Field Methods in Human Geography

Mondays 2:15-5, 1186 Derby Hall; 3 credits

Instructor: Kendra McSweeney, 1164 Derby Hall, mcsweeney.14@osu.edu, 614-247-6400
Office hours: Wednesdays 1:00-3:00, or by appointment

Overview

How do methods fit into our research program? How do we generate data to address our research questions? What methods are best? What are some of the advantages and pitfalls of specific approaches? This course is designed to expose students to these and other questions about how we generate and interpret data from the “field” — that complex social, environmental and political space in which we apprehend the world. The course sets up the history of fieldwork within geography, explores the epistemological challenges of ‘mixed methods,’ reviews ethical practice, and encourages students to think of research methods within a broader research design framework. Interspersed with these concerns are opportunities to critique and apply a variety of techniques, including interviewing, participant observation, questionnaires, archival research, and landscape interpretation. In the process, we will discuss overarching themes such as reflexivity, positionality, representation, and more.

Students may explore and practice these methods in the context of their own planned or ongoing thesis or dissertation research, or they may contribute to a group investigation (to be discussed in class). The course fulfills the requirements of an “Advanced Methods” course for graduate students in Geography. Many of the methods we review are inherently cross-disciplinary. The course therefore is designed with students from across campus in mind who may wish to hone and/or expand their methodological “tool-kits.”

Course Format and Readings

The course is an upper-level, readings-based seminar that meets once a week. Students are expected to come to class with the readings read, thought about and in-hand, and with substantive comments already posted to the Discussion forums in Carmen and ready to contribute to class discussion.

Required readings are on Carmen in the “Content” section. Readings on specific methods combine theoretical and ‘how-to’ articles with professionals’ reflections on their use of the method. Some weeks include on-line or interactive materials. Some class meetings will also include a ‘Workshop’ where we will focus on a particular issue, text, or exercise; one class meeting will be devoted to a debate.

Disability Services

Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated, and should inform me of their needs as soon as possible. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/.
Building your Methodological Repertoire

You will post your reactions to the readings by NOON on Monday. Be sure to include ONE specific question that the reading(s) raised for you. In addition, a student will be assigned, each week, to lead the discussion of a reading of their choosing from the required list. They may also wish to provide additional material for the class to read. This must be provided to the instructor to post on Carmen at least a week prior to the class in which it will be discussed.

Assignments

1. **Journal and reflection piece** (15%). At the end of each class, time will be set aside for you to write an entry into your ‘class journal/log’ (beginning in Week 1), in which you will reflect on what happened in the class, your reactions to it, and lingering or new questions that you have. The idea is to reflect on the learning process and practice ‘field noting.’ At the end of the course, you will summarize and excerpt these entries into an empirically rich reflection piece (5 pages) on your arc of learning over the semester, due May 2.

2. **Interview exercise** (15%). In Week 3, you will begin a multistage process that you’ll have 4 weeks to complete: 1) You first identify a willing interviewee; 2) You’ll then conduct the interview face-to-face, using a voice recorder. The interview should be at least 45 minutes long; 3) Next, you’ll excerpt a 20 minute section of the interview that you will transcribe verbatim. 4) You’ll then code that textual data using techniques we will discuss in class (manually or in a Qualitative software program such as N*Vivo). You may also wish to try other forms of data exploration, including visualization (see, e.g., www.wordle.net, FreeMind). 5) Finally, you’ll represent (write up) the interview as a situated encounter, including your reflections about the experience. Due March 7, in-class. You will receive feedback from the instructor and a peer after Spring Break.

3. **Practice exercise** (15%), due in the form of a presentation to the class on April 25 (please be sure to upload PowerPoints to Carmen before class). A peer will be assigned to offer written feedback on your presentation within a week. Depending on your interests, you will ‘test’ one of the following other methods:

   a. **Archival ‘exhibit.’** You will ‘curate’ an archive. As curator, you will: a) identify and explore an archive; b) identify a particular theme that you would like to explore; c) select a set of items (objects, texts, video, sounds, maps) from that collection that allow you to tell a particular ‘story’ from the archive in terms of its relevance to your research; d) present your ‘exhibit’ of curated items, and your rationale for their selection.

   b. **Survey.** You will conduct a survey, using one of the survey techniques discussed in class, in order to generate multiple instances of comparable data across a varied population (n≥30). Alternately, you could conduct an in-depth ‘reverse survey’ (as demonstrated in class), unpacking claims back to their (survey) source.

   c. **Photo/visual exercise.** In week 9, we’ll explore a variety of forms of data generation that involve the use of photographs and other visual data. You will identify one of those forms to explore independently.

