

POLI 571: Qualitative Research Methods

University of British Columbia, Department of Political Science, Fall 2009
<http://www.faculty.arts.ubc.ca/bnyblade/poli571.html>

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Description This seminar is intended to help prepare graduate students to be both thoughtful designers of their own qualitative research projects and careful consumers of other scholars' work. The course begins with a review of the nature and purposes of academic research, considering both the epistemological bases of research and the practical tradeoffs that analysts confront when choosing among research strategies. We then focus on consideration of major qualitative research design strategies (process tracing, small-n comparisons, mixed methods) and research techniques (ethnographic, elites interviewing and archival research).

Readings This is a reading intensive discussion seminar. There are no readings for the first week. In subsequent weeks, students are responsible for doing the readings before attending class, which may total 150 pages or more, as well for reading and commenting on each other's work. As Marx wrote "There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits."

Requirements

Eight weekly assignments	40%
Participation	20%
Group Project	20%
Research Design Paper	20%

20% of your final mark will be based on in-class participation. You are expected to actively contribute to discussions. Your mark will not be based on the quantity of your words, but on their quality. It is important to be able to discuss the readings and topics in depth, to raise and address interesting questions, and to engage with your fellow students' ideas. It is impossible to participate if you do not attend, although consideration will be made for excused absences.

20% of your final mark will be based on the group project. There will be 3 groups, each group will be responsible for one of the classes on a specific qualitative research technique (ethnography/participant observation, elites interviewing, archival work) in the final weeks of term. The groups will be responsible for choosing the readings on the topic, developing discussion questions and planning and leading the class time devoted to the topic. Half of this mark will be based on an overall assessment of group performance, and half based on assessments of individual students, both by the instructor and by fellow group members.

20% of your mark will be based on an assessment of your final research design report, which is due by noon on December 16th. A more complete description of the requirements for the research design project can be found in the pages below.

40% of your mark will be based on doing eight short (~1000 word) weekly assignments. Students must post these assignments to a group discussion board (details provided in class) by Tuesday noon before the class for which the assignment is due. Students are expected each week to read their fellow students' assignments before class and write a brief (confidential) email to the instructor each week highlighting one or two assignments that they read that they found particularly insightful, provocative and/or well done. During Part I of the course, the assignments focus on assessment of readings/topics for the week. During Parts II and III, the assignments focus on linking the readings with students' individual research projects and should help in the development of the final paper. There are ten weekly assignments in the syllabus, and students are responsible for doing at least eight of them. Students may choose to do more than eight, in which case their weekly assignments with the eight highest marks will be counted.

Course Schedule

Part I. Research: Goals

Week 1 (9/9). Introduction

Week 2 (9/16). Key Issues in the Philosophy of (Social) Science

Week 3 (9/23). Concept Development and Theory Building

Week 4 (9/30). Descriptive Inference

Week 5 (10/7). Causal Inference

Week 6 (10/14). Brainstorming Session: Student Research Projects

Part II. Research: Designs

Week 7 (10/21). Single Case / Process Analysis

Week 8 (10/28). Small-n Comparative Method

Week 9 (11/4). Multi-Method and Alternative Approaches

Week 10 (11/11). No Class: Remembrance Day

Part III. Research: Techniques

Weeks 11-13 (11/18, 11/25, 12/2). Student-Led Classes (order TBD)

- Ethnography/Participant Observation
- Interviews
- Archival and Document-Based Research

Week 14 (12/9). (Optional Class) Discussion of Research Projects

Research Design Project

Each student will write a proposal for a research project on a research question chosen in consultation with the instructor. The research proposals should reflect careful thought about the methodological issues and tradeoffs we will have read about and discussed during the term. While the proposal will require some limited library research on the chosen topic, the emphasis is less on mastery of a subject matter than on considerations of research design.

The research design project will be done in stages:

Stage 1: Developing a Research Question, Possible Answers and Observable Implications.

During Part I of the class, students should consider topics and choose an empirical research question that can be fruitfully examined with qualitative research methods. For Week 6, rather than a standard weekly assignment, students will submit a document to their fellow students in which they: propose and justify a research question for the research design project, suggest possible answers to the question, and identify distinct observable implications of the possible answers. Week 6's class will be a brainstorming session as students give feedback and suggest further ideas for their classmates concerning the issues raised by their proposed question.

