Course Description

This course focuses on how to log, interpret, and explain human meaning-making, behaviour, and interaction—a fundamental task for almost all qualitative researchers. We will discuss methodological foundations as well as select methodological challenges that are important in the process of gathering and analyzing qualitative data: interpreting behaviour, dealing with talk and language as data, and transforming hunches into explanations. We will also conduct exploratory fieldwork to confront methodological writings with practical experience and vice versa. Additionally, we will read exemplary studies that will help to further hone our methodological tools. These studies are exemplary not in that they are flawless (although almost of them are very good) but insofar as they illustrate typical research strategies and problems that researchers encounter.

Readings

You do not have to buy any books for this class. If material is not posed on MyCourses, it is available to you through the McGill library. Depending on what your reading and work habits are, you might well want to buy one or more books, but I leave this up to you. However you absorb the material, it is essential that you always have your annotated readings available in class, because we want to have the option of working closely with the text.

Remote Delivery Process and Procedures

Course meetings and communications will take place remotely. I understand that the remote learning process can pose specific challenges for individual students. I will do my best to accommodate you. For this purpose, it is essential that you contact me about your concerns or challenges as early as possible. Please do not contact me at the last minute about foreseeable problems.

We will hold our course meetings through Zoom. At certain points, we will share documents and other material. For this purpose, you will need MyCourses, Zoom, and Google Docs. Please close everything else on your computer, including email clients, calendars, and news sites. I will add frequent, short breaks into our meetings (every twenty minutes or so), which will allow you to stand up and stretch, get more water, and
so on. In short: please do everything you can in order to devote your full attention to the course meeting.

Expectations

First and foremost: you need to prepare for class, come to class, and participate in class. In order for you to learn something from this course, you have to participate. This can only work if you do the readings.

I have to make certain assumptions about your background skills and knowledge. Since you have already taken SOC1580, I assume that you are familiar with the basics of study design, especially the logic of case studies. Almost all qualitative research qualifies as case study research. If for any reason you feel insufficiently familiar with the logic of case studies, I recommend the following textbook:


I also assume that you have thought and written about a research project that you are considering, since that is the final paper requirement for SOCI 580. You will be able to further advance your project in this course, if you want. Additionally, having taken SOCI600, I expect that you are familiar with the basics of qualitative research. At certain points, we will touch on basic practices, such as coding and memo writing, but we will not systematically review them. If for any reason you feel insufficiently familiar with the basics of qualitative research, I recommend the following textbooks. I should add that it is useful to own one or both of these books as reference guides.


Course Policies and Statements

- **Inclusive learning environment**: As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.

- **Recording of live sessions**: If one or more students cannot attend course meetings, because they are, for example, located in a different time zone, I will record our sessions and share them through MyCourses. You will be notified through a ‘pop-up’ box in Zoom that a session is being recorded. By remaining in the session, you agree to the recording, which implies that your image, voice, and name may
be disclosed to classmates and that recordings will be made available in MyCourses to students registered in the course.

- **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 (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information). If you are caught engaging in fraudulent activity, you may fail the assignment in question or the entire course, and I may report you to the Dean of Students.

- **Language:** In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

- **Attendance and absence from class:** I expect you to attend course meetings. If you can’t join the class, you should email and tell me. If you have to be absent for more than a week (or for several weeks during the semester), you should confer with me as soon as possible. Note that you must know the course material and any assignments explained in class even if you miss a session. Ask your fellow students for their notes.

- **Late assignments:** Don’t hand in any assignments late. If you are going to be in a crunch because of conflicting commitments, you should inform me well ahead of time. Reading responses, fieldwork exercise reports, and researcher standpoint reflections that are not submitted by the scheduled date will not receive credit. Late final papers incur a penalty of one letter grade per 24-hour period.

- **Land acknowledgment:** McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

**Empirical research and REB approval**

I will ask you to conduct fieldwork exercises for this course. For this purpose, I have approval from the Research Ethics Board. However, the protocol covers fieldwork only as a pedagogical exercise for this class, and therefore not the fieldwork you may want to conduct for your dissertation or other projects you may be working on. Note that the ethics protocol for this course does not cover underage respondents or vulnerable populations (e.g., homeless people, refugees, institutionalized individuals). If you want to work on your own empirical research project as part of this class—and I encourage this—you must apply for REB approval and receive it before you conduct fieldwork.
Assignments and Grading

A) In-class participation: 20%

In the best case, we all thrive from each other’s company. My goal is to improve your methodological skills and your overall grasp of sociology. This should also be your goal in relation to your fellow students. I am asking you to do everything in your power to make this goal attainable. Especially, you should always:

- Maintain your focus, engagement, and motivation. Ask questions and volunteer your knowledge. Talk when you have something to say that might advance the discussion. Especially if you like talking, it is good to consider whether the discussion currently needs your intervention or not. If it does not, it might be better to listen.
- Be constructive in your comments. In particular, this means that you should always engage the strongest version of an argument that is being presented to you. Orally, we tend to present arguments in a form that is weaker than in writing. (Although, for some people, it’s the opposite.) This should not lead us to focus on those shortcomings, but to imagine the best version of the argument that could be made.
- Engage the work your fellow students are doing. Read the material they share, think about the problems they bring to your attention, engage their responses to the readings.

