Interpretive Research Methods and Methodologies: Introduction

22-26 April, 2013

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4 ECTS

Course organised by Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS), Wageningen University
**Introduction & objectives of the course**

This course introduces interpretive approaches in social science: those approaches that position *meaning* as a fundamental element of social (inter-) action. This reflects 20th-21st century developments in the philosophy of social science and emphasizes the intertwining of ontological and epistemological presuppositions with their methodological enactments.

Since the late 1970s, more social scientists have begun (again) to generate data through “talk” (conversational interviews), observation (with various degrees of participation), and document analysis, often retaining the word form of those data for analysis, rather than translating them into numbers for statistical analysis. Often, these two broad classes of method are referred to as “qualitative” and “quantitative.” But the conceptual distinction is mis-named: researchers using “qualitative” methods also count, and those analyzing numbers also interpret their data. What is being captured in those two terms is a difference in philosophical presuppositions, based on different understandings of the perceived character of human or social reality (ontological presuppositions) and whether and how that reality might be known (epistemological ones). In other words, methods are grounded in methodological (ontological and epistemological) arguments which they put into practice. Making this explicit renders “methodology” as, in a sense, applied ontology and epistemology, as distinct from “methods,” which enact methodologies. But more than that: “qualitative” methods have increasingly come under pressure to conform to “quantitative” ones. And so today, we increasingly have a tripartite division among methods (as seen from a presuppositional perspective): quantitative (informed by positivist notions of ontology and epistemology); qualitative (also following positivist presuppositions); and interpretive (informed by ideas explicated by such philosophies as phenomenology, hermeneutics, some critical theory, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology and their ontological and epistemological presuppositions).

This course explores these issues in theory and in practice, looking at fieldwork, deskwork, and textwork phases of research. We will be more practical than philosophical, although we will also take up the methodological underpinnings of interpretive(-qualitative) methods. It will cover:

- an overview of interpretive approaches in social science – origins and recent developments;
- discussion of the relationships among ontology, epistemology, and methodology in interpretive approaches;
- research implications of *doing* interpretive social science;
- discussions of issues in interpretive research projects, including those of the instructor.

On the latter point, we will generate our own observational and interview data for exploration during the course, through a series of laboratory exercises to be conducted in class and/or between sessions. This will enable us to ground our method and methodological discussions in actual research practices.

**Target group**

The course is intended for students beginning to think about their own research designs. It will explore different kinds of inquiry employing interpretive methods of generating and analyzing data, as well as their theoretical underpinnings. Methods for *generating* data include (participant) observation, talk/interviewing, and the close reading of research-relevant documents. Methods of *analyzing* data vary depending on the data type (e.g., metaphor analysis for language, ethnomethodology for conversations or acts; see the list of 2 dozen in YSS 2006, p. xx).

**Course fees**

For PhDs of WASS there is a fee of 300 euros. For all other participants and for staff members (fellows/post docs), there is a fee of 600 euros for the whole course (including drinks, lunches, course materials and a course dinner).

**Requirements and ECTS**

Read; think; do the exercises; come to class prepared to discuss the readings and present a research dilemma, having reflected on both. The course will be conducted as part lecture, part discussion; emphasis will be placed on student participation in the discussions.

**Location**

The sessions will be held in building “De Leeuwenborch”, Hollandseweg 1 in Wageningen, The Netherlands. The exact rooms will be announced later.
Main texts:

Course readings will be drawn from the following 3 books, supplemented with additional articles or book chapters ad indicated in the syllabus. Journal articles and book chapters are noted in the daily schedule. Additional readings are listed following that.


Background: It would be very useful to read Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki, 2007, Improvising theory: Process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork (University of Chicago Press) prior to the beginning of the course. It presents email correspondence between a phd student [Cerwonka] just starting her field research and the anthropologist on her committee [Malkki], with reflective commentary. What is also remarkable about it for our purposes is that Cerwonka was taking her phd in a political science department, which is not known for valuing ethnographic research.

