To provide an intensive introduction to in-depth interviewing as a powerful research method, students will construct, carry out, and complete an original interview study. In the course of a semester, we will move (very quickly) through all stages of research design and analysis.

The course emphasizes the relationship between carefully crafted empirical research and theory building, including how to use an interview study to explain (as well as describe) important social phenomena and processes. We will consider both the logical similarities between qualitative and quantitative procedures and the strengths of in-depth interviewing as a unique research tool. In considering ongoing methodological debates, we will cover both epistemological and practical issues.

Our class meetings will take the form of a workshop within a seminar setting. Students will develop and conduct their own projects and also provide critical feedback to others. Emphasize learning by doing, everyone will spend considerable time conducting original field research outside the class setting. Eight written memos provide the basis for moving through a series of tasks, from formulating a question and developing a research design to choosing a sample and constructing a questionnaire to conducting the interviews and, finally, analyzing the collected material. The culmination of this process will be an article-length paper.\(^1\)

Since the main goal is to provide a forum for launching or extending a project that may lead to a publishable article or a dissertation, students will focus their reading on the empirical and theoretical work that is relevant to their chosen topics, including books and articles that provide good models using in-depth interview findings to answer core theoretical and empirical questions. Those students who wish to continue their projects beyond the semester will also have the option to take an independent study in the following semester.

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\(^1\) Since time constraints make it impossible to complete the human subjects review process, interviews will be conducted as pretests within the context of class instruction. We will consider issues regarding the protection of human subjects thoroughly in class.
Class Schedule
(subject to change!)

January 25: Introduction

February 1: Formulating a Research Question
(Exercise 1 due on Jan. 29.)

February 8: Constructing a Research Design
(Exercise 2 due on Feb. 5.)

February 15: President’s Day

February 22: Choosing a Sample and Gaining Access
(Exercise 3 due on Feb. 19.)

March 1: Constructing a Questionnaire/Interview Guide
(Exercise 4 due on Feb. 26.)

March 8: Conducting Interviews
(Exercise 5 due on March 5.)

March 15: Spring Break (continue to conduct interviews)

March 22: Conducting Interviews (cont.)

March 29: Human Subjects Issues and Requirements
(Exercise 6 due on March 26.)

April 5: Developing a Framework for Analysis
(Exercise 7 due on April 2.)

April 12: Developing a Framework for Analysis (cont.)

April 19: Completing Data Analysis and Writing Results
(Exercise 8 due on April 16.)

April 26: Completing Data Analysis and Writing Results (cont.)

May 3: Final Research Reports

May 10: Papers due
Written Memos

A series of short memos – one to two pages on average – are described below. Each memo should be circulated via e-mail to all class participants no later than the Monday before the class in which a memo is to be discussed. The class will be devoted to discussing and providing feedback on these memos.

Exercise 1: Formulating a Question

Develop a question or set of questions to focus on in your research. This question should focus on a puzzling or problematic "fact" of social life that you wish to understand. A good sociological question asks not only what, but why and how. The question(s) you pose should point, either explicitly or implicitly, to a “dependent variable” – that is, your question should help clarify what you are trying to explain and how it might vary in the “real” world.

Although this exercise may appear easy, posing a theoretically powerful and empirically rich question is one of the most difficult – and most important – tasks of qualitative research. If done well, the rest will flow more smoothly. To move forward with in-depth interviewing, the research question(s) need to be sufficiently specified to point the way to knowing what questions to ask and what field settings and samples to address.

Exercise 2: Constructing a Research Design

In contrast to ethnographic and observational research, in-depth interviewing requires the early development and formulation of a research strategy and study design. This stage involves several related tasks – including thinking through the theoretical issues, choosing a strategically targeted sample, and considering the range of substantive information that needs to be collected from respondents.

First, it is helpful to outline the range of alternative theoretical perspectives (or alternative explanations) that are relevant to answering the question(s) you have posed. More specifically, this involves thinking about the factors and processes (similar to independent variables in the language of quantitative analysis) that might help explain variation on the “outcomes” (or, in the language of quantitative analysis, dependent variables). Rather than an undirected literature review, this means considering the range of competing explanatory frameworks that have been used or may be useful to address your research questions (including those you wish to refute as well as those you expect to apply).

