which are free.

**HOW IS SUCCESS MEASURED IN THIS COURSE?**

Your grade will be based on the following individual and group assignments:
**Individual Assignments (20%)**

**CLASS ATTENDANCE (5%)** Regular attendance is expected, as it will help you to retain the material, to improve your critical thinking and analytic skills, and will optimize the learning experience for both you and your classmates. I therefore expect you to come to each class on time and prepared to learn, discuss, and engage with me and your classmates. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class with a sign-in sheet. You will be allowed to miss one session during the semester without affecting your attendance grade. It will be your responsibility to catch up on missed course material by consulting with your classmates and reviewing the assigned texts.

- If you miss more than one session, you must justify your absence with appropriate medical documentation to avoid a reduced attendance grade. If you miss a second session without acceptably justifying your absence, you will receive an attendance grade of 2.5%. If you miss a third session in the same way, you will receive an attendance grade of 0%.

- Your group members can reasonably use your absence from class (as well as any group meetings outside of class) as part of their justification for their peer evaluation grades, even if you only miss a single class session. As such, please communicate with your group members about absences, especially if important tasks for your group project are on the agenda for that day.

**IN-CLASS PARTICIPATION (8%)** Seminars work best when everyone is invested and participates actively. My goal is to improve your methodological knowledge and your overall grasp of sociology. Everyone will need to work together to successfully achieve this goal. During class, I encourage you to ask questions, and to actively participate in group discussions and in-class activities. Moreover, during class discussions and when engaging in group work/assignments, you are expected to: 1) Be respectful of each other’s thoughts and contributions; 2) Commit to learning, not arguing; 3) Criticize ideas, not individuals; 4) Assume best intentions; 5) Avoid inflammatory language, insults, and blame; 6) Deliver feedback that is constructive and kind; 7) When in doubt, speak from and/or to the course texts, and 8) Engage fairly so that no one else feels that they are doing more than their share.

**COURSE ON RESEARCH ETHICS (2%, PASS/FAIL)** You must complete the Canadian Tri-Agency’s online Course on Research Ethics, which you can begin and finish on your own time. The course website is here: [https://tcps2core.ca/welcome](https://tcps2core.ca/welcome)

**PEER EVALUATION (5%)** After you submit the final paper, you will have the opportunity to evaluate your group members’ contribution to the group work.

**Group Assignments (80%)**

For this course, you will conduct a research project on some aspect of the racial/ethnic experience in the Montreal metropolitan area. With your fellow students, you will select a group to study, create a research question, collect, process, and analyze data, present your findings to the class, and write a final research paper. I will assign students to groups at my discretion. Please note that I will not alter group assignments under any circumstances. Be sure to take a role in your group that is productive (even if others do not), and do everything you can to build a collegial work environment with your peers. At the end of the class, you will participate in a peer evaluation to assess your group members’
contributions to various components of group tasks/assignments. The following sections discuss the group work components roughly in the order in which they will occur in class.

- **STUDY OUTLINE, CONSENT FORM, AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGY (5%)** For your research project, your group will select a racial/ethnic group and create a research question. You will then develop a recruitment strategy that describes plausible steps for securing access to interviewees and participant observation opportunities, as well as a study consent form. The study outline will provide me with a summary of your research question, your consent form, and your recruitment strategy.

- **INTERVIEW GUIDE (5%)** Your group will create an interview guide that all group members will use when conducting in-depth interviews.

- **FIELD RESEARCH (15%)** To familiarize yourself with the practice of qualitative data collection and to contribute to your group’s research project, each student will be required to: 1) conduct two in-depth interviews and generate a complete transcript of each interview; and 2) conduct one participant observation and write up a fieldnote describing that observation in detail.

- **ANALYTICAL PRODUCT (5%)** You will practice analyzing qualitative data and support your group’s research presentation and final paper by writing and submitting one analytic product.

- **CODING (10%)** You will practice analyzing qualitative data and support your group’s research presentation and final paper by submitting a MaxQDA project file in which you code at least six fieldwork documents (interview transcripts and/or field notes). Among the coded documents must be at least one interview transcript and at least one fieldnote.