Note: Instructor reserves the right to alter the syllabus to reflect the composition of the class and students’ prior backgrounds.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Thought questions; Labs/assignments</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>11.20-12.30</strong></td>
<td>Think: What is a symbol, and what is one doing in this course? What is the relationship between symbols and human, or social, meaning? What is the difference between “accessing” social data and “generating” data? What are the various ways in which we can generate meaning-centered data? Are these the same as or different from the ways in which we might analyze those data?</td>
<td>SSY: Introduction, ch. 1. YSS: introductions to the book and to Parts I, II, III, IV; ch. 21/24 [Pachirat], 22/25 [final]. SS: ch. 1 and Epilogue. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. The interpretation of cultures. NY: Basic Books. Esp. ch. 1. Yanow, Dvora. 2003. Interpretive empirical political science: What makes this not a subfield of qualitative methods. Qualitative Methods Newsletter 1/2: 9-13; at maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/moynihan/cqrm/Newsletter1.2.pdf</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9.30-11</td>
<td>Methodological roots of interpretive research methods:</td>
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<td>Why do we need methods? and where do they come from?</td>
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<td>Metaphysical explanations of events around us; the dawn of 'science' and its development; natural science laws &gt;&gt; social science laws; the contributions of positivist thought; the development of interpretive thinking; the role/place of prior knowledge (of self, settings, people, events, ...)</td>
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<td>11.20-12.30</td>
<td><strong>Think:</strong> What arguments are made for the differences between qualitative and quantitative research? What is it about human social reality that makes it require different methods from the natural or physical world? What do these methods allow us to understand about social reality that positivist (or &quot;quantitative&quot;) methods do not?</td>
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<td>12.30-14.00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>Lab—Participating:</td>
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<td>to be conducted over lunch break; see assignment.</td>
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<td>14.00-15.15</td>
<td>Generating data through participating:</td>
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<td>15.30-17.00</td>
<td>Bodies, space, and experience.</td>
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<td>Visual methods and methodological issues.</td>
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<td>Discuss writing exercise.</td>
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<td>Lab—Space/nonverbal:</td>
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<td>in class.</td>
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<td>YSS: ch. 13/11 [Shehata-review].</td>
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<td>Additional:</td>
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<td>Pink 2006</td>
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<td>9.30-11</td>
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<td>Lab—Interviewing: in class, after break.</td>
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<td>Lab—Interviewing: see assignment.</td>
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<td>'Thick description’ in fieldwork. Discussion of interviewing exercise. Generating evidence through documents [contemporary; archival].</td>
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<td>Think: What might it mean, in field research, to &quot;see the world in a grain of sand&quot; [as Pachirat asks, YSS ch. 21/24]? Is this the same thing as &quot;thick description&quot;? The late journalist David Halberstam apparently &quot;talked about marshaling a library of facts and interviews about any subject — density, he sometimes called it — before actually winnowing that thick mass to its essence.&quot;¹</td>
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<td>Interpretive research involves not only observing (with whatever degree of participating) and talking, but also locating and reading research-relevant documents. What are some of the issues that arise concerning this aspect of the research? What sorts of 'documentary' evidence might there be in your research project other than paper records?</td>
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<td>Lab—documents: generate a list of the fullest range of documentary materials you can think of, in your research setting [in class].</td>
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<th>Think:</th>
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<tr>
<td>9.30-11</td>
<td>'Thick description' in deskwork and textwork</td>
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<td>11.20-12.30</td>
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<td>How to write ‘up’ the mass of field data? What’s the relationship between field research and theory? Is there a difference between finding much in a grain of sand – making a complicated picture out of what seems to others a detail – and piling those grains sky-high – making a fine-grained picture with many details? Are there special characteristics of ethnographic writing that distinguish it from other genres of research writing? Do these have any bearing on the trustworthiness of the researcher’s claims? “Solid journalism isn’t about fancy verbiage, he says; rather, ‘it’s about ideas, about narration, about setting things out, about telling the story.’ And what really comes first is legwork, ‘The more the better.’ The more interviews you do, the better. The more anecdotes you get, the better. Because when you’ve got a hundred different angles on a story, Halberstam says, you can write with authority. When you’ve got a hundred different anecdotes, you can leave the lame ones out. “Do both, and your writing will have -- and this is a key characteristic, Halberstam says - - it will have density. ‘I can always tell when a writer is cheating,’ Halberstam says. ‘I can tell when it’s a two phone-call story.”2</td>
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<td>12.30-14.00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>14.00-15.15</td>
<td>The relational character of interpretive research I: Problematics of dual identities in the field and other issues in the researcher-participant relationship.</td>
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<td>15.30-17.00</td>
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<td>What is involved in “accessing” the research field? How does one manage one’s own identity, in all its aspects, in the field? What is entailed in being a researcher at the same time that one is an observer (with whatever degree of participation)?</td>
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<th>Time</th>
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| **5. Friday 26 April** | **The relational character of interpretive research II: Positionality and knowledge claims.**
Good/bad interpretive research? Evaluative criteria.  
Reflexivity and trustworthiness: Rephrasing/reframing rigor, objectivity, reliability, validity; Or, Reading like a reviewer....
Reflexivity in the field and on the page: Evaluative "standards" for interpretive research. |
| **9.30-11** | **Think:** How does researcher positionality shape the character of the research and of the researcher’s claims to have knowledge of the subject studied? In the context of interpretive philosophies/methodologies, how might we engage the questions of "rigor" and "objectivity," "reliability" and "validity"? What makes interpretive research trustworthy? |
| **11.20-12.30** | **YSS: ch. 13/11 (Shehata, reread).**  
YSS: chs. 4/6, 5/7 (Yanow, Schwartz-Shea)  
| **12.30-14.00** | Lunch                                                                 |
| **14.00-15.15** | **Other topics and issues in research design for interpretive research projects:**
DDT; duration.  
Selecting: people (interviewing), places (for observing and interv.), documents (sources, kinds).
Analyzing interpretive data  
**Interpretive science:** Systematic and testable! |
| **15.30-16.30** | **Think:** Generated data in hand, what are different ways of analyzing them? Can we make a case for textual ethnography? |
| **YSS:** ss. 2, 3. | **YSS, chs. 17/18, 20/21, 11/17, 14/14 (Schmidt, Yanow, Oren, Jackson).* |
Additional readings

