

## 11.THG Thesis Prep

Spring 2016  
Monday 3.30-5.30pm  
Rm. 9-450B

### Instructor

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### Course Description

The purpose of this course is to help students identify interesting and promising research questions and to learn techniques for structuring their MCP thesis proposals around such questions. This course is particularly well suited for students who are interested in conducting international field research, but will be helpful for all students conducting master's thesis research whether domestic or international. Over the course of the semester students will develop research questions in their area of interest, develop research design and methodology necessary to address such questions, and explore different ways to substantiate their arguments. By the end of the course students will complete the thesis proposal including: a well-articulated research question drawing on the relevant literature, and a viable research strategy for collecting and analyzing data. Students will also identify and begin collaborating with their thesis advisors. The course will host several current DUSP students and DUSP Alumni to discuss various aspects of how they developed their thesis proposal and the ways in which the thesis was useful in their professional or academic careers. This course requires intensive class participation, particularly as students will work together to help each other develop their proposals. Students are expected to complete reading and writing assignments that are designed to assist in the thesis research design process.

### Participation

This seminar requires active participation in discussions and critical reflection and assessment of the course material. Students should be prepared to discuss the main points of the readings, ask insightful questions, provide constructive feedback and generate and share critical perspectives. Attendance in class sessions and meaningful engagement with the readings and in discussions will determine the participation grade.

### Assignment Summary

*All assignments are due by 5.00 pm on the due date (usually the Sunday before our class) in order to facilitate discussion in class.*

#### Assignment 1: Topic identification and question framing – February 14<sup>th</sup>

Write a short paragraph about the topic, issue or puzzle of interest. How did you 'discover' and decide upon this topic? Describe the process. How do you propose to design a thesis research project around this area of interest? Follow this paragraph with up to three questions that could be addressed in the thesis. Use recommendations in the readings to help work through ideas. You should also provide a short list of **potential** advisors (if not yet finalized) along with dates when you most recently have or will meet with them to discuss your thesis.

#### Assignment 2: Thesis summary and initial literature review – February 28<sup>th</sup>

Submit a 2 page summary of your thesis research idea along with a preliminary literature review. Building directly on your topic identification and question framing in Assignment 1, as well as the readings and class discussions to date, restate the research question(s) that you would like to address

in your thesis proposal. You should then provide an initial literature review. This review should discuss perspectives on your topic and question of interest that are provided by the relevant academic and policy/planning literature. That is, what do policy/planning debates have to say about the issue? You should use your review of the literature to ‘animate’ and frame your question. Finally, provide an update on scheduled meetings with potential thesis advisors and outcomes.

Assignment 3: Draft of thesis summary, literature review and proposed methodological approach – March 13<sup>th</sup>

This initial draft proposal should demonstrate your knowledge and familiarity with the literature that will support your research. This literature review should be used to specify your research question and generate a set of testable hypotheses or propositions that links your research question to the specific empirical issue/problem that you propose to study. This should provide an opportunity to identify your own emerging perspective on the issue. Briefly discuss anticipated research methods focusing on your **rationale** for selected approach, comparing strengths and weaknesses of alternative methods (and building directly on the puzzle and question). Your discussion of methods should address the philosophical and ontological assumptions that underpin your choice of research design and methods. The assignment should be 4-5 pages.

Assignment 4: Human subjects exam completion – March 27<sup>th</sup>

Complete the CITI Social and Behavioral Research Course and pass the online exam. Send a copy of the *Completion Report* to the instructor. This assignment is graded as full/no credit. The exam takes several hours to complete, plan accordingly.

Assignment 5: Advisor meeting and revision of thesis summary – April 3<sup>rd</sup>

By this stage you should be in active conversation with your advisor about your thesis proposal. Revise and expand the summary to 4-5 pages based on the input of your advisor and any new literature recommended or different interpretations of the literature that was previously discussed. Include an addendum to your summary describing how the thesis topic and question has developed.

Assignment 6: Draft of research design and methods – April 17<sup>th</sup>

Submit a revised version of the research design and methods section of your proposal, which should elaborate details of site/case selection, data collection approach and proposed protocols/instrumentation; 2-3 pages.

Assignment 7: COUHES submission – May 1<sup>st</sup>

Prepare and submit application and protocols to COUHES. We will review and comment on your application prior to submission. Note your advisor needs to make the final review and sign the application before submission.