- **FINAL RESEARCH PROJECT PRESENTATION (5%)** On the final day of class, you and your group will give a 10-minute presentation of your research project and its outcomes.

- **FINAL PAPER (35%)** Each group will write a 20-25 page research paper on the basis of the data you have gathered. The paper’s structure will be discussed in class.

More detailed instructions about all of the assignments for this course can be found in the “Syllabus & Assignment Guidelines” Folder under “Content” on MyCourses

**GRADING**

Grade inflation at the secondary school level can sometimes lead to unrealistic expectations of grades at the university level. Assessments in this course are graded using the full available scale, from A to F:
On any given assessment, a “good” submission (i.e., one that answers the question well, taking all instructions into account) will receive a score ranging from B to A- (e.g., 7-8 points on a question with a maximum score of 10). This leaves room at the top to reward especially thorough and nuanced work. There are no pre-set limits on how many students can receive an A (on an assessment and/or overall), but no one should expect that to be the default grade. I will provide you with a guidance sheet for each assignment with some tips on preparation. We will discuss this in class several weeks before the assignment is due, so that you have a chance to ask questions and I can address any questions that you may have. I will provide general feedback (normally during class discussion time), but I will never circulate a full grading rubric.

Please note that to ensure equity and fairness, final course grades will not be rounded up or down at any stage.

GRADE APPEAL/DISCUSSION POLICY AND PROCEDURES

I make every effort to evaluate student work fairly and consistently. I am happy to correct any errors I have made in grading but I will not alter my grading rubric. I am also happy to discuss feedback to provide more context. Grade appeals will only be entertained if there appears to have been a major issue with grading, and the procedure outlined below must be followed.

If you would like to discuss the comments and grades (but are in no way appealing your grade), you must:

1. Wait at least 24 hours after receiving your grade. Do not e-mail me until after this waiting period has passed.
2. Carefully re-read your paper/assignment in light of provided feedback.
3. Within 7 days of receiving the grade, arrange to discuss the matter with me. The appeal period ends 7 days after a grade has been received.

If the issue is an error, simply alert me of the error. Be sure to clearly state the assignment and the error. Examples of errors are addition mistakes (in the event an assignment has multiple components that are combined for a total score) or a clear typo (e.g., the only comment was Great Job, but you received a grade lower than a C).

In the case of more substantive appeals, you must:

1. Wait at least 24 hours after receiving your grade. Do not e-mail me until after this waiting period has passed.
2. Carefully re-read your paper/assignment in light of feedback provided.

3. Within 7 days of receiving the grade, arrange to discuss the matter with me. The appeal period ends 7 days after a grade has been received.

4. Submit to me a written explanation of why you think your mark should be altered. Please note statements such as “I worked very hard on this” or “I need a higher grade to apply to law school” are not compelling arguments. Appeals relying on these or similar arguments will not be granted. If your argument is that I took off points on your assignment but not on your friend’s, you must tell me your friend’s full name. Note, the correction I make may be to take off points on your friend’s assignment. If I accept your appeal, I may regrade the entire assignment. This means your total grade may not change or may go down.

COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Preparation. For every hour that we spend in class, you should plan to spend 2-3 hours outside of class to read, reflect on the material, and/or work on course assignments. You are also responsible for all announcements made during in class sessions, via email, and on MyCourses, therefore please check for new announcements on MyCourses and monitor your email consistently.

Diversity and Preferred Gender Pronouns. In this class we will respect and value the perspectives of students from all backgrounds, including those who have a different ethnicity, race, gender identity, national origin, religion, social class, age, sexual orientation, parental status, political background, and/or physical and learning ability. We will work together to make sure that our class meetings are an inclusive space for all students. We will also affirm people of all gender expressions and gender identities. If you would prefer for me and your peers to call you by a different name than what is listed on the class roster, or by a different pronoun, please let me know. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Student Hours. Please talk to me about your concerns, needs, and/or questions as early as possible. To make the best use of student hours, please come prepared with specific questions or a specific problem you’d like to discuss, and think ahead about how I might be able to help you. You are also welcome to come to student hours if you don’t have a problem or question, and just want to chat about something. If you have a standing conflict during student hours, please email me to set up an alternate time to meet.