Theoretical-Methodological:

On representation and truth claims:

Additional case examples of interpretive research:

Archival and other documentary research:
Geiger, Till and Moore, Niamh. 2011. What is archival research? Methods@ Manchester (10 March).

Note: There are some potentially useful analytic tools available at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration; see, e.g., archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/ [12.12.12].

Uses of multiple (and unusual) kinds of ‘documentary’ data:

Interpretive/social history:
Natalie Zemon Davis. The Return of Martin Guerre (you may have seen the movie made out of this book!)

On reading scientific texts as literary documents:

Visual methods

Listservs concerning interpretive research methods
http://malagigi.cddc.vt.edu/mailman/listinfo/interpretationandmethods
http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/rubriken-e.htm
[FQS is an open access journal, so all articles are available online free of cost. 22 FQS issues, published since 2000, are available at address above. See http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/boai-e.html for some brief information about open access.]
http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/iiqm/index.cfm
[International Institute of Qualitative Methodology, at the U of Alberta, Canada, based in the Nursing School; this is a fantastic resource, dealing with issues much broader than nursing per se; they have an e-newsletter that you can subscribe to from this site]

Location
The sessions will be held in building "De Leeuwenborch", Hollandseweg 1 in Wageningen, The Netherlands. The exact rooms will be announced later.

Registration
Registration is possible electronically via the WASS courses page:
http://www.wass.wur.nl/UK/courses/registration/ The maximum number of participants is set at 20, the minimum at 10.

Please make sure that you provide the most recent contact details so that in case of any changes you will be notified promptly. After your internet registration you will receive a short notification that your name has been registered. At least two weeks before the course you will receive a confirmation about the location and the schedule. WASS will also send an invoice to the address indicated in the registration form.

