

SOC 204H1F – L0101  
**Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Sociology**  
University of Toronto  
Fall 2024

**Day/Time: Tuesdays, 11:10am – 1:00 pm (See ACORN for location)**

**Instructor:** Dr. Jordan Brensinger

- Email: [j.brensinger@utoronto.ca](mailto:j.brensinger@utoronto.ca)
- Office Hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-3:30pm, by appointment only. Please sign up at: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/kvjy> (includes location/access information).

**Teaching Assistants:**

- Gihad Nasr. Email: [gihad.nasr@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:gihad.nasr@mail.utoronto.ca)
- Daniela Ugarte. Email: [daniela.ugarte@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:daniela.ugarte@mail.utoronto.ca)

**Tutorials:**

- TUT0301 – Thursdays: 10-11
- TUT0401 – Thursdays: 3-4
- TUT0501 – Thursdays: 4-5  
(See ACORN for locations)

**COURSE INTRODUCTION:**

*What does losing a job mean to the newly unemployed and their families? How do couples decide if, when, and how to use birth control? In what ways do authoritarian regimes leverage the internet to quell dissent in the diaspora? How does environmental degradation contribute to constructing indigenous communities as “non-white”? And why in the world do people seek relationships with other species, from puppies to pigeons?!*

These questions—and a limitless array of others like them—constitute the “bread and butter” of qualitative research. Rather than focusing on the *prevalence* of social phenomena, they attend to the *processes* that produce them and the *meanings* those phenomena have for the people who experience them, as well as how larger social forces relate to both. In this course, we will explore together a number of ways of thinking about and producing knowledge using qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, and comparative historical methods. We will read and engage with pieces that discuss the basics of conducting these methods, as well as ones that use them effectively. We will think about what those methods can offer, and where they come up short. We will contemplate how to do them in ways that honor the people we engage with—and ourselves as researchers. And you will have a chance to put what you’ve learned into practice, conducting interviews and observations of your own and analyzing them collaboratively in small team settings.

Most people trained in sociology don’t work in academia. So, it’s a good thing the methods we’re going to explore this semester have a vibrant life outside the ivory tower; they find common use in industry, nonprofits, and the public sector too. For that reason, we will conclude the course by taking a closer look at and comparing the use of these methods across different settings you may encounter in your personal and professional lives.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Through participating in this course, you should learn to:

- Discuss the strengths and limitations of different qualitative methods
- Identify appropriate questions for qualitative research
- Conduct in-depth interviews and participant observation, working both individually and collaboratively as part of a research team
- Analyze and evaluate qualitative research produced by others
- Understand some of the differences in the use of qualitative methods outside academia

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Due date</b>	<b>Weight</b>
Midterm test	10/15	25%
Team-based fieldwork		
Interview report	Week 6 tutorial	15%
Participant observation report	Week 9 tutorial	15%
Individual portfolio pieces	Weeks 6 and 9 tutorials	10%
Methodological review	11/19	10%
Final test	11/26	25%

*Midterm test (25%).* The midterm test will be administered virtually the week of our 10/15 class. You will have the full week to take the test, with our class session that week specifically set aside for that purpose should you choose to complete it then. The test will likely consist of multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank questions covering all the material from the first half of the course. The TAs will review material for the test and answer questions you have during tutorials the week of 10/8. If you have to miss the midterm and follow the proper procedure (see the section below on “Late or missed assignments”), I will shift the weight of the midterm’s grade onto your final test. Since the final test covers more course material, it is in your interest to take the midterm if at all possible.

*Team-based fieldwork (40%).* You will be assigned randomly to teams of approximately 3 from within your tutorial. Over the course of the semester, you will complete two fieldwork assignments together:

- (1) Interview report (15%). Together, your team will develop an interview guide. Then, each of you will conduct a single audio-recorded interview of at least 30 minutes using your interview guide and transcribe a 10-minute segment of the interview. You will then draft a single report (1,000 words or less) as a team synthesizing across your interviews and reflecting on the experience of conducting interview research.

- (2) Participant observation report (15%). You will conduct several observations of a public setting in the GTA. You will write up fieldnotes on these observations, and then draft a single report (1,000 words or less) as a team synthesizing across your observations and reflecting on the experience of conducting observational research.
- (3) Individual portfolios (10%). As part of each team assignment, you will build an individual portfolio of qualitative data. First, each team member will submit an interview transcript on the due date for the team interview report (5%). Later, each member will similarly submit fieldnotes from observations (5%).

[Note: Working in teams can be a challenging, rewarding, and virtually inevitable part of life. I recommend you make an early effort to build a supportive, collegial environment on your team. Part of that means celebrating wins and finding constructive ways to problem-solve and address conflict. You are welcome to speak with the TAs or come to my office hours to discuss issues in a constructive manner, but we will not alter individuals' assignments to teams.]