After reviewing assigned texts, you should be able to:

• Identify the central argument(s)
• Identify and evaluate the methods used (if applicable)
• Evaluate the evidence used to support the argument(s)
• Evaluate the central theory used
• Identify and evaluate the implications of the central argument(s)
Emails. For simple questions, the quickest way to reach me is by email. I will aim to respond to your email within 48 hours. Please note that I will refer you back to the syllabus or assignment instructions if the answer to your question is already addressed in one of those documents. For more difficult questions, please make an appointment to chat with me during student hours.

Developing “soft-skills” that will help you succeed beyond this course and your time at McGill is incredibly important. One of these skills is professional communication, which we will practice in this class. Please abide by the following guidelines when sending emails for this course to me and to your classmates:

1) In the subject line, include the name of the course and a brief description of what the email is about (e.g., SOCI 477: question about homework);
2) Begin your email with an appropriate greeting (e.g., Dear Dr. Dennis, Hello Prof. Dennis);
3) Write in complete sentences, and use respectful language; and
4) Include a closing / signature (e.g., Thank you, Beyoncé; Sincerely, Drake).

Academic Integrity. McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, ALL students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003). (See McGill’s guide to academic honesty for more information.)

Extensions, Late Work, and Extra Credit. It is best if you keep up with the course schedule by turning in all assignments on time. Each group will have one, “Extension Coupon” for a three-day extension that can be applied to one of the following assignments with no questions asked: study outline, consent form, and recruitment, interview guide, field research, analytic product, coding. Email me to redeem your extension coupon. If your group does not use your coupon for an assignment extension, it will be applied as extra credit to your final paper grade. Late work that is not discussed with me in advance will incur a penalty of one grade step per 4-hour period past the deadline (e.g., if your initial grade is an A- and you submit the assignment 12 hours late, your final assignment grade will be a B-). Beyond what is described above, no additional individual and/or group extra credit opportunities will be offered in this course.

Learning Hardships. If you experience a major hardship during the semester (e.g., illness, accident, family crisis) that may negatively impact your ability to keep up with the course, please communicate with me as soon as possible. Let me know what the circumstances are, and we can discuss a reasonable way to move forward. Additional supportive resources that are available across campus are listed under “Resources for Success” below.

Syllabus Changes. This is a flexible syllabus. This means that I may make changes to the syllabus that are in alignment with the syllabus’ course content and evaluation schemes (e.g., swapping
out assigned texts or pushing back assignment due dates), when unforeseen circumstances arise. I will announce these changes as early as possible in class, on MyCourses, and via email so that you can adjust your schedule accordingly. *In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.*

