CRIM 795: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

COURSE INFORMATION

Meeting time: Thursdays, 10:30 a.m.-1:10 p.m.
Meeting location: Blue Ridge Hall 127

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor: Dr. Janani Umamaheswar
Office location: Enterprise Hall 303
Office hours: By appointment.
Email address: jumamahe@gmu.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

Qualitative methods are typically used to study the *social processes* that underlie experiences and interactions across a range of institutions. Qualitative researchers explore individuals' processes of sense-making and interpretation while simultaneously teasing out the interplay between individual behaviors and the broader structures within which they are embedded. Most broadly, this course serves as an opportunity for you to learn how to conduct empirically rigorous and theoretically sophisticated qualitative research. Focusing especially on doing qualitative field research, we will combine classroom discussions with in-class workshops in which you will receive feedback from your instructor and peers on your developing qualitative research skills.

This course may be far more hands-on than other graduate courses you have taken, as we will embrace a "learning by doing" approach throughout the course. As the semester progresses, we will also engage with larger, more philosophical questions and debates in qualitative research, such as those related to positionality, conducting research with vulnerable populations, and what it means to do ethical qualitative research.

By the end of this course, you should:

1. Understand the types of research questions that qualitative research methods are best suited to answer.
2. Have an appreciation for the ethical dimensions of conducting qualitative field research.
3. Have begun to develop a robust set of hands-on qualitative data collection, analysis, and writing skills that you can apply in your own research projects.
4. Understand the standards for rigor and sophistication by which qualitative research should be evaluated.

While these are the overarching goals of this course, we will work on co-creating other course goals that are shaped by your (the students') interests and preferences.

REQUIRED READINGS

All required readings will be available on Canvas or through Mason's library system.

ASSESSMENT

This course will focus on *qualitative*, not *quantitative* assessment. While you will get a final grade at the end of the term, I will not be assigning a numeric grade to individual assignments. Instead, I will be asking questions and making comments that engage with your work rather than simply evaluating it. You will also be reflecting carefully on your own work and the work of your peers. The intention here is to help you focus on working in a more organic way as opposed to working as you think you're expected to for a particular grade. This process may cause some anxiety (especially as we settle into the semester), but we will be communicating often and intentionally about your performance in this course. If you are worried about your grade, your best strategy is to join the discussions, do the reading, and complete the assignments.*

*This language is adapted from Jesse Stommel's "Ungrading: An introduction" (https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-introduction/)

You will be evaluating yourself (via self-reflections or "process letters" that we will discuss in class) and receiving in-depth feedback from me on your effort and performance on the following dimensions:

Class participation:
In classroom discussions, you should strive for *productive* participation. By this, I mean that you will be assessed based not on *how often* you speak, but on:

- How your contributions shape our collective understanding of the course material.
- Your constructive criticisms of the readings.
- Your respectful engagement with others' views.
- Your ability to listen actively (attentively and responsively) to your peers' comments.

For truly productive discussions, it is important that you think about the readings instead of just completing them. Above all, this graduate seminar is a *communal* space of knowledge creation—one that I aim to ensure is explicitly inclusive, welcoming, and affirming. As we navigate discussions about ethics, positionality, and reflexivity, my priority is to make my classroom as welcoming as possible, and I encourage you to reach out to me if you are uncomfortable with the course content at any time. Please come to class having thought deeply about the readings and having prepared to encourage yourself, your peers, and me to think about what it means to do qualitative research with, as, and for individuals with diverse biographies.

Reading responses:

Students will submit short (500-1000 word) reading responses at the end of class each week. These responses should do more than simply summarize the week's readings. Instead, students should use the following questions to guide their responses:

1) What did you learn about qualitative research methods from these readings?
2) How can you apply lessons from the readings to your own research?
3) What critiques did you have of the readings?
4) What questions did the readings raise in your mind?

Observation:
All students will conduct one observation *in a public setting* during the semester and submit fieldnotes recording and reflecting on their observation session.

Please limit your observation site to one in which there is no expectation of privacy. All observation data, no matter the research site, should not allow for the identification of the participants; should not be staged by the researchers; and should be non-intrusive. Please do not audio record, video record, or photograph participants.

Interviews:
Students will conduct, transcribe, and analyze three in-depth interviews. One of these interviews will be transcribed and coded during the course of the semester so that students can get some feedback on their interviewing and analysis techniques. The other interviews will be evaluated as part of the final research portfolio.