Stage 2: Developing a Research Design, Assessing Research Techniques

Following Week 6's class, students should refine their research question and possible answers in light of the feedback from their fellow students and the instructor. They will also move on to consider what sort of research designs and techniques would be most fruitful in answering their question. The Weekly Assignments in Parts II and III of the course ask students to consider how various research designs and techniques might be fruitfully used in addressing their proposed research question. These assignments should be used to link the concepts from the course readings and discussion to practical application in the students' projects, and be used as an opportunity to continue to refine the individual research design projects.

Stage 3: Pulling It All Together: The Final Paper

A non-mandatory class will be held in Week 14 of term (Dec. 9th) in which students will have the opportunity to present and discuss the status of their project, which will be due the following week. The final submitted research design paper will lay out and justify the research question, discuss possible answers to the question with reference to appropriate theory and literature, and consider the observable implications of the different possible answers. The paper will then go on to propose an appropriate research design and lay out research techniques that would be well-suited to answering the research question and empirically assessing the different possible answers. The paper will include explicit discussion of the benefits and disadvantages of alternative research designs and techniques, including options that have been rejected. This final paper may draw on prior written work students have done in the course, but must be a coherent single paper. The full paper must be no longer than 25 double-spaced pages.

Weekly Assignments

Each weekly assignment should be posted to the discussion board by Tuesday noon before class, and students are responsible for reading, and being prepared to discuss, what their fellow students have written.

Part I

Week 2 The Clark, Golder and Golder piece assigned for this week, "What is Science?" is from a recent introductory comparative politics textbook. Keeping its purpose in mind, write a critical review considering relevant philosophy of (social) science issues, noting both the chapter's strengths and weaknesses.

Week 3 Identify and briefly evaluate an important political science concept (other than democracy, which is discussed extensively in the readings) that we attempt to use in empirical analyses. Evaluate the concept and its use by whatever standards seem most important/useful from the articles for the week.

Week 4 Take one of the concepts considered by either you or one of your classmates in the previous week. Discuss the challenges of various methods of attempting to make descriptive inferences about it in the real world. Consider both the normal 'quantitative' measurement criteria (validity, reliability) as well as other challenges to effective descriptive inference.

Week 5 Do different approaches to causal inference suggest different underlying conceptions of causality? Is there a useful unified conception of causality? Both explain your personal views and compare and contrast the different perspectives of the readings for this week, and from previous weeks as appropriate.

Week 6 Brainstorming Assignment (MANDATORY). Students will submit a document in which they propose and justify a research question for the research design project, suggest possible answers to the question, and identify distinct observable implications of the possible answers.

Parts II and III

Weeks 7-13 Common Question

How could this week's research design or technique help answer your research question? What are the challenges to using it in answering your question?

Weeks 7-9 (Research Design): process tracing, small-n comparisons, mixed-methods
Weeks 11-13 (Techniques): ethnography, elites interviewing, and archival research

Readings

Part I. Research: Goals

1 Introduction

No Readings. Come prepared to (1) introduce yourself and talk a bit about your research interests, and (2) take part in a broader discussion of “political science as a vocation”.

2 Key Issues in the Philosophy of Social Science

- Little, D. 1995. “Philosophy of Social Science” in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.
- Selections from Little’s blog, *Understanding Society*.
- Bond, JR. 2007. “The Scientification of the Study of Politics” *JOP* 69(4): ONLY PAGES 897–900.
- Clark, Golder and Golder. 2008. “What is Science?” Ch 2 in *Principles of Comparative Politics*.
- Kageyama, Y. 2003. “Openness to the Unknown,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 33(1):100-121.
- Antony, L. 2006. “The Socialization of Epistemology.” In *Goodin and Tilly, OHCPA*: 58–77.

3 Concepts and Theories

- Sartori, G. 1970. “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics.” *APSR* 64(4): 1033-46.
- Collier and Levitsky. 1997. “Democracy with Adjectives.” *WP* 49(3): 430-51.
- Gerring, J. 1999. “What Makes a Concept Good?” *Polity* 31(3): 357-93.
- Munck, GL. 2001. “The Regime Question: Theory Building in Democracy Studies.” *WP* 54(4): 119-44.
- Geddes, B. 2003. *Paradigms and sand castles*. Chs. 1 and 2 (pp. 1-81).