Assignment 8: Full proposal – May 15<sup>th</sup>

The final submission is your proposal including the following elements: i) an introduction that frames your research and states the question; ii) a literature review from which the hypotheses or propositions are generated; iii) a detailed discussion of research design and methods that includes a justification and rationale for the approach you are taking; iv) discussion of preparations made to date; v) summary timeline for the research; vi) brief discussion of funding for research; vii) reference list; and viii) appendices with research instruments. The proposal should be 12 pages, exclusive of references and instruments. The proposal should reflect the feedback from previous assignments and from your advisor.

### **Methods assignment – due date is before the selected class**

During the semester we will spend a week discussing a specific research method (e.g. interviews, surveys, etc.) as described in Section II of the course syllabus. There is an associated assignment for each of those weeks. Each student should choose **one** of these assignments corresponding to a research method you think you may use during your field research and addressing your specific research topic, question and field site. The assignment will be due on the Sunday **after** the class where the method in question is discussed.

### **Grading**

Grades for thesis prep are recorded as satisfactory and unsatisfactory. A score of 80% or better is required to receive a satisfactory for the semester.

### **Writing**

The graduate thesis requires the ability to communicate effectively through writing. If you have difficulty writing in English, please let the instructor or TA know. You should also seek assistance from the dedicated staff at the MIT Writing and Communication Center. <http://writing.mit.edu/wcc>.

### **Academic Misconduct**

MIT takes academic integrity very seriously and so do we. Trust in your own creativity and ideas.

### **Weekly Readings**

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#### **Session 1: Introduction to the Course**

**What is an MCP thesis? What is a thesis proposal in planning?**

**February 8**

*Introduction to the course. General discussion of the goals and objectives of the MCP thesis, and how to approach the challenge of developing a research question and determining the most appropriate research design and methods to be employed.*

#### **Reading**

Sternberg, Ernest. (1994) “What is a Master’s Thesis in Planning?” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 13:284-289.

Przeworski, Adam and Frank Salomon. (1988) “On the Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Science Research Council Competition.” Available at: <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/the-art-of-writing-proposals/>

Please come to class prepared to discuss your thesis research interests. What are you interested in studying? Why? Where? How? What kind of research design and methods are you thinking of using? Why do you think the approach(es) you have in mind may be the most appropriate or effective?

*Assignment 1: Topic identification, research question framing and advisor selection – Feb 14<sup>th</sup>*

## SECTION 1: RESEARCH DESIGN

### **Session 2**

**Fundamentals of research design and international field research.**

**February 16**

*\*\* Note that today's class is held on Tuesday due to MIT following the Monday schedule. \*\**

Booth, Wayne, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. (2003) Ch. 3, "From Topics to Questions" and Ch. 4, "From Questions to Problems." In The Craft of Research. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Singleton, Royce A. and Bruce C. Straits. (2009) "Introduction" and "Elements of Research Design" Ch. 1 & 4 in Approaches to Social Research Fifth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Vaus, David. (2001). *Research Design in Social Research*. Sage Publications. Chapter 1.

#### **Recommended:**

Abbott, A. (2004). *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. W.W. Norton and Company.

King, G., Keohane, R. and Verba, S. (1994). *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Ch.1 Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brady, H. and Collier, D. (eds.). (2004). *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. Rowman and Littlefield.

George, A. and Bennett, A. (2005). *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press. [Esp. Ch. 4].

Binns, Tony. (2006) "Doing Fieldwork in Developing Countries." in Doing Development Research V. Desai and R. B. Potter. Sage Publications.

Devereux, Stephen and John Hoddinott. (1993) "The Context of Fieldwork" and "Fieldwork Under Time Constraints." Boulder, Lynne Reiner.

### **Session 3**

**Developing the Research Question. Good proposals and the literature review. February 22**

De Vaus, David. (2001). *Research Design in Social Research*. Sage Publications. Chapter 2.

Geddes, B. (2003). *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Chapter 2, pp. 26-45 (skim Chapter 1).

