

## **Qualitative Research: Participatory Inquiry in Psychology**

**Spring 2026**

**4 points**

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**TIME**

**PLACE**

**Office: Uris Hall 204C | Office Hours: TBA**

### **Course Description**

*We have to remember that what we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.*

- Werner Heisenberg, Physicist

As Heisenberg reminds us, science does not grant unmediated access to reality, but rather, to reality as shaped by our methods of questioning. In psychology, quantitative experiments powerfully allow us to ask particular kinds of questions with precision and control, but they can sometimes bracket out the complexities of lived worlds, reducing what is messy and ambiguous into variables that may miss or even mischaracterize the very phenomena we wish to understand. Qualitative methods open up different vantage points, enabling us to explore meaning, context, and experience in ways numbers alone cannot capture.

This class takes seriously the idea that all methods both reveal and conceal, and that our task as researchers is to choose, and sometimes combine, approaches that best illuminate the questions we seek to answer. We will begin by considering the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying different research methodologies—that is, assumptions about the nature of reality and how it can be studied. Next, we will learn and practice a range of qualitative approaches used by psychologists including thematic analysis, grounded theory, phenomenological analysis, portraiture, discourse analysis, narrative psychological methods, case studies, and non-linguistic methods. Attention will be given to evaluating what counts as “good” qualitative research, including the benefits of using mixed methods and pluralistic approaches (i.e., combining multiple methods). Throughout the semester, we will look at published examples of qualitative research in a variety of subdisciplines of psychology as well as in how these methods can be used in action research (i.e., in application to real-world problems).

The centerpoint of the course will be an independent project, devised around student research interests, through which students will gain hands-on experience in participatory inquiry, developing not only methodological skill but also a critical perspective on how knowledge is produced. The course is designed both for students who wish to conduct basic or applied qualitative research and for those who want to reflect more deeply on the foundations of scientific inquiry.

## **Shortened Description**

“What we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” – Werner Heisenberg, physicist. This class takes seriously the idea that all methods both reveal and conceal. In psychology, quantitative experiments powerfully allow us to ask precise questions with control, but they can sometimes bracket out the complexities of lived worlds, missing or even mischaracterizing the very phenomena we wish to understand. Our task as researchers is to choose, and sometimes combine, approaches that best illuminate the questions we seek to answer. We will begin by considering the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying different research methodologies—that is, assumptions about the nature of reality and how it can be studied. Next, we will learn and practice a range of qualitative approaches used by psychologists including thematic analysis, grounded theory, phenomenological analysis, portraiture, discourse analysis, narrative psychological methods, case studies, and non-linguistic methods. Throughout the semester, we will look at published examples of qualitative research in a variety of subdisciplines of psychology as well as in how these methods can be used in action research (i.e., in application to real-world problems). The centerpoint of the course will be an independent project, devised around student research interests, through which students will gain hands-on experience in participatory inquiry, developing not only methodological skill but also a critical perspective on how knowledge is produced. This course is designed both for students who wish to conduct basic or applied qualitative research and for those who want to reflect more deeply on the foundations of scientific inquiry.

## **Prerequisites**

Instructor permission is required to enroll. Students must have completed PSYC UN14XX (any Research Methods class in the Psychology department) or equivalent experience with quantitative research methods, at the discretion of the instructor. Please contact the instructor if you are unsure whether you meet this requirement.

## **Role in the Psychology Curriculum**

This course is open to graduate students and advanced undergraduate students. Within the Psychology major, it counts as a Special Elective and can also be used as an elective. Note that this class does not fulfill the Research Methods requirement.

## **Goals:**

1. Develop the ability to articulate the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie different quantitative and qualitative methods in psychology.
2. Gain practical skills in designing, conducting, and analyzing qualitative studies.

3. Critically evaluate what counts as “good” qualitative research, with attention to reflexivity, validity, ethics, and rigor.
4. Apply participatory and action research principles to psychological inquiry, linking methodology to real-world contexts and social change.
5. Complete a qualitative research project that demonstrates both methodological competence and critical reflection on how knowledge is produced.

## **Texts and software**

### Required

Willig, C. (2021). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Dedoose (Version 9.0.54). (2025). Dedoose: web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data. Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC.