4 Descriptive Inference

- Zeller and Carmines. 1980. *Measurement in the Social Sciences*. Ch. 1
- Adcock and Collier. 2001. “Measurement Validity” *APSR* 95(3): 529-46.
- Gerring, J. 2009 ms. “Description: What the Devil is Going on Around Here?”
- Herrera and Kapur. 2007. “Improving Data Quality: Actors, Incentives and Capabilities.” *PA*: 365-87.
- Paxton, P. 2000. “Women’s Suffrage in the Measurement of Democracy” *SCID* 35(3): 92-111.

5 Causal Inference

- Gerring, J. 2005. “Causation: A Unified Framework for the Social Sciences.” *JTP* 17(2): 163-98.
- Reiss, J. 2009. “Causation in the Social Sciences: Evidence, Inference and Purpose” *PSS* 39(1): 20-40.
- Elster, J. 2007. *Explaining Social Behavior*. Chs. 1-2 (pp. 9-51).
- Falletti and Lynch. 2009. “Context and Causal Mechanisms in Political Analysis”. *CPS* 42(9): 1143-1166.
- Ragin, C. 1997. “Turning the Tables.” *Comparative Social Research* 16:27-42.
- Abell, P. 2004. “Narrative Explanation.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:287-310.

6 Brainstorming Session: Student Research Projects

Read your fellow students’ documents and come ready to brainstorm.

Part II. Research: Designs

7 Case Studies & Process Analysis

- Gerring, J. 2007. *Case Study Research*. Chs. 1-3 (pp. 1-63)
- Collier, Mahoney and Seawright. 2004. "Claiming too Much." In *Rethinking Social Inquiry*.
- Collier, Brady, and Seawright. 2004. "Sources of Leverage in Causal Inference." Also in RSI.
- Beck, N. 2006 ms. "Causal Process 'Observation': Oxymoron or Old Wine."
- McDonagh, E. 2008. "Is Democracy Promotion Effective in Moldova?" *Democratization* 15(1):142-161

8 Small-n Comparative Method

- Collier, D. 1993 "The Comparative Method." in Finifter, *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*.
- George and Bennett. 2005. "Case Studies and Theory Development".
- Lieberman, S. 1991. "Small N's and Big Conclusions." *Social Forces* 70(2): 307-20.
- Skocpol/Somers. 1980. "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry." *CSSH* 22: 174-97.
- Ziblatt, D. 2004. "Rethinking the Origins of Federalism" *World Politics* 57 (1): 70-98.

9 Multi-Method Approaches

- Mahoney and Goertz. 2006. "A Tale of Two Cultures." *PA* 14(3): 227-249.
- King and Powell. 2008 ms. "How Not to Lie Without Statistics."
- Seawright/Gerring. 2008. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research." *PRQ* 61(2): 294-308.
- Rohlfing, I. 2008. "What You See and What You Get" *CPS* 41(11): 1492-1514.
- Pearce, LD. 2002. "Integrating Survey and Ethnographic Methods for Systematic Anomalous Case Analysis." *Sociological Methodology* 32: 103-32.
- White, H. 2002. "Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in Poverty Analysis." *WD* 30(3): 511-22.

10 Remembrance Day

No class

Part II. Research: Techniques

In Weeks 11-13 we will consider ethnography, elites interviewing, and archival research. Readings will be determined by student groups. A non-exhaustive resource list with potential readings will be provided in class Week 2 when the groups are formed.

Legalese

Classroom Conduct. Students are responsible for helping create a positive classroom atmosphere and are expected to treat each other with respect. Students should expect a certain degree of disagreement, criticism of arguments and debate in this class—this is a crucial, central portion of the academic enterprise. However, disagreement should be respectful, thoughtful and not personally directed.

Plagiarism. Students should be aware of their responsibilities in regards to academic integrity as they apply to this and all other courses they take here at UBC. For more information, check out the UBC VP Academic website (<http://www.vpacademic.ubc.ca/integrity/>).