Target audience and auditing
This course is designed for PhD students in the social sciences who will be conducting some form of fieldwork (interviews, observation, ethnography, focus groups, or archival research and historical case studies) for their dissertations. Although much of the material is from political science, doctoral students from other disciplines (Urban Studies and Planning, Management, Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, Public Health, etc.) should find the class valuable to their studies. MA students and advanced UGs whose theses involve a significant fieldwork component can also enroll with permission of the instructor, though it will be a challenging class.

Auditors are permitted. Auditors should do the bulk of the readings for the classes they attend, in order to be able to participate in class discussion, but do not need to do any other readings nor any of the assignments. [The readings expected of auditors are noted in brackets for each week in the header for “Readings”]. Which sessions auditors choose to attend is up to them, with the exception that all auditors must attend: (1) at least five classes total over the semester, (2) the first class on February 11, and (3) the third class, scheduled for February 25, which focuses on ethics in the field. However, I advise auditors to attend the first five sessions, especially if they want feedback on their project.

Given the natural progression of doctoral studies, it makes most sense for students to take this class in their second or third year; however, those students who have enough of an idea about their own research agenda to begin pilot fieldwork would benefit from taking it in their first year. Those who still have some fieldwork left to do but have not yet received formal training in field research methods are encouraged take (or audit) it in their Nth year. Those who have taken the class for credit in previous years are welcome to return as auditors in subsequent for a refresher; they do not face the restrictions listed above about which sessions they must attend.

Goals of the class
The central goal of this class is to give students the tools to do fieldwork. This goal is accomplished in four ways:
1. The readings: Many of the readings provide practical lessons. There is a logic to the order in which the readings are listed for each week – generally speaking, overview followed by conceptual material followed by highly applied material. I recommend reading them in that sequence.
2. Guest speakers. You will hear from a number of speakers from other professions with experience in eliciting information from different sorts of people in different contexts. This year, the tentative list of outside speakers includes:
   o an investigative journalist;
   o a former federal prosecutor;
   o a senior management consultant, who will preside over mock interviews;
   o a professor at a peer institution who can provide advice on archival research;
   o a panel of doctoral students fresh from the field; and
   o a member of MIT’s professional staff with experience conducting focus groups.
You should be able to take away at least one lesson from each of the speakers, even though many are from non-academic fields – and ideally, more than one lesson. (Some of these speakers’ schedules are, for obvious reasons, subject to scheduling changes, and some may join by VTC.)
3. **Practice.** Some class sessions will include role-playing and simulation so that you can develop your interviewing skills. The goal here is to improve your technique and avoid costly blunders.

4. **Critique of your fieldwork technique, in a collegial, low-risk environment.** You will present examples of your interviewing (or other fieldwork) for comments from your classmates and the instructor.

How much you invest here is some choice in the syllabus (including the entirety of the last two weeks), so in total you will spend:

- Two to four sessions on unstructured and semi-structured interviewing;
- One or three sessions on archival research and historical case studies;
- One or three sessions on “site-intensive research”; and
- One or three sessions on focus groups.

For instance, if you wanted to concentrate on interviewing, you would spend four weeks learning about, practicing, conducting, and writing up interviews, as well as one week each on focus groups, site-intensive research, and archival work/historical case studies.

The class will only briefly touch on survey research (i.e., fully standardized and structured interviews consisting almost exclusively of closed-ended questions, conducted at arms-length, with a pre-set sampling frame that obeys statistical properties, and a large N) and field experiments (i.e., projects that attempt to measure the effect of a specific stimulus on people’s behavior in their natural habitat). These methods are already the subject of well-conceived courses at MIT.

In addition to practical skills acquisition, the class should also afford you insight into the theoretical issues and emerging debates in the field with regard to qualitative methods and fieldwork. Understanding of these issues and debates is necessary to evaluating the work of other scholars. It will also help you to design and justify your fieldwork plan, as well as to anticipate critiques of your own research.

Ethics in fieldwork is an essential component of the class. We will devote the third class session to a general discussion of the issues at stake, but we will also return to how these principles apply to specific situations in several other sessions. The third session itself includes a presentation by a representative from the Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES), MIT’s Institutional Review Board. As we will discuss in class, however, there are ethical requirements for field researchers that go beyond compliance with COUHES.

**Assignments and grading**

Your written assignments and presentations constitute 75% of your grade; the longer assignments count more than the shorter ones. Assignments are due, posted on the Stellar site, by noon on the day of class, unless otherwise indicated.

Keep in mind that the target audience for presentations in class, when it is not self-improvement, is your fellow classmates rather than the instructor. Focus your presentation what they want and need to hear to be better researchers.