## RESOURCES FOR SUCCESS

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<th><strong>“I need an accommodation for this class.”</strong></th>
<th><strong>Students with Disabilities or Students who are Pregnant</strong> – If you have a long-term or temporary disability; a chronic or episodic medical condition; or pregnancy complications that make it difficult for you to demonstrate your abilities, you should contact the <a href="#">Office for Students with Disabilities</a> at 514-398-6009 or <a href="mailto:disabilities.students@mcgill.ca">disabilities.students@mcgill.ca</a> as soon as possible to discuss accommodations. Please also arrange a time to meet with Dr. Dennis to discuss your situation.</th>
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| **“Je dois soumettre mon travail en français”** | In accordance with [McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009).  
Conformément à la [Charte des droits des étudiants de l’Université McGill](#), chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être notés. (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009) |
| **“This assignment deadline conflicts with my Religious Holy Day”** | Students will not be penalized if they cannot write examinations or be evaluated otherwise on their religious holy day(s) where such activities conflict with their religious observance(s). Students who, because of religious commitments, cannot meet academic obligations -- other than final examinations -- on certain holy days are responsible for informing their instructor at least two weeks in advance of each conflict. When the requested accommodation concerns a final examination, students are responsible for advising their faculty office as soon as possible and not later than the deadline for reporting conflicts. Additional documentation confirming their religious affiliation may be requested. |
| **“I need help with my research project!”** | [Nikki Tummon](mailto:nikki.tummon@mcgill.ca) is the Liaison Librarian at McGill who works with the Sociology Department. Nikki is happy to help you with your research project. She can help you find, access, and evaluate sources. You can email her to ask a question or to set up an appointment for a consultation: [nikki.tummon@mcgill.ca](mailto:nikki.tummon@mcgill.ca). If you have a quick question that any librarian could answer, you can also send an email or chat a librarian [here](#).  
Check out the resources on the Sociology Department’s [Library Resource Guide](#).  
Visit student hours to chat about your project. If you have a conflict and cannot make student hours, please email Dr. Dennis to schedule an alternative time. |
<p>| <strong>“I need help with writing, studying, or time management.”</strong> | If you would like assistance with your writing, studying, or time management for the course, please contact <a href="#">Student Services</a>. |
| <strong>“I am struggling with stress / my mental health /</strong> | If you are struggling with stress, your mental health, or your emotional wellbeing, I encourage you to contact a <a href="#">Local Wellness Advisor (LWA)</a> at McGill. LWAs are trained |</p>
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<th><strong>my emotional health.</strong></th>
<th>mental health clinicians who can connect you with appropriate on- or off-campus support resources for your unique situation.</th>
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<td><strong>“I am in a situation that makes me feel unsafe.”</strong></td>
<td>If you are experiencing or impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking, there are resources on campus and/or in the community that can help you. I encourage you to contact the Office of Equity at McGill to discuss your specific situation and needs.</td>
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COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1. Mon., Sept. 11., Course Introduction & Introduction to Qualitative Methods
- Review Syllabus, Assignment Guidelines, and MyCourses site; come prepared with questions
- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 1. “Introduction” (on MyCourses)

Week 2. Mon., Sept. 18., Qualitative Research Questions and Study Design
- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 2. “Asking Questions and Identifying Goals”
- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 3. “Strategies for Designing Research”

Week 3. Mon., Sept. 25., The Ethics of Qualitative Research
- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 4. “Ethics on the Ground, A Moral Compass.”

  DUE (9/29 at 5 pm): Research Ethics Course

Week 4. Mon., Oct. 2., Project Planning
  DUE (10/2 at 5 pm): Group Work Plan In-Class Assignment
  DUE (10/6 at 5 pm): Study Outline, Consent Form, and Recruitment Strategy Assignment

Week 5. Mon., Oct. 9., FALL BREAK
  NO CLASS
  Make-up Day will be Thursday, November 30th.

Week 6. Mon., Oct. 16., Participant Observation & Field Notes
- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 5. “Observing Social Life through Field Research”
Week 7. Mon., Oct. 23., In-Depth Interviewing

- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 6. “In-Depth Interviewing”

DUE (10/27 at 5 pm): Interview Guide Assignment

Week 8. Mon., Oct. 30. Documents & Images as Qualitative Data

- TEXTBOOK: Chapter 8. “Unobtrusive Research”

Week 9. Mon., Nov. 6. Theoretical Orientations


EXTRA

Week 10. Mon., Nov. 13. Coding & Memoing


**DUE (11/13 @ 11:30 am): Data Document #1 (IDI transcript OR Fieldnote) – BRING A PRINT OUT TO CLASS**

**Week 11. Mon., Nov. 20. Coding & Memoing**

NO ASSIGNED TEXTS

Class time mostly devoted to projects

**DUE (11/20 @ 5 pm): Data Documents #2 & #3 (IDI transcript OR Fieldnote)**

**Week 12. Mon., Nov. 27., Writing Up Qualitative Findings**

• **TEXTBOOK:** Chapter 10. “Writing Up Qualitative Research”


AND, review the “Results” Sections from:


**DUE (11/27 at 5:00 pm): Analytic Product Assignment Due**

**Thurs., Nov. 30., PROJECT WORK DAY**

NO ASSIGNED TEXTS

Class time mostly devoted to projects

**Week 13. Mon., Dec. 4., COURSE WRAP UP & FINAL PRESENTATIONS**

RESEARCH PROJECT PRESENTATIONS
DUE (12/4 at 9:00 am): Project Slides Due
DUE (12/4 at 5:00 pm): MAXQDA Project File Due

DUE (12/11 at noon): Final Group Paper
DUE (12/11 at 11:55 pm) Peer Evaluation Due