### Additional readings available on Canvas

Brown, S. D., Locke, A., Willig, C., & Stainton Rogers, W. (2017). Social psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 391–412). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n25>

Burman, E. (2017). Developmental psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 429–452). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n27>

Cloud, D. H., Drucker, E., Browne, A., Parsons, J., & Fatos, K. (2020). Psychological distress in solitary confinement: Symptoms, severity, and prevalence in the United States, 2017–2018. *American Journal of Public Health, 110*(S1), S56–S62. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305375>

Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U., Delgado, J., Rua, M., de-Graft Aikins, A., & Hodgetts, D. (2023). Participatory action research. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers, 3*, Article 34. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1>

Dedoose. (n.d.). *Dedoose user guide*. SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from <https://www.dedoose.com/userguide/gettingstarted>

- De Smet, M. M., Meganck, R., Van Nieuwenhove, K., Truijens, F., & Desmet, M. (2019). No change? A grounded theory analysis of depressed patients' perspectives in psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 588. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00588>
- Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2019). Critical participatory action research: A feminist project for validity and solidarity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 43*(4), 433–444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319865255>
- Harper, D. (2017). Clinical psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 453–471). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n28>
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2016). Commentary: Portraiture methodology: Blending art and science. *LEARNING Landscapes, 9*(2), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v9i2.760>
- Lloyd, S., & Gifford, R. (2024). Qualitative research and the future of environmental psychology. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 97*, 102347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2024.102347>
- McDonald, J. P., Isacoff, N. M., & Karin, D. (2018). A vortex at South Falls. In *Data and teaching: Moving beyond magical thinking to effective practice* (pp. 91–103). Teachers College Press.
- Melvin, K. (2022). Arts-based methods for hallucination research. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry, 27*(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2021.1993807>
- Ormerod, T. C., & Ball, L. J. (2017). Cognitive psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 554–575). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n33>
- Potter, J., Hepburn, A., & Edwards, D. (2020). Rethinking attitudes and social psychology – Issues of function, order, and combination in subject-side and object-side assessments in natural settings. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 17*(3), 336–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1725952>

### Assignments and grades

The centerpiece of this class will be the project. Students will have the option of working in groups of 1 - 4 people, depending on student research interests and on preferences for working alone or with a group. There are benefits and drawbacks to working alone or collaboratively, which we can discuss. The rubric will vary based on group size. For example, each person will need to complete at least 3 semi-structured interviews independently. This means that in the final paper, the minimum requirement for a group of 1 will be 3 interviews, and for a group of 4 will be 12 interviews. Exact requirements will be provided ahead of time.

Initial research question (Due before Class 3)

5 pts

Practice analytic memo and coding (Due before Class 5)	5 pts
Research proposal (Due before Class 6)	10 pts
Transcribed semi-structured interview (Due before Class 7)	5 pts
Analyzed semi-structured interview (Due after Class 7)	5 pts
2nd transcribed interview or observation memo (Due before Class 8)	5 pts
Analyzed interview or observation (Due after Class 8)	5 pts
Homework and classwork in Weeks 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13	30 pts
Presentation in final week	5 pts
Final Paper	15 pts
Participation during discussion of readings	10 pts

### **Topics and Readings**

Each class includes 1. A reading assignment to be completed before class, 2. A project component to complete before class 3. A lecture component in class, 4.. A methods practice and/or project component in class. Given that this is a 4-credit advanced class, students are expected to commit to an intensive workload, including carefully reading each text before class and completing each component of the project on schedule.

#### **Week 1. Introducing “Big Q” Research**

##### Before class

Chapter 1. From Recipes to Adventures

Chapter 2. Epistemological Bases for Qualitative Research

Lecture: After going over the syllabus, we will begin by asking the question: What kinds of things do we aim to learn about the world? For example, do we aim to make predictions, capture the feel of a person’s experience, or explain behavior? We will also explore how different approaches view the researcher’s role. In one view, the researcher is like a neutral observer: looking at a pile of bricks is like going on a treasure hunt, trying to discover what is already hidden there. In another view, the researcher helps create knowledge: the same pile of bricks could be arranged into very different structures depending on who is doing the building. Being clear about these assumptions is an essential first step in conducting and evaluating research.

Project: Students will begin brainstorming research project questions.

## **Week 2. Research Design & Data Collection**

### Before class

Chapter 3. Qualitative Research Design & Data Collection

Cloud, D. H., Drucker, E., Browne, A., Parsons, J., & Fatos, K. (2020). Psychological distress in solitary confinement: Symptoms, severity, and prevalence in the United States, 2017–2018. *American Journal of Public Health, 110*(S1), S56–S62.  
<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305375>

Lecture: We will cover core concepts in qualitative research, including assumptions that shape inquiry (participatory inquiry, naturalistic settings), criteria for evaluating quality (validity, reliability, reflexivity, ethics), and strategies for rigor and representation (representativeness, accumulative techniques, triangulation). We will also examine major approaches to data collection, such as semi-structured interviews, observation, visual methods, and focus groups, along with the use of diaries and digital spaces.

Project: Students will refine their initial research questions.

## **Week 3. Research Proposals**

### Before class

Submit initial research question

Chapter 4. The Role of Interpretation

Chapter 5. Putting Together A Research Proposal

### Lecture

This week we will focus on developing qualitative research proposals, including articulating research questions, situating them in the literature, justifying methodological choices, and addressing feasibility and ethics.