*Methodological review (10%).* To give you the chance to practice assessing qualitative research, you will write a methodological review (500 words or less) assessing a recent article on a topic of your interest. The article must: (1) appear in a sociology journal (2) during the past 12 months (3) using qualitative methods covered in this course. For the review, you will evaluate the suitability of the methods using principles from the course (citing course readings), attending to the theoretical appropriateness of the methods for the research question and the method's strengths and weaknesses in practice in the article.

*Final test (25%).* The final test will be administered virtually the week of our last class on 11/26. You will have the full week to take the test, with our last class session specifically set aside for that purpose should you choose to complete it then. The test will likely consist of multiple choice, true/false, fill-in-the-blank, and short-answer questions covering all the material from the course. The TAs will review material for the test and answer questions you have during tutorials the week of 11/19. If you have to miss the final test and follow the proper procedure (see the section below on "Late or missed assignments"), the teaching team will devise an acceptable alternative. Since that alternative may include an online or written make-up test, an oral test, or a term paper, I would encourage you to take the final test if at all possible.

Formatting: All written submissions should be double spaced, size 12 font, Times New Roman, with 1" margins.

#### POLICIES AND CONSIDERATIONS:

*Late or missed assignments and tests.* Since learning depends on our collective involvement in the course, please do everything you can to attend class and submit assignments in a timely fashion. For team assignments, each team will have a 2-day time bank for the semester to be used at your team's discretion (i.e., you can submit one or more assignments late, no questions asked, up to a cumulative total of 2 days late for the team). So, you could submit the interview or observation report 2 days late or both reports one day late without penalty. You do not need to email the TAs or me for approval to use these days. At the end of the semester, we will add up your days late. If you deplete

your time bank, any additional late days will cost all team members' 10 percent of their final grade up to a maximum of the total worth of your team assignments (i.e., 30%).

For all individual work (including portfolio pieces), anyone who submits an assignment late or misses a test will receive a mark of zero for that assignment or test unless the reason is a circumstance beyond their control. **Within three days** of missing a paper deadline or test, you must send me (the instructor) a request for consideration. Students must document their request with **one of the following**:

- Absence declaration via ACORN
- U of T Verification of Illness or Injury Form
- College Registrar's letter (e.g., in case of personal/family crisis or emergency)
- Letter of Academic Accommodation from Accessibility Services

All other requests for late submission or retests will be denied.

*Grading disputes.* If you believe that an assignment or test of yours was graded incorrectly or unfairly, you may submit a regrade request in writing to your TA no earlier than two weekdays after the grade is returned. In your request, you should document the mistake or disagreement and provide a detailed justification for the regrade. A different TA or I (the instructor) will regrade your assignment in its entirety. Be aware that your grade could go up, stay the same, or go down.

*Email.* When emailing the teaching team, you should generally contact your TA first **unless** it pertains to accommodations (see below) or you wish to speak about a sensitive personal matter. You can typically expect a response from one of us within 2 weekdays. Do not expect a response outside of normal business hours (i.e., Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm).

*Technology usage.* I encourage you to use technology, including large language models (LLMs) like Chat-GPT, to facilitate your learning of the course materials. A word of advice though: technology often gets things wrong (especially LLMs), so make sure you understand the strengths and limits of a particular technology—just as we approach methods in this course—and scrutinize its output. Remember, ultimately, the work you submit is under your name and reputation, and not those of the technologies! Finally, as this last point suggests, I ask you to use technology in ways that respect everyone involved in the course—your peers, the TAs, me, and yourself. Cell phones, tablets, and laptops can distract you and those around you. Please honor our collaborative learning by not using these devices during class for non-course related work.

*Recording and sharing lectures and other materials.* I will be recording all course lectures to make the course more accessible to everyone and to facilitate my development as an instructor. In coming to lectures, you agree to be recorded. Also, I invest a lot of time producing the material for this class, so recordings and other materials specific to the course belong to me and should not be copied or shared without my written permission.

*The purpose of office hours.*<sup>2</sup> Why should students sign up for office hours? What topics are appropriate? Office hours are a time for us to talk through any questions, issues, or ideas you have about course content. Similarly, we can chat about your academic or professional interests and goals, as well as any personal issues you may be dealing with that you need to process to thrive in the course. Either

way, while it's a great idea to come with a topic or goal in mind, you definitely don't have to have it "all figured out" before you show up.

*Acting with respect and integrity.* Like I mentioned above regarding technology, how you conduct yourself in the course toward your peers and the teaching team shapes the degree to which others respect and trust you. Mistreatment of others in our learning community (such as making personal attacks) and scholarly misconduct (such as reusing the work of others as if it was your own) can have serious implications for one's personal and professional reputation. I will treat each of you with respect and hope that you will return that respect by treating everyone around you in the course with dignity and conducting your work with integrity. If you have not already, please familiarize yourself with the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#) and feel free to come speak with me about any such questions or concerns.

