Studying Social Life: Theory and Method

Syllabus
Course number: CORE-GG 2022 (Graduate Proseminar)
School: Gallatin School, New York University
Term: Spring 2012
Meeting time: Tuesdays, 6:20-8:40
Instructor: David Moore
Contact: 1 Washington Place, room 408
david.moore@nyu.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3-5; by appointment

Overview
The primary function of this course is to help you to become more conversant with a variety of theories and methods in the social sciences; secondarily, it should help you develop ideas and skills that move you toward a plan for your studies and, ultimately, a thesis. Some of you have strong backgrounds in one or another of the major approaches to understanding social life: psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, etc. But most of you have not had the chance to engage a wide range of approaches germane to the themes of your concentrations. Since your studies now are unusually interdisciplinary, it will be important for you to become at least generally familiar with the underlying assumptions, claims, questions, and methods of several schools of thought and approaches to research. The course will expose you to a number of these approaches, and encourage you to figure out how some of them might help you develop your concentration themes.

Let me illustrate what I mean by schools of thought or approaches to the study of social life. Some of you may be working with the concept of community, a prominent theme in social theory and practice. One could define that phenomenon as an objective “social fact” (Durkheim) made up of a variety of institutional structures, roles, and norms serving particular locality-relevant functions (Warren); that is, one could work from a structural-functionalist position. Alternatively, one could regard community as a set of relationships centered on shared symbols or meanings (Cohen); that is, one could draw on a semiotic tradition. Or one could see contemporary community as a fluid, fragile, multifaceted form of experience that shifts in shape and meaning depending on individual preferences and situations (Maffesoli); that is, one could adopt a post-modernist stance. As we will see, even these categories are contested and permeable – but it’s important to know that they exist and to work out a useful approach of your own as you embark on your work toward a thesis. This will be true whether your theme is community, identity, globalization, social change, or any other problematic within the study of social life.

Obviously, the course cannot “cover” all forms of social theory. Instead, our work together will be organized around a sequence of themes and activities that you will be able to tailor to your own interests and needs. Here, then, is the general plan for the course: After the initial introduction, we will proceed through several units corresponding to several (loosely defined, highly contested) forms of social inquiry: the positivist/quantitative; the interpretivist/qualitative; the postmodern/discursive. Moreover, we will address conceptually different (and complexly...
related) levels of phenomena: studies of the person (issues such as emotion, cognition, learning); of the group (phenomena like community, organization, and network); and of the society (concepts like class and opportunity, demographic changes, and patterns of belief). (Have you picked up on the hints that I find both of these category systems problematic? Still, we have to organize this complex domain somehow.) In each unit, we will first read and discuss several examples of actual studies that address a variety of social issues and concepts, teasing out their key assumptions and claims about the nature of social phenomena, the kinds of questions they ask, and the sorts of theories they propose. In the second week, we will read and discuss theories related to that form of inquiry, analyzing their fundamental premises and logics. In the third, we will examine methods in the particular approaches, strategies for answering the questions raised from the different angles: experiments, tests and measures, surveys; participant-observation or ethnography, focus groups, interviews; discourse analysis, and so on. In some cases (the choices will depend on students’ interests), we will try out some of these methods: designing a survey, conducting observations, analyzing texts. Finally, in the fourth week, members of the class will present work related to the unit’s approach. You will not achieve mastery in any of the methods, of course, but you should emerge with at least a feel for the options; you will come back to one or more of them in your individualized work for the course, and later in your MA studies.

Please understand that I will adjust the content of the course—the readings, the themes, etc.—on the basis of student interests and concentrations. I will also encourage each of you to contribute readings, questions, and suggestions for methods. The current version of the syllabus is suggestive, not exhaustive; we may go in different directions or employ different strategies.

In process and style, therefore, the course will be highly participatory: You will contribute your own thoughts and insights to the conversation; you will engage with work being done by other students in the class; you will try out some of the theories and methods on your own themes, and share your efforts with the group. The class will succeed only on the foundation of your active participation.

The Work

You will produce several kinds of work as part of that participation:

$ Response papers: in advance of about eight of the class sessions, you will write short papers (<1 page) about the assigned and discovered readings. Those commentaries will be sparked (but not exhaustively determined) by questions provided by the instructor, and will be posted on the course Blackboard site discussion board so everyone can read them.

$ Unit papers: at the end of each of the “form” units (qualitative, quantitative, postmodern), you will write a paper exploring some aspect of that perspective on social life, preferably as it bears on your own concentration theme(s). Two of those papers will be relatively short (8-10 pp.), and one will be more substantial (15-20 pp.). The longer paper will constitute the basis of the presentation.

$ Presentation: Once during the semester, you will be responsible for presenting a paper on a question/topic of major importance, partly illustrating an approach to one of the forms
of methodology (and very possibly problematizing that perspective) and partly raising issues related to your own studies and work, perhaps to your possible thesis. Each presentation will take 15-20 minutes; small groups may choose to collaborate.

In each of these forms of work, you will be encouraged to grapple with issues and concepts related to your own thematic areas, to make them useful to your whole program of study. The papers, presentations, and other activities will manifest high levels of academic quality and integrity.

### Policies

Here are several policies that you should be aware of as a participant in the course:

- **Academic integrity**: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction in accordance with the Student Discipline Rules of the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Please read the Gallatin website page on academic integrity; you will be responsible for knowing this policy: [http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/graduate/academic-integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/graduate/academic-integrity.html)

- **Attendance**: Since the course relies heavily on the active participation of all members, you will be expected to attend every session, to arrive punctually and to stay until the end of class. (Please do not make commitments elsewhere that result in your missing part of any class session.) You are entitled to one **excused absence** (due to either illness or family emergency) without its having an impact on your grade; please notify me in advance if you will not be present one evening. Absences beyond that one will affect your course grade, particularly in the participation element.