In addition to the formal presentations, participation in class discussion is a vital component of the course (25% of your grade). Participation includes giving helpful feedback to your colleagues, as well as analysis and commentary on the readings. You are expected to attend all class meetings, be conversant with the material assigned, and be prepared to discuss it. Unexcused absences will obviously affect your grade.
Accessing the readings
Where Fair Use doctrine makes it impossible to have the readings available electronically, copies of the books will be on reserve in Dewey Library (E53). Because they might be scarce the week of class, you might consider buying one or all of the following books:


**Note that there is reading due the first week of class.**
Schedule

1. **February 11: NOTE THAT THERE IS READING DUE THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASS**
   In class
   - Introductions
   - Student questions on the syllabus
   - Why do fieldwork?
   - Discussion of readings.
   - Time permitting, discussion of student research projects (including case selection)

Readings [Auditors may skip the Van Maanen reading]
- This syllabus.

Recommended readings [Those in the field of public health or education should substitute this reading for the Van Maanen reading above]
- John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth. 2017. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design (International Student Edition): Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Fourth edition). Read only the sections on “Designing a Qualitative Study” (except part on ethics), overview of at least one of their five “approaches”, and the example of a study that goes with that approach.

Assignment
- None
2. **February 19 (note that this class falls on a Tuesday, in accordance with MIT’s schedule)**

In class

- Discussion of “qualitative methods”, including (a) causes of effects versus effects of causes; (b) logic of inference, including necessity, sufficiency, and examples of INUS conditions; (c) within-case analysis (process tracing, path dependence, etc.); (d) concept measurement and contextualization; (e) sampling and “data” collection; and (f) interpretation of evidence.
- Critiques and solutions for methodological challenges in fieldwork
- Evolving standards of transparency.
- Discussion of field work plans.

**Readings** [Auditors attending this session may skip the second half of Goertz and Mahoney (2012)]


**Assignments**

- Develop a fieldwork plan for your dissertation of at least 200 words. (It can considerably be longer if you wish.) This plan should include the outlines of where you will go, what you will do, and why. Post it on the Stellar site by noon on the 19th. Be prepared to briefly summarize it in class.
3. **February 25: Ethics in the field**

In class

- ADHD drivers and those who research them.
- Guest Speaker: Representative of COUHES and possible faculty guest speaker. (Who count as subjects? What does “informed consent” mean, and how can it be done in the context of ethnography? What to do *ex post* if a conversation later becomes the basis for research? What constitutes “harm”, and does it include re-traumatization? Do those hired to do things in the field (e.g., interviews) on behalf of the researcher need to have human subjects training, and of what sort? What kinds of guarantees about confidentiality can researchers offer? How does COUHES interpret the Belmont Commission concept of “beneficence”? Etc.)
- Summary of the cases from readings.
- Discussion of ethical issues, including: what can be promised in the way of confidentiality; “what’s in it” for the subjects and benefits to communities; gauging the “benefits to science”; representation; “positionality”; and relationships with informants. (As a group if possible, using breakout groups to identify issues if not.)

**Readings [Auditors should do all the required readings]**

  http://repository.umpwr.ac.id:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3723/qualitative_research_methods_for_the_social_sciences.pdf?sequence=1.
- **Read ONE of the following:**
  1. Boston College papers case
     - Read some of the news coverage of the case (you can choose specific articles, such as https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jan/24/ira-gunmen-face-arrest-boston-college-belfast-project-tapes).
  2. Conflict zones and trauma


Harvard Facebook case


Other recent coverage of this case, of your choosing.

Alice Goffman case

Material as appropriate to understand the case (e.g., read selections from Goffman’s book On the Run, watch Goffman’s TED talk, or both).


Venkatesh case


Covert field work (by sociologists)


Assignments

• Complete IRB training: for MIT students, [http://couhes.mit.edu/training-research-involving-human-subjects](http://couhes.mit.edu/training-research-involving-human-subjects). Send me the certification email you receive from them before the start of class.
4. March 4: Field work plans

In class
- Presentation and critique of field work plans.

Readings
- Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 6 (“Interviews, oral histories, and focus groups”), pp. 190-233. [Non-political scientists should discuss with me alternative readings if appropriate.]