*Accessibility.* I am committed to creating a learning environment that is both productive and inclusive. If you have a consideration that may require accommodations, please contact Accessibility Services: <https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>, 416-978-8060, or [accessibility.services@utoronto.ca](mailto:accessibility.services@utoronto.ca). Also, I welcome you to come talk to me about ways I may be able to improve your learning experience.

*Accommodations for religious observance.* I affirm your religious expression and will provide reasonable accommodation for observance not already accounted for in the university's ordinary scheduling. Please let me know as soon as possible about any religious observances or anticipated absences that may interfere with your participation in the course.

## REQUIRED READINGS:

Lareau, Annette. 2021. *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. [You can purchase a copy (including pdf or epub) from the [University of Chicago Press](#), or from other online retailers or your neighborhood bookstore]

## COURSE OVERVIEW:

*(Note: I may change some of the readings below if I find something I think works better for a particular week.)*

### **Part I: Introduction**

#### Week 1. September 3<sup>rd</sup>: Course introduction

This week we'll talk about our plan for learning for the semester, including the kinds of themes we'll explore together and the learning assignments and tests. You'll also have a chance to ask questions.

#### *Readings*

- Course syllabus

*Tutorial:* None

*Assignments due:* Complete class survey

### Week 2. September 10<sup>th</sup>: Why qualitative methods?

Why, particularly in a world of big data and artificial intelligence, would we use qualitative methods? What unique opportunities or advantages do those methods offer that we can't get other ways? This week, we will contend with these questions, offering a general orientation to the usefulness of qualitative methods.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 1 (“Introduction”), stopping at the section entitled, “Organization of this book” (p.6)
- Lareau, Chapter 10 (“Conclusion”)
- Desmond, Matthew. 2012. “Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty.” *American Journal of Sociology* 118(1):88–133. (You are welcome to skip most of the section entitled, “Establishing the Discrepancy” [except for the summary at the end of it on p.104] along with the “Discussion” and “Appendix” sections)

*Tutorial:* None

*Assignments due:* None

## **Part II: The Methods**

### Week 3. September 17<sup>th</sup>: In-depth interviews

This week, we begin our exploration of particular qualitative methods with a look at in-depth qualitative interviewing.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 4 (“Learning to Interview”) and Chapter 5 (“How to Conduct a Good Interview”); you can skim the “Two Sample Interviews,” pp.103-38)
- Daminger, Allison. 2019. “The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor.” *American Sociological Review* 84(4):609–33. (You can skim the section entitled, “Uncovering Cognitive Labor”)

*Tutorial:* Introduction of interview assignment and Q&A

*Assignments due:* None

### Week 4. September 24<sup>th</sup>: Participant observation and ethnography

Moving on from interviewing, this week we will read and discuss the method of participant observation and ethnography, typically characterized by longer duration and greater immersion in the social world being studied.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 6 (“Learning to Do Participant Observation”) and Chapter 7 (“Writing High-Quality Field Notes”); you can skim the “Two Sets of Sample Fieldnotes,” pp.180-93)
- Chapter 4 (“Canadian Integration”) in Gowayed, Heba. 2022. *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

*Tutorial:* Interview assignment teamwork and Q&A

*Assignments due:* None

### Week 5. October 1<sup>st</sup>: Comparing interviews and ethnography

When and how should we use interviews versus ethnography? By reading and discussing an important methodological debate in sociology, we will take a comparative look at both methods to better understand their respective strengths and limits.

#### *Readings:*

- Jerolmack, Colin, and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43(2):178–209.
- Lamont, Michèle, and Ann Swidler. 2014. "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2):153–71.

*Tutorial:* Introduction of observation assignment and Q&A

*Assignments due:* None

### Week 6. October 8<sup>th</sup>: Historical and comparative methods

For our final week on particular methods, we move from interviews and participant observation/ethnography to consider historical and comparative methods.

#### *Readings:*

- Chapter 9 ("Historical-Comparative Methods") in Luker, Kristin. 2008. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berrey, Ellen C. 2011. "Why Diversity Became Orthodox in Higher Education, and How It Changed the Meaning of Race on Campus." *Critical Sociology* 37(5):573–96.