In light of these theoretical considerations, the research design should specify what groups and individuals will be interviewed and why. In choosing a sample of respondents, what factors need to be controlled, and what should vary? What comparisons need to be made within the sample, and what groups or variations within a group should be sampled to make these comparisons? What information needs to be collected to measure relevant (and potentially relevant) factors, processes, and outcomes?
Exercise 3: Choosing a Sample and Gaining Access

It is time to go into "the field," gain access to a research site, and choose a sample. Write a brief summary of your findings, conclusions, and remaining problems. Some questions to consider include: What is the research setting, and who do I need to interview? What is my sampling strategy, and how will I locate and gain access? What are the practical barriers, and how can they be overcome? What larger population do the data represent, and what are the trade-offs between different sampling strategies?

Exercise 4: Constructing a Questionnaire or Interview Guide

Construct a questionnaire or interview schedule for collecting and organizing information. The questionnaire should be open-ended and probing, but also organized. It should make sense to those being interviewed and also measure the factors, processes, and outcomes that are being addressed. In addition to ascertaining the sequence of relevant events, experiences, and actions, it should also measure the meaning and consequences of these events and experiences.

To develop your questionnaire, pretest a preliminary interview with selected people who represent the major groups – or ideal types – in the sample. Questions to consider include: What information do I need to gather? What is the best format to evoke the needed information? How will the interview be organized temporally? How will it gather information on what, why, how, when, and with what consequences?

Exercise 5: Conducting Interviews

Submit several interview transcripts. Questions to consider include: What do these interviews reveal about how to change or expand the interview questions or sample? How will information be recorded, organized, and analyzed?

Exercise 6: Human Subjects Issues and Requirements

Procure a copy of human subjects guidelines and prepare a proposal for human subjects review.
Exercise 7: Developing an Framework for Analysis

It is time to develop a framework for analyzing findings. Remember that the goals of analysis are *discovery* and *explanation*. In developing an analytic strategy, issues and questions to consider include:

What findings are *surprising*, *new*, and *unanticipated*? What are the implications of these findings for theory? For example, how do they expand, clarify, change, challenge, rebut, or contribute to current understandings and debates?

What categories are emerging on any outcomes (or dependent variables)? How do these categories differ from the ones originally expected? What is the variation?

Which factors and processes (or independent and intervening variables) help explain your outcomes? Which factors are not helpful, despite early expectations or their role in the theories of others?

What overall analytic strategy will enable you to answer the core empirical questions? What critical comparisons are most illuminating? What coding schemes and frameworks will help make sense and bring order to the data? Which information will be central (and which peripheral or irrelevant)? How will this approach help uncover and demonstrate the existence of important relationships, as well as the lack of expected relationships.

What are the theoretical implications of the findings, and what theoretical framework will best answer your research question(s)? What is your argument, and how does it differ from prevailing understandings and contribute something new?

If this exercise is especially difficult, that is a good indication that the “thing” you are explaining and the possible ways to explain it need to be specified more clearly.

NOTE: A number of software packages are available for coding and analyzing qualitative data. I can provide an overview of my preferred program, Atlas.ti.
Exercise 8: Writing Results

Submit an outline of the research paper. The paper should include:

(1) A statement of the question(s) being posed, the empirical and/or theoretical puzzles under investigation, and/or the dependent variable(s) to be explained.

(2) A brief theoretical overview of competing approaches to answering the research question(s) or explaining the variation under investigation, including an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and your own approach to the problem/topic/question.

(3) A brief explanation of the methods and research strategy developed to answer the question(s).

(4) A presentation and analysis of the significant findings as well as their relevance to the questions and theories under investigation.

This section should form the bulk of your paper. It should present strategically chosen material that demonstrates your key arguments and findings and uses them to advance your theoretical argument.

(5) A conclusion that briefly summarizes the findings and presents the theoretical implications of the research.

Final Paper

Submit an “article”—that is, a paper based on the analysis of your interview material. While content is always more important than length, most published articles are between 20 to 30 pages (double-spaced).
Some general methodological texts that may be helpful:

**General Issues in Qualitative Research:**
Howard Becker, *Tricks of the Trade*
Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*

**Interviewing:**
Robert Merton, *The Focused Interview* (Free Press)