Assignments
- Develop a draft fieldwork plan for your dissertation of ~2,000 words. This plan should include where you will go and what you will do. Make sure your plan reflects the discussions from the previous three weeks (e.g., if you are doing interviews, how to select the interviewees). [If your plan exclusively involves historical case studies and archival work, with no interviews or site-intensive work, please discuss an alternative assignment with me ahead of time.]
- Summarize your field work plan in 2-3 slides for presentation and critique. The first slide should include the problem statement and background; the second should discuss your specific research plans. If you have a third slide, it should identify potential problems, ask for feedback on specific issues, tee up questions for class discussion, etc. The maximum length of your presentation should be 40 minutes divided by the number of people in the class. Thus, if there are 10 people, your presentation should be no more than 4 minutes. Load your slides onto the class website by noon on the 4th.
- Start preparing an interview guide.
5. March 11: Interviewing (!): Asking clear questions

- Review interview guides and practice interviews in class (in pairs).
- Discussion of lessons from preparing interview guides.

Readings [Auditors attending this session should do all readings]

- Chappell Lawson. nd. “Hints on writing an interview guide”.

Assignment

- Develop a draft interview guide for your fieldwork (after doing the reading). Rehearse it. (If this exercise takes you less than 5 hours, you haven’t done it right. If it takes you more than 9 hours, stop at 9 and revise it next week.) Post it to the Stellar site by noon on the 11th.
- Conduct at least one pilot interview (e.g., on a friend or colleague), revising the guide afterward.
- If you think your interview guide is done and need no further feedback, submit your COUHES application (to COUHES and to me).
6. March 18: Interviewing (II): Technique
In class
- Discussion of interview techniques with Grant Freeland, Senior Partner, The Boston Consulting Group (see https://www.bcg.com/about/people/experts/grant-freeland.aspx)
- Interview role playing.
- Discussion of interview clips.

Readings: None.

Assignments
- Join one of your classmates on one of his or her interviews. It's up to you to pick a partner in advance (or to pick partners in round-robin style).
- Conduct at least three pilot interviews of your own, revising your interview guide and your overall proposal as appropriate. (If you have already submitted your COUHES application, these can be real interviews.) One of your classmates should join you on at least one of these interviews. but please contact me if that proves too challenging for whatever reason (e.g., no one else speaks the language of the interview you will conduct), so that we can work out an alternative arrangement for someone to observe your interview.
- Revise your fieldwork plan and interview guide, and submit your COUHES application (to COUHES and to me). Post the revised fieldwork plan, the revised interview guide and the COUHES application to the Stellar site.
- Record a clip of an interview you conducted (1-2 minutes), which you will present in class for critique. If you cannot record your interviewee for confidentiality reasons, just record your end of the conversation. Post the clip on to the Stellar site by noon on the 18th.

March 25: SPRING VACATION. No class
7. April 1: Focus groups and group interviews

In class
• Focus group administered by Jennifer Greenleaf, Political Science and Social Science Librarian Liaison, MIT. (https://libguides.mit.edu/profiles/jgleaf) [You, the class, will be the subjects of this focus group.]
• Discussion of tips on focus groups (e.g., using a local facilitator) and finding ready-made groups.
• Brief discussion of Braithwaite et al. (2004) and Cyr (2016).
• Presentation and critique of focus group proposals.

Readings [Auditors attending this session should do all of the readings]

Recommended reading

Assignment
• Design a focus group and plan recruitment of 5-10 subjects. You may rely on joining existing groups that meet either formally or informally and turning them into your focus group, rather than on standard recruitment (see D. Walsh. 2012, “Doing ethnography”, in C. Searle, ed. Researching society and culture, 3rd edition. London: Sage.); these could include student groups, informal labor markets, street-corner hangouts, church gatherings, regular tables at coffee shops, etc. The goal of the focus group is up to you: pre-testing potential materials for an experiment or survey, investigation of political narratives among a particular group of people, understanding how attitudes revealed in interviews might change in the context of an interactive conversation, etc. However, it should be related to your research.
• Be prepared to present your focus group plan in no more than two slides for critique in class. These slides should specify all the basic elements of a focus group discussed in the readings, but they should also provide context on how the focus group fit into your project. Post the slides to the Stellar site by noon on the 1st.
8. April 8: Archival research and comparative historical cases
   
   In class
   • Discussion of archival research with Marika Landau-Wells (http://www.marikalandau-wells.com/): equipment, making appointments, uploading and transcription, hiring local RAs, other tradecraft.
   • Brief discussion of lessons from Trajectories readings and Harrison (1992).
   • Presentation on cases and critiques.
   • Handling “evidence”, coding rules, “expanding” cases, etc.

   Readings [Auditors attending this session may skip Harrison (1992)]
   • Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read. 2015. Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 5, “Thinking outside the archive box: discovering data in the field” (pp. 178-89).
   
