Course description and structure

This course is an introduction to qualitative research methods for students with some and no experience with qualitative research design and qualitative primary data collection and analysis. As such, the course aims to introduce students to the following:

- what qualitative social science is and what its generic objectives are, especially in comparison to quantitative empirical research;
- what research puzzles and research questions are best tackled through a qualitative research design;
- the range of qualitative primary data that can be used in (political) research and the pros and cons of each for a range of research topics;
- the practicalities of preparing and doing qualitative primary data collection;
- the first steps of primary data analysis;
- writing up the research design and the findings of a qualitative study.

Thus, the course aims to help students understand the scientific applicability of qualitative research in the social sciences (and political science more particularly) as well as identifying the range of considerations made and the steps taken in preparing and carrying out a qualitative empirical study, from thinking through research questions, choosing the most appropriate method, planning and carrying out fieldwork, processing the collected primary data, ‘kick-starting’ data analysis and writing up the results of this process as a research design section and a findings section of a scholarly research report. The applied components of the course comprise (i) crafting research questions for which a qualitative research design is most fitting; (ii) justifying the choice for a particular qualitative research methodology; and (iii) writing up a tentative research design section of a qualitative research report.
Learning outcomes

Students will become familiar with a range of key concepts in qualitative research. More importantly, they will form a clear understanding of the qualitative research cycle comprising (1) the research design cycle; (2) the fieldwork cycle (or the ethnographic cycle) and (3) the analytic cycle (see Hennink et al., 2011: 4); and the range of issues and steps that each of these cycles is habitually predicated on in qualitative research practice. Finally, students will gain understanding of how to write up a research design section and a findings section of a qualitative research report.

In addition, classroom activities are aimed to help students develop a range of:

- **transferable skills:** presenting and critically discussing scholarly work by others; listening critically; offering informed judgements in a concise fashion;
- **study skills:** especially note taking, summarising (orally and in written form), critical reading comprehension, metacomprehension; constructive feedback and team work; defining one’s own learning needs, planning progress and incorporating constructive feedback received; manage a semester-long project in a successful way;
- **critical thinking skills:** especially deductive reasoning; hypothesising; structured argumentation; the application of newly acquired knowledge to new situations.


Class structure

Most meetings consists of a 15-minute instructor- or student-led presentation and/or discussant’s presentation of a key reading, followed by a structured discussion of key concepts; key arguments; key theoretical and methodological approaches; puzzles & questions; the relevance of the subject matter.

Structured discussions follow the results of reading key readings using the I.N.S.E.R.T. technique (Estes and Vaughn, 1986). As such, discussions will focus on what students already knew when reading the text; what they knew differently; what they did not know; and the issues they want to find out more about.

✔ indicates a passage that confirms what students thought was true;
– indicates a passage that disconfirms something students thought was true;
+ indicates a passage that contains important information students had not anticipated;
? marks a passage containing something students want to know more about.


Class requirements and assessment

Students are expected to attend meetings regularly, to actively participate in class discussions and submit independent work according to assignment descriptions on time.
Students’ final grade will consist of the following assignments:

i. class participation in structured discussions and in-class group activities – 30% of the final grade;

ii. presenting the results of the I.N.S.E.R.T. reading technique for the key readings(s) assigned for the session – 30% of final grade (15% written material and 15% oral presentation);

iii. final assignment: a 3000-word (without References) ‘Research design’ thesis chapter detailing the envisaged research design for a tentative qualitative empirical study – 40% of the final grade.

This course encourages the use of so-called rubrics or descriptions of standards of performance. They are meant to help students reflect on their performance and identify aspects of their academic performance where they can improve. Specific rubrics are also used to grade all assignments. Rubrics are available online on the course website: <http://ceulearning.ceu.hu/course/view.php?id=4365>.

**Note on Citing and Referencing**

You will be expected to use Harvard style referencing. Please find an extensive citation and referencing guide on the course website: <http://ceulearning.ceu.hu/course/view.php?id=4365>.

**Key texts of the course**


*Penalties: in case of late submissions of independent work and plagiarism. Departmental rules on plagiarism apply.*
I. WHAT IS QUALITATIVE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND WHAT IS IT FOR?

1. Practicalities & what is social science research and why do we do it?
This session introduces the course and details a number of practicalities: class structure, assignments, grading etc.
In addition, building on discussions in the Scope and Methods course during the first half of the semester, this session is a revisiting of what empirical research in the social sciences is generically about. The discussion is aimed to introduce the different reasons we do empirically grounded research.