4. **Draft ‘Methods’ section for a Proposal** (20%). The final task is to produce the ‘Methods’ section for a proposal that you intend to submit in the near future, ideally for, or similar to, that required for an NSF-DDRI grant. We will read several examples of these in class over the course of the semester. Due May 2.
**Grading**
Assignments are weighted at 15% each (x3=45%); the proposal is 20%. Class leadership, feedback on the readings and participation account for the remaining 35%.

**Policies and Expectations**
Work that is late cannot be peer reviewed.

Attendance at all seminars is required. If there is an issue in your life that makes attendance (or active participation in class) difficult, please draw this to my attention as soon as possible so we can make alternative arrangements. If you miss a seminar, you must complete an essay (minimum 5 pages, double-spaced) that raises substantive issues about the readings. Essays will be due the week following your absence. If you do not turn in an essay, I will automatically take 10% off your final grade.

**Academic Misconduct**
It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term “academic misconduct” includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the [Code of Student Conduct](http://studentlife.osu.edu/edu/csc/).

**Schedule (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Workshop/Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>01/11</td>
<td>Introduction to course</td>
<td>Begin class journals</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>01/18</td>
<td>No class; MLK day</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>01/25</td>
<td>Methods, Methodology, Epistemology</td>
<td>Interview exercise assigned</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>02/1</td>
<td>Interviews &amp; Focus Groups</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>02/8</td>
<td>Cross-cutting concerns</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>02/15</td>
<td>Coding &amp; Sorting Workshop: Reading a research proposal</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>02/22</td>
<td>Ethics in fieldwork Workshop: IRB Debate</td>
<td>[Do CITI course]</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>02/29</td>
<td>Participant observation &amp; Field noting Workshop: ‘Journalism as trope’</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>03/7</td>
<td>Visual methods Workshop: Reading a research proposal</td>
<td>Interview due Practice exercise assigned</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>03/14</td>
<td>SPRING BREAK</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>03/21</td>
<td>Archives</td>
<td>Interview feedback due</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>03/28</td>
<td>Action research and activism</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>04/04</td>
<td>Questionnaires and surveys Workshop: ‘Reverse’ survey exercise</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>04/11</td>
<td>Interpreting landscape</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>04/18</td>
<td>No class meeting; instructor absent</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>04/25</td>
<td>Presentations &amp; Course Wrap-Up</td>
<td>Present methods exercise</td>
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<td>May 2</td>
<td>Course reflection and ‘Methods section’ due by 5 pm.</td>
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Schedule of Topics and Readings/Explorations
(subject to some change)
PLEASE READ IN THE ORDER LISTED

January 11: Introduction to the Course

No readings required in advance.

January 25: methods, Methodology, and Epistemology

Legacies

Methods within research design

February 1: Interviews & Focus Groups


February 8: Cross-cutting concerns


**February 15: Coding & Sorting**


**Workshop:** DDRI Proposal analysis: Please come to class having read the proposal in Carmen, and be ready to talk about how it integrates methods into the research design.

**February 22: Ethics in Fieldwork**

3. Review these materials on the ‘Oaxaca controversy’
   b. Agnew, J. 2010. Ethics or militarism? The role of the AAG in what was originally a dispute over informed consent: 422-423.

**Resources for debate preparation:**

4. Register for and take the CITI program course: [https://www.citiprogram.org/](https://www.citiprogram.org/)
5. Read statement on professional ethics in your field (Geography’s is at: [http://www.aag.org/cs/about_aag/governance/statement_of_professional_ethics](http://www.aag.org/cs/about_aag/governance/statement_of_professional_ethics))
7. Look for articles in your field that pertain to negotiating the IRB
8. Review the articles in the special issues on IRB in Geographic research:
   a. Professional Geographer vol. 64(1), 2012.

**February 29: Participant Observation & Field-noting**


**Field-noting**


**Workshop:** Please read: Peterson, M. A. 2010. Journalism as trope. *Anthropology News* April: 8-9, and be prepared to take a position on the argument presented.

**March 7: Visual methodologies**


**Workshop:** DDRI Proposal analysis: Please come to class having read the proposal in Carmen, and be ready to talk about how it integrates methods into the research design.

**March 14: SPRING BREAK (no class)**

**March 21: Archives**


**Workshop:** Prior to class, please explore the on-line archives linked to Carmen.

**March 25: Participatory/Action/Policy/Activist Research**


**April 4: Questionnaires & Surveys**


**Workshop: ‘Reverse survey’ exercise**

**April 11: Interpreting Landscape**


**April 18: No class meeting**

**April 25: Course Wrap-Up and Presentations**

NO READINGS

**Monday, May 2: Proposal and Reflection piece due by 5 pm**