   Pick ONE of the following three cases:
   1. U.S. Congress (text analysis of interviews + other records)
   2. U.S. entry into the Vietnam War (interpreting historical, mainly primary, sources)
      ▪ Ian S. Lustick. 1996. “History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias,” American Political Science Review, 90 (3): 605-618. [Note that this reading is not directly relevant to this case.]
   3. The creation of the European Economic Community (weighing historical sources)

   Assignment
   • Conduct either three interviews or four hours of primary-source research (or secondary source reading with prior approval), posting the notes to the Stellar site by noon on the 8th:
   • Be prepared to present in class on the case you chose. You do not need to prepare a formal presentation, but if you will be using visual aids that you want to display in class, make sure to post it to the Stellar site by noon on the 8th. Remember as always that the audience is your classmates.

April 15: Patriot’s Day Holiday. No Class
9. April 22: Participant-observation and ethnography

In class

- Central questions in ethnographic work
  - The role of immersive ethnography in the social sciences.
  - The interpretivist epistemology. Criteria for sound narrative analysis (“apparency”, “verisimilitude”, and “transferability” or “natural generalizability”, “trustworthiness” of researcher, etc.).
- Presentation and critiques of coding sheets for those doing site-intensive research.
- Class exercise in breakout groups: develop a coding sheet on attitudes of Berliners about Allied occupation in 1946. Then consider the challenges of systematically observing and coding the following 15-second scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5i9k7s9X_A (1:27-1:42).

Readings [Auditors attending this session may read one substantive chapter in Schatz ed. (1999) instead of 2+; they should still read pp. 25-43, 49-50, and 303-316. Non-political scientists should discuss possible substitute readings with me.]

  
Assignment

- If you plan to do any “site-intensive” research for your dissertation, expand your previous fieldwork plan to incorporate a plan for “site-intensive” research and develop a coding sheet for observations. Be prepared to present your coding sheet in class for critique. If you do NOT plan to do any site-intensive research, conduct at least four interviews. (If you plan to do neither site-intensive field work nor interviews for your dissertation, discuss the assignment with me ahead of time.) Post your revised plan to the Stellar site by noon on the 22nd.
- Be prepared to present your substantive chapter from Schatz (2009), ideally with a visual aid of some type. Your presentation should be no more than 30 minutes divided by the number of students in the class. (in other words, if there are 5 people in the class, your presentation should be no longer than 6 minutes.) As always, keep in mind that your audience is your fellow classmates, not the instructor; tell them what they need to know from this chapter that is useful in their own research. Post the visual aid you will present to the Stellar site by noon on the 22nd.
10. **April 29: Tales of the Field**

In class

- Presentation of interviews (or other field work).
- Graduate student flash presentations (Elissa Matz Berwick, Tugba Bozcaga, Cullen Nutt, and Minh Duc Trinh). Each presentation will cover the following in 2-3 slides:
  - Description of research question and fieldwork plan
  - Positive lesson(s) learned
  - Negative lesson(s) learned
- Discussion with panel of practical challenges of adjustment in the field (making contacts, where to live, managing personal relationships, safety concerns, etc.).

**Readings** [Auditors attending this session can skip Coffrey (1999)]

- Chappell Lawson, nd. “Preparing for the field” checklist.
- Material from at least one of the graduate students on the panel (see below).

**Assignments**

- Conduct at least one interview and post your notes to the Stellar site by noon on the 29th.
- Review your notes and recordings from your interviews (or focus groups or archival work or “site-intensive” field work) so far, identify one place where you may have made a mistake or faced a difficult choice, and prepare to discuss it in class. If you are recording your interviews, post a short audio clip to the Stellar site by noon on the 29th. If you are not recording your interviews, post a single PowerPoint slide to the Stellar site by noon on the 29th with a transcript of the relevant segment of the interview. If your mistake or lesson involves a choice of whom to interview or how to interview that person, submit a single PowerPoint slide describing the situation to me by noon on the 29th. Your presentation in class should be no more than two minutes; make sure to practice and time yourself before the class.
11. May 6: Choice week

In class
- Presentations. In your presentation, remember that the target audience is your fellow classmates; tailor your presentation to what they would want to know and keep it engaging. **Note that you will be unceremoniously cut off at the time limit. This maximum time limit is 60 minutes divided by the number of students in the class.**
- Time permitting, practice interviews.

Readings
- Depends on assignment (see below).

**Assignment (PICK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING):**

**Option 1: Focus Group.** Conduct a focus group or group interview related to your project of ~45-60 minutes, write up the results, and present your findings in class (see time limit above).