Booth, Wayne, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams. (2003) Chapter 5 "From Problems to Sources," and Chapter 6 "Using Sources," in The Craft of Research. Ch5-6 Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Creswell, John W. (1994) "Uses of Literature." Chapter 2, Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

**Recommended:**

Wildavsky, Aaron. (1993) "Reading with a Purpose." Chapter 3, in Craftways: On the Organization of Scholarly Work. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

*Assignment 2: Thesis summary and initial literature review – Feb 28<sup>th</sup>. This assignment should also be posted on the course platform so that your peers can read in preparation for the small group discussions in Session 4.*

**Session 4**

**Research Questions and Puzzles**

**February 29**

*This session will involve small group work to help us to develop and hone our research questions and puzzles. The discussions will involve on peer exchange between class participants, based on the Thesis Summaries (Assignment 2).*

**Reading**

TBA

**Session 5**

**Philosophical foundations of research design and methodology.**

**March 7**

*In today's class we will build directly on the work we have done on our research questions and puzzles by discussion the relationship between our research questions and the methods that we choose to investigate them. We will do so by interrogating the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin our proposed research interests, design and methods.*

**Reading**

Morgan, G. and L. Smircich (1980) "The Case for Qualitative Research." *Academy of Management Review*. 5(4): 491-500.

Peter Hall. 2003. "Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research" in *Comparative Historical Analysis: New Approaches and Methods*. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Eds). New York: Cambridge University Press.

*Assignment 3 due: Revised thesis summary, literature review and proposed methodological approach. March 13<sup>th</sup>*

## SECTION II RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

### Session 6

#### Case Studies

March 14

*Today's class is our first in discussing different methods that we can use in doing research. For our in-class discussion, choose a book or an article that employs a case study for testing (or developing) a theory or policy proposal. How did the author decide what city, town, village, country or industry should be selected for the study? Do you think the criteria was appropriate? Is it a crucial case for the theory? Can any generalizations be drawn from the case? How does the author define and limit the unit for study? Might the choice of other units lead to different results? Most of our research is in some way case-based, so be prepared to discuss your choice of cases in class.*

#### Reading

George, A. and A. Bennett. 2004. Chapter 3 in *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Gerring, J. (2004). "What Is a Case Study and What is it Good for?" *American Political Science Review*. 98 (2): 341-354.

Geddes, B. (2003). *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Chapter 3.

#### Recommended:

Berg, Bruce L. (2007) "Case Studies," in Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

**\*\*\* Spring Break: No Class March 21 \*\*\***

*Assignment 4 due: CITI Human Subjects Exam. March 27<sup>th</sup>*

### Session 7

#### Interviews.

March 28

*In this session we will discuss interviews as social events, taking into consideration the value of interviews as means of conducting the iterative dance between theory testing and theory development, as well as the importance of language and power in the interview data collection process.*

#### Readings

Pawson, R. "Theorizing the Interview." *British Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 47, No. 2, (June 1996) pp. 295-314.

*Optional readings*

Ewick, P. and Silbey, S. (2003). "Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority." *American Journal of Sociology*. 108 (6): 1328-1372.

Nobles, M. (2005). *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Chapter 3.

### **Methods Assignment**

Imagine that you want to answer the following research question: what determines success in planning research or practice? To carry this out, you decide it is worthwhile to collect the knowledge, opinions, and beliefs of current and aspiring planners. Your assignment is to develop a questionnaire and interview both a faculty member or planning practitioner and a student in DUSP. Write a brief memo describing your interviews. How did you choose your interview subjects? How did you motivate them to provide you with the information you needed? How did you deal with stereotyped answers, evasiveness and potential misrepresentations of the truth (responses that may be misleading or false)? Please attach your interview protocol (questionnaire) to the memo.

### **Recommended**

Leech, Beth. (2002) "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semi-structured Interviews." *Political Science and Politics* 35(4): 665-668.

Weiss, Robert. (1994) *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.

Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. (2011) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Whyte, William Foote. (1984) "Interviewing Strategies and Tactics," in *Learning from the Field: A Guide from Experience*. Ch.6. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

*Assignment 5: Advisor meeting and revision of thesis summary and literature review – April 3<sup>rd</sup>*

### **Session 8**

**Ethnography, observation and fieldnotes.**

**April 4**

*What is an ethnography? What is participant observation? What do we mean by 'thick description'? Under what conditions is this approach feasible? Desirable? What are potential advantages and strengths, as well as challenges and pitfalls of this method of data collection?*

Geertz, Clifford. (1973) "Ch. 1 Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" and "Ch. 15 Notes from the Balinese Cock Fight" *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

James Clifford (1986) "Introduction" Partial Truths" *Writing Culture" The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* University of California Press.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) "Writing Against Culture" in Richard Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, pp. 137–62. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

*Guest Speaker: TBC*

**Recommended:**

Warren, Carol A. B. and Tracey X. Karner. (2005) "Writing Fieldnotes," in *Discovering Qualitative Methods: Field Research, Interviews and Analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Company.

