

SOC 204H1F – L0101
Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Sociology
University of Toronto
Fall 2025

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

Instructor: Dr. Jordan Brensinger

- Email: j.brensinger@utoronto.ca
- Office Hours: Tuesdays, 2:00-3:00pm, by appointment only. Please sign up at: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/jqzah> (includes location/access information).

Teaching Assistants:

- Michelle Nadon Bélanger, michelle.nadonbelanger@mail.utoronto.ca
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Tutorials:

- TUT0401 – Thursdays: 2-3pm
- TUT0501 – Thursdays: 3-4pm
- TUT0601 – Thursdays: 4-5pm
- TUT5201 – Thursdays: 5-6pm
(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?¹

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 several ways of thinking about and producing knowledge using qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis. 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 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 and analyzing interviews and observations of your own.

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’re commonly utilized 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
- 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:

Assignment	Due date	Weight
Select a research question	9/23	5%
Design an interview guide	9/30	15%
Conduct and transcribe an interview	10/7	15%
Conduct an observation	10/14	15%
Code an interview or observation	11/4	15%
Fieldwork reflection	11/11	10%
Methodological review	11/18	10%
Course reflection	11/25	15%

This course is organized around a series of (relatively) small assignments designed to give you practice thinking through and working with qualitative methods. I will provide a detailed guide for each assignment on Quercus. All assignments will be due by the start of class on the date listed above (and on Quercus). Here is a summary of each assignment:

Select a research question (individual or in groups of up to 3 people). You will identify and articulate a sociologically relevant research question focused on digital media or technology use along with a justification of the question's relevance and importance. This assignment encourages you to begin framing a qualitative inquiry. You may choose to complete this assignment individually or you may form a group of no more than 3 people to complete it together. If you choose to form a group, you will also complete the following assignment, the interview guide, together.

Design an interview guide (individual or in your group from the previous assignment). You will create a semi-structured interview with questions tailored to answering your research question from the previous assignment. This assignment emphasizes question formulation, sequencing, and ethical considerations in qualitative interviewing.

Conduct and transcribe an interview. You will conduct a one-on-one interview of at least 1 hour using your interview guide and produce a full verbatim transcript. This exercise develops practical interviewing skills and introduces transcription as a foundational step in qualitative analysis.

Conduct an observation. You will carry out a short field observation of at least 1 hour in a public or approved setting, making jottings while at the setting and later expanding those jottings into detailed field notes. The goal is to practice systematic observation.

Code an interview or observation. Using your transcript or field notes, you will apply open coding techniques to identify emerging themes. This introduces the basics of qualitative data analysis and interpretive thinking.

Fieldwork reflection. You will write a reflective piece on your experience conducting fieldwork, focusing on challenges, insights, and ethical dilemmas. This encourages critical self-awareness and reflexivity in the research process.

Methodological review. You will review and critique a published qualitative study, analyzing its research design, data collection, and analytical strategies, including presentation of evidence and interpretation. This assignment builds evaluative skills and deepens understanding of methodological rigor.

Course reflection. In a final reflective essay, you will assess your personal learning journey, highlighting key takeaways, challenges, and how your understanding of qualitative research has evolved. You are also invited to consider how you might continue learning about and/or using qualitative methods in the future. This serves as a capstone to consolidate your growth over the term.

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. But life is unpredictable—stuff happens. So, each of you can submit 2 assignments late, up to 1 week each. You do not need permission to use this additional time (Please—we get a lot of emails, so don't email the teaching team to ask about this policy). Any assignment submitted more than 1 week late, or beyond your second late submission, will receive a 0 unless you have followed the formal process for accommodation (see below).

Formal process of accommodation. Within three days of missing a paper deadline or test, you must send me (the instructor) a request for consideration. You must document your request with **one of the following:**

- Absence declaration via ACORN (**can only be used once during the semester**)
- 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 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 welcome you to use technology, including large language models (LLMs) like Chat-GPT, to facilitate your learning of the course materials, with one exception: you may not input any research data (e.g., interview transcripts, fieldnotes) into websites or applications (that would violate our research ethics process). 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! For assistance with using LLMs, check out UofT’s [GenAI Literacy Course Modules](#). 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. Furthermore, issues with technology and OCCS may happen. I therefore make no guarantees as to the availability or quality of the recordings. If you want to make sure you have access to all course content, do your best to attend all lectures.