B) Reading responses: 15%

Over the semester, you must submit a total of 9 reading responses. Reading responses should consist of 600-1000 words. Post them on MyCourses -> discussions 24 hours before class (by Monday, 2:30pm). If you post your response later, it won’t count towards your grade. Make sure to read other students’ reading responses before class. I will grade reading responses on a pass/fail basis. Do not write summaries but instead commentaries, analyses, or applications. Feel free to engage the other students’ reading responses in your own response. Reading responses should stand in some identifiable relation to the goals we are going to pursue in the corresponding class session. For example, if we are talking about gaining and maintaining ethnographic access, you should not submit a postcolonial critique of appropriating and selling the people’s narratives for the selfish gain of researchers, although you might well write about the issue of how we can honour the access that informants give us in the field.

C) Fieldwork exercises: 15%.

Please note: At the time of this writing, I am waiting for approval from the Faculty of Arts for conducting in-person research for this course. Depending on the Faculty’s decision, I may have to modify this course component.
I will ask you to conduct exploratory fieldwork, which includes at least two in-depth interviews and potentially also three participant observation exercises. Fieldwork is currently dependent on the COVID-19 situation and I may have to adjust this grade component throughout the semester. You may complete in-depth interviews remotely, but participant observation does require in-person research. If you prefer not to do in-person research, I will give you the option of conducting more remote research instead. If you do choose to do participant observation, you must maintain a distance of two meters from other people at all times and wear a mask in indoor settings. Do not conduct any fieldwork for this class before you discuss it with me! I will give you detailed instructions in class. Before conducting participant observation, you have to describe to me the setting you are planning to observe and the feasibility of maintaining the necessary social distance. Before conducting interviews, I have to approve the interview guide you are planning to use.

What is the point of these exercises? Many people feel paralyzed before they ever set foot in a fieldwork setting. But the truth is that it is actually not that hard to start fieldwork because most people try to be helpful if we approach them politely and with reasonable expectations. You will write up (and share) fieldnotes and summary notes (including transcribed segments) from your interviews for those exercises that we will discuss in class. These notes are the very bedrock of all qualitative research and crafting them well and carefully is a core skill that all qualitative researchers must master.

In terms of sites and interviewees, your exercises should be relevant (even if indirectly) for an empirical project you are currently conducting or planning to conduct. Be creative. Of course, you cannot travel to Tibet for this class if you plan to study the political views of Tibetan monks, but you can interview a Tibetan monk in Montreal or even simply a Buddhist Montrealer. And you can visit a Buddhist temple and observe a ceremony there. The fieldwork exercises will be graded as pass/fail. I will grade your completion, effort, and success of these exercises. Usually, any reasonable effort will be graded as a pass, but I reserve the right to fail submissions that simply follow the path of least resistance.

D) Researcher standpoint reflection: 5%

Qualitative research is often challenging, time consuming, and emotionally taxing. As you begin to conduct qualitative research, it is important to think about who you are and what this means for the qualitative research that you may want to conduct. By week 7 (October 20), please write a short paper (3-5 pages) in which you reflect on your personal character (serene, extroverted, opinionated, nervous, etc.), your social identities (race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and any other identity that may be important to you), your personal circumstances (do you have kids, for example), your politics (anti-racist, conservative, environmentalist, etc.), and any other things that strongly shape who you are. What implications do these things have for fieldwork that you are conducting, might conduct, or would never conduct? How would these things shape your access, rapport, and experience in the field? How would they inflect the findings you might be able to produce? Can or should you “correct” for them? Submit this paper 48 hours before class (2:30pm on October 18).
E) Final paper: 45% (due by the end of December 15)

You have three options for your final paper:

a) **Empirical paper.** If you are currently collecting or have already collected qualitative data, I encourage you to write an empirical paper. You should submit a complete draft, which means that the paper should have an introduction, a rudimentary literature review, methods section, analysis, discussion, and bibliography. The draft does not have to be ready for publication, but it should be clear that it could become publishable at a later stage. Since this option is a highly productive use of your time, I will be generous in grading empirical papers. Of course, the papers should in some way incorporate insights you have taken from this course. If you already have a draft of this paper (in any stage or form) at the beginning of the semester, I will grade the progress you have made in extending and improving it. Consequently, you must send me the most current version of that paper once you decide that you will choose this option for the final paper.

b) **Dissertation or grant proposal.** You might also want to advance your research by writing a dissertation or grant proposal. However, you cannot simply submit a proposal you already wrote for SOCI580 or another class. You can continue to work on an existing proposal, but I will then need to grade the progress you make. If you want to pursue this option, you must therefore send me the most current version of that proposal once you decide that you will choose this option for the final paper.

c) **Conventional final paper.** If you so choose, you may write a methodological or theoretical discussion paper. For example, you could compare how methodological decisions have shaped a set of studies you have read. Or you could write a comparative analysis of how researchers gain access to difficult-to-study populations. If you think that you want to become a “theorist” (although this is no longer a common job profile on the North American job market), this might be your preferred route.

**Schedule**

**Week 1. September 8.** Introduction. *Read the following pieces as a refresher on the foundations and history of qualitative research.*


**Week 2. September 15.** Methodology: interpretive/hermeneutic social science.


Week 6. October 13. More methodology: renegades, oddballs, and unicorns. Select at least one of the following traditions and carefully study it. Of course, feel free to study more than one tradition.

- Extended Case Method:
- Institutional Ethnography:

- Ethnomethodology:

Week 7. October 20. Analysis: practical aspects of coding, writing memos, and similar techniques. *Also: discussion of standpoint reflections (due 48 hours before class).*


Week 12. November 24. Challenges and considerations in “studying up” and “studying down.”