Research portfolio:

1. Final research paper:
    a. Introduction
    b. Literature review (including a theoretical framework)
    c. Methods (including discussion of ethics and reflexivity)
    d. Preliminary findings
    e. Conclusions
2. Appendices:
    a. IRB application
    b. Data collection instrument
    c. Informed consent form
    d. Recruitment materials
    e. Coded interview transcripts
    f. Interview fieldnotes
    g. All research-related process notes
    h. "Spew" draft*

*The point of any "spew draft" is to write freely without editing or correcting yourself and without worrying about "getting it wrong." In your spew draft, you will draw on the data (fieldnotes, transcripts, and notes-on-notes) that you created throughout the semester, the readings and seminar discussions, classroom workshop discussions of your work, and feedback you received to reflect on your experience conducting qualitative research. What challenges did you face? How did you overcome them? What did you

take away from the process? Which elements of the process did you enjoy? How did your own biography shape the research process? What ethical issues did you face? In thinking through all these questions through the "spew" essay, you will develop a sense of reflexivity and the "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz, 2017) that is a crucial part of doing good qualitative research.

Final presentation:
You will present your final research paper in our final class.

STATEMENT ON USE OF AI

Students must fully prepare every element of class assignments themselves in this course. **The use of generative AI tools for any part of your work is strictly prohibited and will be treated as plagiarism. Use of AI in this course will be referred to the University Honor Committee.** I want this course to help you develop your critical thinking skills, and using AI to do your work is fundamentally at odds with this goal. Beyond considering the penalties associated with using AI in this course, I want students to experience the confidence that comes with knowing that your opinions are the product of careful, deliberate thought—that your views are *educated* and *informed*, rather than the product of algorithmic manipulation. I encourage all students to learn more about the ethical and practical problems posed by AI tools, and to get in touch with me about any questions or concerns related to this policy.

SEEKING SUPPORT

Expecting normalcy in the classroom during periods of crisis (whether personal, social, or political) is not reasonable. As we learn together, please feel free to approach me with suggestions about how to support you if you are struggling. Although I may be unable to offer direct assistance with some of the issues you may be facing, I am happy to support your learning in my class however I can, and to connect you with resources that may help with issues beyond the classroom. I can only help if I know you are having difficulties, so please: Communicate with me.

COMMUNICATION

Email is the best way to reach me (jumamahe@gmu.edu). Please use your Mason email address for all communication related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from (or send messages to) a non-Mason email address. I will do my best to respond to emails within 48 hours (except on weekends and holidays). If you have not heard back from me within that time frame, please feel free to send me a follow-up email.

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

I want students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives to be well-served and well-respected in my classroom. I want students' diversity to be viewed as a resource,

strength, and benefit in this course. I encourage students to approach me with questions, comments, and suggestions related to respecting *every* form of diversity.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All submitted course work should be your own. When using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations. When in doubt, cite! You are bound by the George Mason University Honor Code. Violations will be referred to the University Honor Committee.

GMU COMMON POLICIES

Please review the following link for important information related to GMU's policies (applicable to all courses) regarding academic standards, accommodations for students with disabilities, FERPA and the use of GMU email addresses for course communication, and Title IX and required reporting: https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/

Assignment	Due date (by 11:59 p.m.)
Submit CITI training completion certificate	Thursday, August 27th
Submit research question and research plan sketch	Thursday, September 3rd
Submit full data collection plan	Thursday, September 10th
Submit IRB application	Thursday, September 17th
Submit fieldnotes from observation 1	Thursday, October 1st
Submit one coded interview with fieldnotes	Thursday, October 15th
Submit spew draft	Thursday, October 29th
Submit final portfolio	Thursday, December 3rd

WEEKLY SCHEDULE*

* Readings are tentative and may change as the semester progresses.

Week 1 (August 27th): Introduction

Readings	Assignments
• Goodwin, J., & Horowitz, R. (2002). Introduction: The methodological strengths and dilemmas of qualitative sociology. *Qualitative sociology*, 25(1), 33-47. • Lareau, A. (2012). Using the terms "hypothesis' and "variable" for qualitative work: A critical reflection. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(4), 671-677. • Behar, R. (2020). "Read more, write less." Pp. 47-53 in *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft & Commitment*, edited by Carole	• Familiarize yourself with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) website at https://oria.gmu.edu/topics/human-subjects/ . • Complete the CITI training (if you have not already done so): https://oria.gmu.edu/topics/human-subjects/training/. Submit certificate of completion.