*The purpose of office hours.*² Why should you 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.

Letters of reference. If you think you might request a letter of reference from me—now or in the future—please plan to attend at least one of my office hours during the semester. This gives me a chance to get to know you beyond your coursework and helps me write a more thoughtful and personalized letter. If I haven’t had the opportunity to speak with you individually, I won’t be able to provide a reference. I’m always happy to chat, so please don’t hesitate to sign 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. 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.

If you would like a digital copy of the text, you can purchase one for 30% direct from the [University of Chicago Press](#) (use code CDDC30 at checkout). Alternatively, you can purchase a print edition from the campus bookstore, 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 2nd: 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: None

Week 2. September 9th: 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

Week 3. September 16th: Thinking through cases

This week explores how qualitative researchers use cases to build theory and deepen understanding. We'll examine what makes a case analytically valuable and how to select, frame, and interpret cases in sociological research.

Readings:

- Collins, Caitlyn, Megan Tobias Neely, and Shamus Khan. 2024. “Which Cases Do I Need? Constructing Cases and Observations in Qualitative Research.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 50(1):21–40.
- *Optional further reading:* Small, Mario Luis. 2009. “How Many Cases Do I Need? On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research.” *Ethnography* 10(1):5–38.

Tutorial: Devising research questions

Assignments due: None

Part II: The Methods

Week 4. September 23rd: In-depth interviews

We'll dive into the practice of in-depth interviewing as a method for accessing lived experience, meaning-making, and social worlds. You will learn about building rapport, asking effective questions, and navigating ethical complexities.

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: Interview ethics primer, guide assistance, and interviewing practice

Assignments due: Select a research question

Week 5. September 30th: Observation

This week introduces participant observation and ethnography as immersive methods for studying social life. We'll discuss the researcher's role in the field, the value of long-term engagement, and the challenges of "being there."

Readings:

- Lareau, Chapter 6 ("Learning to Do Participant Observation")
- Skim Chapter 4 ("Canadian Integration") and more closely read Appendix A ("On Methods") in Gowayed, Heba. 2022. *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tutorial: Q&A about interview assignment

Assignments due: Design an interview guide

Week 6. October 7th. Observation part 2: Field notes

Focusing on the craft of writing field notes, this week emphasizes how observation becomes data. We'll explore strategies for things like capturing detail and balancing description with interpretation.

Readings:

- Lareau, Chapter 7 ("Writing High-Quality Field Notes"; pay attention to the practical insights in the section, "Two Sets of Sample Fieldnotes," pp.180-93)

Tutorial: Observation ethics primer and Q&A about observation assignment

Assignments due: Conduct and transcribe an interview

Week 7. October 14th. Analyzing documents

We turn to documents—texts, images, media—as rich sources of qualitative data. You will learn how to approach documents analytically, considering context, authorship, and the social meanings embedded in texts.

Readings:

- Martin, John Levi. 2017. "Dealing with Documents" – pp.188-211 in *Thinking Through Methods: A Social Science Primer*. Chicago: University of Chicago 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: None

Assignments due: None

Part III: Analysis and Evaluation

Week 8. October 21st: 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: Coding assignment Q&A

Assignments due: Conduct an observation

No Class October 28th: Fall Break

Week 9. November 4th: 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 a bit in the course of your 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* 20:16094069211014766.

Tutorial: None

Assignments due: Code an interview or observation

Week 10. November 11th: 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).
- 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: Q&A about methodological review

Assignments due: Fieldwork reflection

Part V: Conclusion

Week 11. November 18th: Beyond academia

In our penultimate session 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:

- Nichols, Jess. 2023. "The Qualitative Research Process, End-to-End." Retrieved from <https://dovetail.com/blog/the-qualitative-research-process-end-to-end/>
- Fritzen, 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: None

Assignments due: Methodological review

Week 12. November 25th: Recap

In our final week, we'll reflect on the major themes, methods, and insights from the course. Together, we'll consolidate our learning, revisit key concepts, and consider how qualitative methods can inform your future research or practice.

Readings:

- None

Tutorial: None

Assignments due: Course reflection

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.

Martin, John Levi. 2017. *Thinking Through Methods: A Social Science Primer*. Chicago: University of Chicago 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.

¹ 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.

² I have Anthony Jack’s 2019 book *The Privileged Poor* to thank for drawing my attention to this issue.