- **Grades**: This course is graded, and grades are based on rigorous academic standards. That means that “A” grades will be awarded for unusually strong work that draws on a wide range of materials (including some from outside the assigned readings) to construct unusually sound, insightful, and well-expressed arguments or analyses; “B” work will reflect a solid grasp of the ideas and methods we read about and discuss. (These criteria will be explained more fully in a later handout.) The following general elements will be taken into account, though *not* in a strictly statistical way; that is, the weight of each listed component is only approximate, and may vary depending on students’ strengths:

  - **Participation**: regular, punctual attendance; participation in class discussions and Blackboard conversations (ca. 25%);
  - **Papers**: response papers (ca. 10% total); short papers (2 @ ca. 15 % each); long (ca. 25%);
  - **Presentation**: leading a class discussion about your own work as it relates to concepts, issues, and theories raised in class (ca. 10%).

- **Lateness and incompletes**: Response papers will be posted on the course Blackboard site...
by 3 pm on the day before the class when the respective readings will be discussed (that is, on Mondays). The unit papers (both short and long) will be submitted by email (to david.moore@nyu.edu) by 5 pm on the day of the student-presentation class sessions (see the calendar below). Proposals for the presentation sessions will be handed in no less than one week before the session. In each case, late papers will receive significantly reduced grades. Students may receive an Incomplete for the course only in case of documented illness or family emergency; a request for an Incomplete must be submitted no later than the final class session.

**Blackboard**

Much of the interaction among members of the class will take place on the Blackboard site. To access the site, (1) log in to NYUHome with your Net ID and password; (2) click on the Academics tab on the bar under the title; (3) find the list of Blackboard sites on that page, and click on the one for this Proseminar: CORE-GG 2022. On the opening page, you’ll find buttons (on the left) leading to several resources:

- announcements (also posted on the home page)
- staff information (my office location, office hours, etc.)
- course information (the syllabus, mostly)
- course documents (readings, slide shows, etc.)
- assignments (which you’ll also get in hard copy in class)
- discussion board (where you will post response papers and comment on other students’ posting, offer commentaries on class discussions, point to other readings, theories, or methods, and so on)

The conversations between class sessions will be an important part of our work together. Please participate actively and thoughtfully.

**Texts**

*Required* (purchase at NYU Bookstore on Broadway)


*Other articles and excerpts will be posted on Blackboard.*
### Calendar

The following chart presents the initial version of the schedule for the course, including themes, specific reading and writing assignments, and student presentation dates. Some items have been left to be determined; as we collaborate on developing the details, the plans might change depending on students’ interests and needs.

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<tr>
<th>#/Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Assignments/Activities</th>
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| 1. 9/4 | Introduction | * Scenarios and problematics  
* Course structure, process, and expectations |
| 2. 9/11 | Positivist/Quantitative 1: Examples | * Paper #1 due (3 pm Monday on BB)  
Readings:  
* Somekh & Lewin, Part 1 (pp. 1-32)  
* Bagby et al., Seasonal Affective Disorder (BB)  
* Moely & Ilustre, Public Service Requirement (BB)  
* McMillan & Chavis, Sense of Community (BB) |
| 3. 9/18 | Positivist/Quantitative 2: Theories | Readings:  
* Somekh & Lewin, pp. 199-219  
* Delanty, Chap. 1 (11-38)(BB)  
* Delanty & Strydom, Introduction (1-10)(BB)  
* Turner, Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 4 (1-42)(BB) |
<p>| 4. 9/25 | Positivist/Quantitative 3: Methods (surveys, tests, experiments; statistics) | * Somekh &amp; Lewin, Chaps. 25, 26 |
| 5. 10/2 | Positivist/Quantitative 4: Student presentations | * Paper #2 due (5 pm, email) |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading/Assignments</th>
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| 6. 10/9 | Interpretive/Qualitative 1: Examples | * McCurdy et al., pp. 103-120, 139-147 (BB)  
* Geertz, Balinese cockfight (BB)  
* Hutchins (in Chaiklin & Lave), pp. 35-63 (BB) |
| 7. 10/16 | No class: fall break        |                                                                                     |
| 8. 10/23 | Interpretive/Qualitative 2: Theories | * Somekh & Lewin, Part 4  
* Stake, Chaps. 1, 2, 3 (BB)  
* McCurdy et al., Chaps. 1, 2 (BB) |
| 9. 10/30 | Interpretive/Qualitative 3: Methods (observation, interviews) | * Schatzman & Strauss, Chap. 1  
* Delanty, Chaps. 2, 3 (BB)  
* McCurdy et al., pp. 21-76 (BB)  
* McIntyre, PAR, pp. 1-32 (BB) |
| 10. 11/6  | Interpretive/Qualitative 4: Student presentations | * Paper #3 due (5 pm, email) |
| 11. 11/13 | Postmodern/Discursive 1: Examples | * Erickson, Chaps. 2, 3, 5  
* Hall, Chap. 1 (BB) |
| 12. 11/20 | Postmodern/Discursive 2: Theories | * Erickson, Chaps. 1, 6-8  
* Somekh & Lewin, Chaps. 8, 9, 10 |
| 13. 11/27 | Postmodern/Discursive 3: Methods (DA, CA) | * Somekh & Lewin, Chap. 16 |
| 14. 12/4  | Postmodern/Discursive 4: Student presentations | * Paper #4 due (5 pm, email) |
| 15. 12/11 | Wrap-up                     |                                                                                     |