### Project

Students will begin putting together their research proposal.

## **Week 4. Thematic Analysis & Grounded Theory**

## Before class

Chapter 6. Thematic Analysis

Chapter 7. Grounded Theory

De Smet, M. M., Meganck, R., Van Nieuwenhove, K., Truijens, F., & Desmet, M. (2019). No change? A grounded theory analysis of depressed patients' perspectives in psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 588. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00588>

## Lecture

Grounded theory is a methodological approach used to generate explanatory theories directly from data. We will cover strategies for coding and categorization (thematic analysis, in vivo categories, open and focused coding), refining insights (constant comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, saturation), guiding data collection (theoretical sampling), and advancing theory construction (theoretical coding, memo writing).

## Project

In pairs, students will practice conducting a short semi-structured interview, to be analyzed for homework.

## **Week 5. Dedoose Primer**

### Before class

Using the interview you conducted in class, write a brief analytic memo and use grounded theory methods to code your data by hand. Specific instructions and a rubric will be provided.

Read the assigned sections from the Dedoose User Guide: Getting Started; Coding; Excerpts & Code Trees. Reading the Dedoose User Guide before class will give students a foundation in project setup, coding, and data organization, ensuring that our in-class workshop time can focus on applying these tools to psychological research questions rather than learning basic navigation.

### Lecture & Project

We will practice using Dedoose, the most popular data analysis software used in qualitative psychological research. We will cover the basics of setting up projects, importing and organizing transcripts, coding text and multimedia materials, and generating analytic outputs such as code co-occurrence charts and excerpts. Students will learn how to use Dedoose to support systematic coding, team collaboration, and transparent reporting in qualitative psychology research and begin thinking about how to use this tool in their projects. **(I will edit this before the start of the semester if I decide to go with an open-source software.)**

## **Week 6. Phenomenological Methods & Portraiture**

### Before class

Finish research proposal (rubric will be provided)

Chapter 8. Phenomenological Methods

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2016). *Commentary: Portraiture methodology: Blending art and science*. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 9(2), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v9i2.760>

McDonald, J. P., Isacoff, N. M., & Karin, D. (2018). A vortex at South Falls. In *Data and teaching: Moving beyond magical thinking to effective practice* (pp. 91–103). Teachers College Press.

Phenomenological methods focus on capturing the lived experience of participants, including strategies for setting aside assumptions (bracketing), describing experience in depth (rich description), and interpreting meaning (attending to essence and perspective). Portraiture complements this by combining empirical research with narrative and aesthetic expression, emphasizing holistic representation and resonance. The reading for this week includes a chapter from my co-authored book in the area of educational psychology.

## **Week 7. Discourse Analysis**

### Before class

Complete and transcribe a semi-structured interview, to be analyzed in class (rubric will be provided)

Chapter 9. Discursive Psychology

Chapter 10. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Potter, J., Hepburn, A., & Edwards, D. (2020). Rethinking attitudes and social psychology – Issues of function, order, and combination in subject-side and object-side assessments in natural settings. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 17(3), 336–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1725952>

### Lecture

Discursive Psychology is the study of how people use language to manage social interactions, such as by disclaiming an undesirable identity, justifying an action, or attributing blame, as well as how the use of particular language shapes experience. This contrasts with cognitivism by shifting attention from internal mental representations to the ways psychological phenomena such as attitudes, memory, and identity are constructed and negotiated through language in interaction. We will explore methods of research design and analysis within discourse analysis.

Project

We will apply principles from the frameworks we have covered to begin analyzing your data.

**Week 8. Narrative Psychology & Action Research**Before class

Conduct a second semi-structured interview or an observation, based on your findings from last class. (Rubric will be provided.)

## Chapter 11. Narrative Psychology

Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U., Delgado, J., Rua, M., de-Graft Aikins, A., & Hodgetts, D. (2023). Participatory action research. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 3, Article 34. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1>

Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2019). Critical participatory action research: A feminist project for validity and solidarity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43(4), 433–444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319865255>

Lecture

Narrative research examines how people construct meaning through stories, including strategies for eliciting accounts (life stories, interviews), interpreting structure and content (plot, temporality), and linking narratives to cultural contexts. Action research emphasizes collaborative inquiry for social change, including participatory design, cycles of reflection and action, and commitments to validity. We will explore these frameworks within the context of psychological research.

Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects, including possible inclusion of action research

**Week 9. Non-linguistic Methods**Before class

Complete next step of project, as agreed to in the previous class.