**Option 2: Interviews.** Conduct at least 6 hours of interviews. Present the results in class (see time limit above). You may wish to present on just a small part of what you have done (e.g., a single interview) or to summarize the entirety or your fieldwork so far. Also read the following:

**Option 3: Archival or secondary source work.** Do archival work on a “mini” historical case (approximately 1,000 words), drawing on multiple primary and secondary sources that you have not already read. Present the results in class (see time limit above). Make sure you have accessed all the sources you find believe are relevant and assess the sources you will use. Also read the following:
  - New standards for case studies (from Week 2) if you did not already read it.

**Option 4: Observation or participant-observation.** Do at least 6 hours of observation using your coding sheet and present the results in class (see time limit above). Your presentation may take any form or style you wish (an essay read aloud, a multimedia presentation, or whatever). You may wish to present on just a small part of what you have done (a scene, the findings from one salient interview, etc.) or to summarize the entirety or your fieldwork so far. Also, read the following:


**ONE of the following four articles:**

- John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth. 2017. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design (International Student Edition): Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Fourth edition). Read chapters on “Data analysis and representation” and writing a qualitative study’. [This reading is recommended for students in public health or education may replace the above with.]

**Option 5:** Do a book report and prepare a presentation on your book (see time limit above), focusing on (1) what the author did and found, (2) your assessment of the fieldwork or archival work, and (3) any practical lessons you learned. Feel free to address the issue of “field to publication” rather than just the fieldwork itself. As always, remember that the audience for your presentation is your fellow students. I recommend those listed below; however, you may choose another book that uses field work as its primary empirical material, with prior approval, as long as it is not something you have read in another class. For instance, if you have a regional interest, consider reading through the book reviews section of the leading regional journal to identify potential volumes. If you are thinking about your own field work appendix, consider option (e). Suggested readings include:

**a. Economic and political development**


**b. More sociological, anthropological, and interpretivist**


c. **Conflict**

d. **Regional studies.** Pick a prominent recent book in your area – ideally by a junior scholar – that relies heavily on field work, reading through the book reviews section of the leading regional journal to identify potential the right book if necessary. I recommend that you reach out to the author and begin a conversation about the research with her; in other words, use this as an opportunity to make a connection. Unless the book is mainly ethnographic, make sure you clear the choice with me.

e. **Grab-bag.** Read five methodological appendices from different social science studies.

Post your slides or other material to be presented to the Stellar site by noon on the 6th.
12. May 13: Choice week

In class

- Presentations. In your presentation, remember that the target audience is your fellow classmates; tailor your presentation to what they would want to know and keep it engaging. **Note that you will be unceremoniously cut off at the time limit. This maximum time limit is 90 minutes divided by the number of students in the class.**

Readings

- Depends on assignment (see below).

**Assignment (PICK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING):**

**Option 1: Focus Group.** Conduct a focus group or group interview of ~45-60 minutes, write up the results, and present your findings in class (see time limit above).

**Option 2: Interviews.** Conduct at least 7 hours of interviews. Present the results in class (see time limit above). You may wish to present on just a small part of what you have done (e.g., a single interview) or to summarize the entirety of your fieldwork so far.

**Option 3: Archival or secondary source work.** Do archival work on a “mini” historical case (approximately 1,000 words), drawing on multiple primary and secondary sources. Present the results in class (6-8 minutes). Make sure you have accessed all the sources you find believe are relevant and assess the sources you will use. Also, read at least one of the following:
  - Another book of your choice, with prior approval.

**Option 4: Participant-observation.** Do at least 6 hours of observation using your coding sheet and present the results in class (see time limit above). Your presentation may take any form or style you wish (an essay read aloud, a multimedia presentation, or whatever); you may wish to present on just a small part of what you have done (e.g., a scene) or to summarize your fieldwork so far. Also, read other articles listed for last week that you did not already read.

**Option 5:** Do a book report and prepare a presentation on your book (see time limit above). For details and list of recommended books, see previous week.

**Option 6: Transparency debates in the discipline.** Read through the reports from the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations and other related sites (e.g., recent panels at APSA like https://www.qualtd.net/, https://dialogueondart.org/perspectives-on-da-rt/, various blogs, http://comparativenewsletter.com/files/archived_newsletters/newsletter_spring2016.pdf,
https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/rethinking-research/benefits-and-challenges-making-qualitative-research-more-transparent, https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/cqrm/qmmr/, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2652097 and develop well-reasoned replies for submission to the section’s leaders and working groups, or an essay of your own on this topic. Send these to me, and present your argument in class (see time limit above), ideally in the form of well-reasoned recommendations or pleas. You may also wish to contact some of those most involved in these debates. Please talk to me about it first if you want.

Post your slides or other material to be presented to me to the Stellar site by noon on the 13th.