*Tutorial:* Midterm test Q&A

*Assignments due:* **Interview report and first individual portfolio piece (due in tutorial)**

### Week 7. October 15<sup>th</sup>. Midterm test

## **Part III: Analysis and Evaluation**

### Week 8. October 22<sup>nd</sup>: Analysis

So far, we've mostly focused on how to design and carry out data collection using various methodological approaches. But what do we do with the data once we have it? This week, we will explore together how to analyze and interpret qualitative data to produce meaningful insights.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 8 ("Data Analysis")
- Lester, Jessica Nina, Yonjoo Cho, and Chad R. Lochmiller. 2020. "Learning to Do Qualitative Data Analysis: A Starting Point." *Human Resource Development Review* 19(1):94–106.

*Tutorial:* Observation assignment teamwork and Q&A

*Assignments due:* None

### No Class October 29<sup>th</sup>: Fall Break

### Week 9. November 5<sup>th</sup>: Assessing the quality of qualitative research

We've considered the value of qualitative research, explored a number of central methods, and grappled with how to analyze qualitative data. An equally crucial skill—one that you will take with you as a consumer of research even if you don't go on to conduct more yourself—is assessing the quality of qualitative research. This week, we will look at a number of leading guides for evaluating qualitative research with an eye for discerning the characteristics of good research.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 2 (“Before You Begin”) pp.35-36 (section entitled, “The Qualities That Characterize Excellent Work”).
- Lamont, Michèle and Patricia White. 2008. “Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research.” Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation. Pp.10-12 ([https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/lamont/files/issqr\\_workshop\\_rpt.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/lamont/files/issqr_workshop_rpt.pdf)).
- Suggested ASR Reviewer Guidelines for Qualitative Papers (<https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASR/ASR%202024%20Reviewer%20Guidelines/ASR%20Reviewer%20Guidelines%20for%20Qualitative%20Papers-1704922365.pdf>)

*Tutorial:* Introduction of methodological review assignment and Q&A

*Assignments due:* **Observation report and second individual portfolio piece (due in tutorial)**

### **Part IV: Additional Topics**

#### Week 10. November 12<sup>th</sup>: Research ethics and politics (including positionality)

What does it mean to conduct research in an ethical manner? That is, how do we honor and care for the people, communities, and so forth that we engage with—as well as ourselves—while producing research of intellectual integrity? While we've discussed this in the course of your team fieldwork assignments, this week we'll consider the issue more fully.

#### *Readings:*

- Lareau, Chapter 2 (“Before You Begin”), pp.27-29 (section entitled, “Who You Are Shapes the Study”)
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1993. “Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22(3):267–94.
- Thambinathan, Vivetha, and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella. 2021. “Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20:160940692111014766.

*Tutorial:* None

*Assignments due:* None

#### Week 11. November 19<sup>th</sup>: Beyond academia

In our final meeting of the semester, we will have a special facilitated dialogue with qualitative researchers from different institutional settings. The conversation will revolve around the experience of conducting qualitative research in those different settings. As the date approaches, I will confirm speaker bios. I invite you to submit and come prepared with questions you have about conducting qualitative research in the speakers' settings.



Readings:

- Introduction and Chapter 1 in Vengoechea, Ximena. 2021. *Listen like You Mean It: Reclaiming the Lost Art of True Connection*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.
- Nichols, Jess. 2023. "The Qualitative Research Process, End-to-End." Retrieved from <https://dovetail.com/blog/the-qualitative-research-process-end-to-end/>
- Fritzlen, Katherine. 2022. "Differences between Academic and Industry Research (from a recovering academic)." *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/buildertrend-research/differences-between-research-in-academia-vs-industry-and-also-some-similarities-df4860f379ae>

Tutorial: Final test Q&A

Assignments due: (optional) Submit questions you have for our class dialogue by 11/15 at 5pm.

**Methodological review**

**Part V: Conclusion**

Week 12. November 26<sup>th</sup>: Final test

**For Further Reading**

Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2024. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Luker, Kristin. 2008. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vengoechea, Ximena. 2021. *Listen like You Mean It: Reclaiming the Lost Art of True Connection*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

Weiss, Robert Stuart. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.

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<sup>1</sup> These examples come from the work of Sarah Damaske, Krystale Littlejohn, Dana Moss, Kari Norgaard, and Colin Jerolmack. See Damaske, Sarah. 2021. *The Tolls of Uncertainty: How Privilege and the Guilt Gap Shape Unemployment in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Littlejohn, Krystale E. 2021. *Just Get on the Pill: The Uneven Burden of Reproductive Politics*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press; Moss, Dana M. 2018. "The Ties That Bind: Internet Communication Technologies, Networked Authoritarianism, and 'Voice' in the Syrian Diaspora." *Globalizations* 15(2):265–82; Norgaard, Kari Marie. 2019. *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People: Colonialism, Nature, and Social Action*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Jerolmack, Colin. 2013. *The Global Pigeon*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> I have Anthony Jack's 2019 book *The Privileged Poor* to thank for drawing my attention to this issue.