Please e-mail to Marcella.Haan@wur.nl in case you have not received the second confirmation two weeks before the course.

Cancellations
Cancellations may be made free of charge until 1 month before the start of the course. Cancellation fee of 100 % applies if participants cancel the course less than 1 month prior to the course. The organisers have a right to cancel the course not later than 1 month before the course starts. The participants will be notified of any changes at their e-mail addresses.

Further information
On course content please contact the course organiser, Dr. Severine van Bommel. She can be reached through severine.vanbommel@wur.nl
On WASS: www.wass.wur.nl
For details about the logistics, accommodation, registration, fees, study materials, etc. please contact
Marcella Haan
Tel +31 317 484126
Marcella.haan@wur.nl

Contact addresses:
Wageningen School of Social Sciences
Wageningen University
Hollandseweg 1
6706 KN WAGENINGEN
The Netherlands

Useful information for participants from outside Wageningen

Hotels:
Wageningen International Centre (Hof van Wageningen): 75 euro for 1 persons room, 98.50 euros for 2
persons room, both prices are including breakfast. Details: http://www.hofvanwageningen.nl/

Hotel de Wageningeberg: 62.50 euro 1 person room, 97.50 euro for 2 persons room, also including
breakfast; www.wageningeberg.com

Hotel Nol in 't Bosch: 83,50 euro for 1 person room, 110 euro for 2 persons room, also including
breakfast; http://www.nolintbosch.nl/

Hotel de Nieuwe Wereld (Hotel School): 50-60 euro for a 1 person room. http://www.denieuwewereld.nl
(only in Dutch)

Bed&Breakfast:
B& B De Heksenspeeltuin: 25 euro for a 1 person room
Address: Einthovenstraat 15, 6706JA Wageningen
Phone: +31 317-418161
E-mail: callyd@zonnet.nl
Website: www.heksenspeeltuin.nl (only in Dutch)

Villaria Bed en Breakfast: 32-38 euro for a 1 person room
Address: Nassauweg 21, 6703CG Wageningen
Phone: +31 317-419636
Email: villaria@hari.demon.nl

Ons Bakhuus Bed & Breakfast: 25 euro for a 1 person room
Address: Dolderstraat 64, 6706 JG Wageningen
Phone.:+31 317-411994
E-mail: janny.wijbo@chello.nl

Knollywood Bed & Breakfast: 35 euro for a 1 person room
Address: L. Roggeveenstraat 39, 6708 SL Wageningen
Phone: +31 317-420970
E-mail: Knollywood@hetnet.nl

De Herbergh Bed & Breakfast: 45 euro for a 1 person room
Address: Generaal Foulkesweg 8, 6703 BR Wageningen
Phone: +31 317-410747
E-mail: glindenbergh@wanadoo.nl
From Schiphol Airport Amsterdam to Wageningen

At the Airport you can buy a train ticket in the 'arrivals' area. You will see the sign "Train tickets" near the exit. Then follow the signs 'Nederlandse Spoorwegen' (www.ns.nl) or 'Trains and busses' to the railway station.

Purchase a one-way ticket to the Ede-Wageningen train station, this will cost € 13,40 (plus € 0,50 service charge if you buy the ticket at the ticket counter). It is also possible to buy the ticket from the ticket vending machines in the station.

Every 30 minutes there are direct connections to Ede-Wageningen. Also, twice an hour there is a connection via Utrecht (where you have to change trains). On the platform, you will see signs hanging from the ceiling with all names of the different stations where the train will stop. Check for the names Ede Wageningen or Utrecht and board the train. The trip from Schiphol to Ede-Wageningen takes you a bit more than one hour.


Wageningen has no railway station. This lack is fully compensated by accurate means of buses and taxis, as described next.

From railway station Ede-Wageningen you can take a taxi (approx.15 min.) Taxis leave at the north side of the station. You can also come by bus (bus 86 (direction Arnhem) or bus 88 (Valleilijn, direction Wageningen). Bus 86 leaves at the north side of the station, bus 88 leaves at the South side of the station. You have to purchase a ticket in the bus, which will cost about 2 euros.