Bernard, H. Russell. (2002) "Field Notes: How Take Them, Code Them, Manage Them," in *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Altamira Press.

Flick, Uwe. (2009) "Observation and Ethnography," Ch.17 in *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kees Van Donge, Jan. (2006) "Ethnography and Participant Observations," Ch.19 in *Doing Development Research V*. Desai and R. B. Potter. Sage Publications.

Sewell, W.H. (1999). "The Concept(s) of Culture." (In Bonnell, V. and Hunt, L. eds., (1999) *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California).

Wedeen, L. (2002). "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review*. 96 (4): 713-738.

**Methods Assignment**

Attend a public meeting and write a brief report on what you observe (examples: a student group meeting, a community group meeting, a protest rally, etc.). Your task is to come up with observations and insights not ordinarily offered by journalists. You might, for example, devise a method for ascertaining the social composition of the audience; a measure of audience response to the speakers; tell us why people came to the meeting; give a content analysis of themes or metaphors presented by the speakers; tell us something about the symbols employed in the event; provide a kind of ethnographic description of the event (a la Geertz and the Balinese cockfight); provide a "discourse analysis"; analyze the event as a "play," a "fight," a "religious" revival, or whatever else appears to be an appropriate metaphor. Use your imagination and ingenuity.

**Session 9**

**Surveys**

**April 11**

*Guest Speaker TBA*

Freeman, Richard and Joel Rodgers 1999 *What Workers Want. Chapters 2-3*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

**Recommended:**

Stokes, S.C. (1991). "Politics and Latin America's Urban Poor: Reflections from a Lima Shantytown," *Latin American Research Review*, 26 (2): 75-101.

Morse, Janice. (2010) "Principles of Mixed Methods and Multimethod Research Design," in Handbook of Mixed Methods Research, eds. A. Tashakkori and C. Teddlie, *Sage Publishers*.

Rallis, Sharon and Gretchen Rossman (2010) "Mixed Methods in Evaluation Contexts: A Pragmatic Framework," in Handbook of Mixed Methods Research, eds. A. Tashakkori and C. Teddlie, *Sage Publishers*.

Schutt, Russell K. (2009) "Survey Research," in Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research. *Pine Forge Press*, p233-286.

Singleton, Jr., Roy A. and Bruce C. Straits. (2009) "Survey Research" and "Survey Instrumentation," in Approaches to Social Research. *New York: Oxford University Press*.

### **Methods Assignment**

Design a sample survey that is intended to address an area of your research interest, and which could be plausibly implemented in your research setting. In your survey be precise as to the questions you propose to answer, hypotheses you wish to test, and the suitability of the data for your proposed study.

*Assignment 6: Draft of research design and methods – April 17th*

**\*\*\* Patriots Day, No Class April 18<sup>th</sup> \*\*\***

### **Session 10**

**Methods Topic TBC.**

**April 25**

*Possible topics include:*

- Spatial analytics e.g. GIS/Mapping
- Experimental approaches: e.g. RCTs, Natural Experiments and IV Techniques

### **Methods assignment**

TBA

*Assignment 7: COUHES submission – May 1<sup>st</sup>*

## **SECTION III: FINALIZING THE THESIS**

### **Session 11**

**Research ethics and practical tips.**

**May 2**

Hertel, S., Singer, M.M., Van Cott, D.L. (2009) "Field Research in Developing Countries: Hitting the Road Running." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 42(2): 305-309.

Scheyvens, Regina, Barbara Nowak, and Henry Scheyvens. (2003) "Ethics" in Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide. Ch.8. *Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications*.

**Recommended:**

Scheyvens, Regina, Henry Scheyvens, and Warwick E. Murray. (2003) "Working with Marginalised, Vulnerable, or Privileged Groups." In R. Scheyvens and D. Storey, Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide. *Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications*.

**Session 12**

**Presentation of draft proposals.**

**May 2**

We will close the semester with a poster session where students can display their research proposals. The poster sessions will be open to IDG, SPURS and faculty.

**\*\* *Assignment 8: FINAL PROPOSALS DUE – May 14<sup>th</sup>* \*\***