## Chapter 12. Visual &amp; Other Non-Linguistic Methods

Melvin, K. (2022). Arts-based methods for hallucination research. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, 27(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2021.1993807>

Lecture

Visual and other non-linguistic methods expand qualitative research beyond spoken or written language, including strategies such as photo elicitation, drawing, mapping, and arts-based techniques. Students will learn how these methods can be used in psychology to access dimensions of experience that may be difficult to capture in words, and how to analyze visual and embodied forms of data.

Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects, including possible inclusion of non-linguistic methods

**Week 10. Pluralistic & Mixed Methods**Before class

Complete next step of project, as agreed to in the previous class.

Chapter 13. Pluralistic Qualitative Methods

Chapter 14. Metasynthesis

Lloyd, S., & Gifford, R. (2024). Qualitative research and the future of environmental psychology. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 97*, 102347.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2024.102347>

Lecture

Pluralistic and mixed methods approaches combine multiple strategies to address research questions from different angles. We will cover combining qualitative approaches (e.g., thematic analysis with discourse analysis), integrating qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed-methods designs), and evaluating coherence and complementarity across findings. Students will also consider when pluralism adds depth to psychological understanding and when a single-method design may be more appropriate.

Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects

**Week 11. Evaluation**Before class

Complete next step of project, as agreed to in the previous class.

## Chapter 15. Evaluating Qualitative Research

## Chapter 16. Review and Conclusions

Evaluating qualitative research involves assessing the quality and credibility of studies beyond traditional quantitative criteria. We will circle back to standards we covered at the beginning of the semester such as validity, trustworthiness, transparency, and reflexivity, as well as strategies for demonstrating rigor (audit trails, member checking, thick description). Students will learn how to critically appraise qualitative studies in psychology and apply evaluation criteria to their own work.

### Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects

## **Week 12. Social Psychology & Cognitive Psychology**

### Before class

Complete next step of project, as agreed to in the previous class.

Brown, S. D., Locke, A., Willig, C., & Stainton Rogers, W. (2017). Social psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 391–412). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n25>

Ormerod, T. C., & Ball, L. J. (2017). Cognitive psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 554–575). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n33>

### Lecture

Qualitative research has been increasingly applied in social and cognitive psychology to explore processes that are difficult to capture through experiments alone. We will examine how qualitative methods can illuminate topics such as identity, attitudes, and social interaction (social psychology), as well as reasoning, memory, and problem solving (cognitive psychology). Students will learn how qualitative approaches complement experimental traditions in these subfields and expand the questions psychologists can ask.

### Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects

## Week 13. Developmental Psychology & Clinical Psychology

### Before class

Complete next step of project, as agreed to in the previous class.

Burman, E. (2017). Developmental psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 429–452). SAGE.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n27>

Harper, D. (2017). Clinical psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 453–471). SAGE.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n28>

### Lecture

Qualitative research in developmental and clinical psychology provides tools for studying experience across the lifespan and within research on mental health. We will consider how qualitative methods can illuminate processes of growth, identity, and learning (developmental psychology), as well as how people describe and interpret phenomena such as diagnostic categories, treatment participation, and lived experiences of distress (clinical psychology).

### Project

Brainstorming for next steps of projects

## Week 14. Final class

Students will present their final projects, with a chance for debriefing and discussions about future directions.

**Academic integrity.** Inclusion of AI statement: Any use of AI (e.g., ChatGPT) in any graded assignment (reading reflection, slides, independent study) must be disclosed, with a detailed description including the prompt(s) you entered, the output, and how you used the information. Use of AI without a disclosure can result in failure of the class in addition to penalties at the University level. Other information about academic integrity can be found here:  
[www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity](http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity).

**Attendance.** As an intensive, project-based class, the expectation is that you will attend every class. If you need to miss a class, please notify me as soon as possible. Of course, if you are sick (even with a cold) you should stay home, but staying in touch with me about this will be very helpful. You will still be responsible for the work due in a class you miss, e.g., reading response and interim project deadlines. Please let me know if you have any questions about this policy.

**Late assignments.** Completing all assignments on time will be essential, since work in class will depend on having completed the relevant previous assignments. With permission, students can receive at most 50% credit for any late assignments.

**Students with disabilities.** Please contact Disability Services before the first class to register for specific accommodations (<https://health.columbia.edu/disability-services>).

**Columbia University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Pledge on Academic Freedom in the Classroom.** Knowledge flourishes when inquiry is free and respectful. This class, which has been approved as part of the Columbia curriculum by appropriate faculty bodies, aims to advance knowledge through discussion, debate, and carefully selected readings and assignments. In accordance with principles of academic freedom promulgated by the American Association of University Professors and affirmed by many universities, including Columbia, the instructor has the authority to set the class syllabus, which may include controversial material relevant to topics being studied. While all participants and their views will be treated respectfully, no one should expect to be shielded from challenging or even upsetting ideas, since thoughtfully engaging such ideas is crucial to free inquiry and intellectual growth.