Key reading:

Additional reading:

2. How do we do social science research?
The focus of this discussion is the different generic avenues we can take to generate what Charles Ragin calls ‘evidence’. It locates qualitative empirical research in a broader context and compares and contrasts qualitative research with other – usually quantitative – methods.

Key reading:

Additional reading:

3. The history of qualitative research
The goal of this session is to revisit the epistemological and technical history of qualitative research. It defines key theoretical concepts in the social sciences more generally, but the overall goal of the discussion is to understand how thinking about and the use of qualitative methods have come to be what they are today.

Key reading:
4. Qualitative empirical research: what is it for?
This session takes a closer look at what qualitative research is best for (and not so good for). The question it seeks to provide an answer for is: when is a qualitative research design most fitting?

Key readings:

Additional readings:

II. THINKING QUALITATIVELY
5. Deciding on a qualitative research design
Through building on the previous discussion, this session introduces both theoretical and pragmatic considerations in choosing a specific qualitative research design. At the same time, the discussion also outlines the steps one should take when deciding on one’s research design – qualitative of quantitative.

Key reading:

Additional reading:

6. Varieties of qualitative primary data
This session identifies the range of primary data – or ‘evidence’ – that can form the stuff of what one might generically call a ‘qualitative study’. Building on the considerations discussed in session 5, here we talk about the range of primary data and the ways in which one can decide whether the research design chosen is really the most fitting for the research questions asked.

Key reading:

Additional reading:
III. PRIMARY DATA GENERATION

7. Technical issues in qualitative primary data collections

This session hones in on a number of issues to consider prior to setting out to collect qualitative data: sampling and the number of cases; recruitment (for methods relying on human participants); data collection instruments (topic guides and other materials used to interact with study participants to generate data); and the data collection process itself (piloting the instrument, creating rapport in interview situations, techniques to generate richer data through interaction); and research ethics.

Key reading:
Especially: Chapter 7. Focus group discussions, pp. 135-154; and Chapter 4. Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research, pp. 63-70.

Additional reading:

Sampling

Recruitment
Especially: Chapter 5. Participant recruitment, pp. 84-85; 91-107.


Research ethics
Especially: Chapter 4. Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research, pp. 61-79.

8. Collecting primary data

This session engages with the actual experience of being in the field gathering focus group data. The discussion expands on how to prep the focus group situation, how to conduct it, what to pay attention to when eliciting reactions from participants which will constitute the primary data (asking questions, probing for more elaborate answers) and how to finalise the process. The aim is to familiarise students with what needs thinking about and paying attention to during the actual data gathering encounters.

Key readings:
Especially: Chapter 7. Focus group discussions, pp. 136; 138; 140; 154-168.

IV. PRIMARY DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

9. Data analysis – step 1: Prepping data for analysis & CAQDAS

With data now gathered, where does one start the analysis? This discussion focuses on the steps one is recommended to take in preparing the actual substantive analysis part, from transcription to importing textual material into data analysis software and starting to ‘process’ primary data through code development and coding. The discussion is also meant to expand on the benefits (and possible drawbacks) of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) and briefly introduce one software package.

Key reading:

Additional readings:
CAQDAS

10. Data analysis – step 2: Where to start the analysis

The goal of this section is to present strategic and conceptual issues related to how to start primary data analysis. Without detailing the different ways of analysing textual data (including ‘text’ generated through oral interaction), this discussion is aimed at helping students develop a clear picture of how to proceed in the early stages of primary data analysis for a variety of primary data types, incl. in-depth interviews, fieldnotes from ethnographic work or visual data.

Key reading:

Additional readings:
11. Writing up qualitative research

This session centres on how to go about planning and structuring the study you are writing using the qualitative data you will have collected and analysed. The discussion outlines important pointers for a successful writing up process and for comprehensive methodology and data analysis chapters in your study.

Key readings:


12. What is qualitative about qualitative research then?

This session brings to a close discussions about qualitative research and what it is for by asking: what is qualitative about qualitative research and how it is different from other approaches? This session builds on students’ knowledge and puzzles and aims to consolidate knowledge about (1) the differences between qualitative and other methods in terms of social phenomena studied; research objectives; units of analysis; and type of scientific knowledge generated; (2) the types of puzzles that are best served by qualitative research designs.