McGranahan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.	

Week 2 (September 3rd): Orienting yourself

Readings	Assignments
• Kleinman, S., Copp, M. & Henderson, K. (1997). "Qualitatively different: Teaching fieldwork to graduate students." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 25(4):469-99. • Small, M.L. & Calarco, J. (2022). *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research.* Chapter 1: Cognitive empathy. • Auyero, J., Deckard, F. M., Diamond, A., Hernández, M., Jensen, K., Lang, A., Levy, E.J., Ortega, A., Sobering, K. & Stitt, M. E. (2026). Why Ethnography?. *Qualitative Sociology*, 1-21.	• Reading response • Submit research question and research plan sketch

Week 3 (September 10th): Getting started

Readings	Assignments
• Fine, G. A. (1993). Ten lies of ethnography: Moral dilemmas of field research. *Journal of contemporary ethnography*, 22(3), 267-294. • Gerson, K. & S. Damaske. (2020). *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Chapters 2 and 3.	• Reading response • Submit data collection plan, including interview guide and discussion of ethical considerations.

Week 4 (September 17th): Doing Field Research

Readings	Assignments
• Small, M.L. & Calarco, J. (2022). *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research.* Chapter 3: Heterogeneity. • Gerson, K. & S. Damaske. (2020). *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Chapters 4 and 5. • Emerson, R. (1990). Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. Chapter 2.	• Reading response • Submit IRB application

Week 5 (September 24th): Qualitative data analysis

Readings	Assignments
• Gerson, K. & S. Damaske. (2020). *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Chapter 6. • Charmaz, K. (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative inquiry*, *23*(1), 34-45. • Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2024). Thematic analysis. In *Advanced research methods for applied psychology*. Routledge.	• Reading response

Week 6 (October 1st): Open data analysis/writing workshop

Readings	Assignments
• None	• Submit fieldnotes from observation session.

Week 7 (October 8th): Emotions and reflexivity

Readings	Assignments
• Small, M.L. & Calarco, J. (2022). *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research.* Chapter 5: Self-awareness. • Garrihy, J., & Watters, A. (2020). Emotions and agency in prison research. *Methodological Innovations*, 13(2). • Waters, J., Westaby, C., Fowler, A., & Phillips, J. (2020). The emotional labour of doctoral criminological researchers. *Methodological Innovations*, *13*(2), published online before print.	• Reading response

Week 8 (October 15th): Researching sensitive topics/vulnerable populations

Readings	Assignments
• Contreras, R. (2019). Transparency and unmasking issues in ethnographic crime research: methodological considerations. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 293-312).	• Submit one coded transcript with fieldnotes.

• Campbell, R., Goodman-Williams, R., & Javorka, M. (2019). A trauma-informed approach to sexual violence research ethics and open science. *Journal of interpersonal violence,* 34(23-24), 4765-4793. • Schlosser, J. A. (2008). Issues in interviewing inmates: Navigating the methodological landmines of prison research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 14(8), 1500-1525.	

Week 9 (October 22nd): TBD (student-informed readings)

Readings	Assignments
• None	• Reading response

Week 10 (October 29th): Writing qualitative research

Readings	Assignments
• Small, M.L. & Calarco, J. (2022). *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research.* Chapter 4: Palpability. • Lareau, A. (2021). *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant-Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*. Chapter 9. • Gerson, K. & S. Damaske. (2020). *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Chapter 7.	• Reading response. • Spew draft.

Week 11 (November 5th): Evaluating qualitative research

Readings	Assignments
• Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *16*(10), 837-851. • Zaatut, A., Jacobsen, S. K., Fader, J. J., & Wood, J. D. (2025). Criminologists' perceptions of qualitative and quantitative methods in criminology and criminal justice. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, *48*(5), 571-588.	• Reading response

• Schlosser, J. A., & Feldman, L. R. (2022). Doing time online: Prison TikTok as social reclamation. *Incarceration*, *3*(2), 26326663221095400. • Reid, K., & Niebuhr, N. (2023). "Prison TikTok": Incarcerated life shared on social media. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology*, *12*(2), 158-177.	

Week 12 (November 12th): Qualitative research book discussion

Readings	**Assignments**
• TBD (student-informed)	• Reading response

Week 13 (November 19th): ASC—No class.

Week 14 (November 28th): Thanksgiving—No class.

Week 15 (December 3rd): Presentations; final portfolios due.