Studying Social Life: Theory and Method

Syllabus

Course number: CORE GG-2022-001 (Graduate Proseminar)
School: Gallatin School, New York University
Term: Fall 2013
Meeting time: Wednesdays, 6:20-8:40
Instructor: David Moore
Contact: 1 Washington Place, room 408
david.moore@nyu.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays 2:30-4:30 and Wednesdays 2:30-4:30, preferably 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, and so on. 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 will 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) or as a term deployed for purposes of power (Foucault); that is, one could adopt a postmodernist 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, gender, 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,
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, and learning); of the group (phenomena like community, organization, and network); and of the society (concepts like class and opportunity, demographic trends, 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 of the unit, 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 may try out some of these methods: designing a survey, conducting observations, analyzing texts. Finally, in the fourth week, several members of the class will do presentations 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 and a hunch about which one(s) work(s) for you; you will come back to one or more of them in your individualized work for the course, and later in your MA studies.

Depending on the array of backgrounds, interests, and concentrations in the class, we may spend time at the Bobst working with reference librarians on the use of research resources (Atlas.ti, GIS, indexes, etc.). Moreover, we might decide to invite other faculty members to visit the class to discuss their own research work.

Please understand, in other words, that I will make every effort to 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 and activities. The current version of the syllabus is substantive – I have put thought into its design – but 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.

Course Objectives

By the time the course is completed, you should have learned at least the following:

$ the basic assumptions and philosophies of several broad modes of inquiry in the social sciences: positivist/quantitative; interpretivist/qualitative; postmodernist/discursive;
$ the kinds of methodologies these approaches imply: e.g., experiments and surveys; participant-observation and the analysis of relationships, practices, and symbols;
discourse analysis;
how to recognize and evaluate the use of these assumptions and methods in published work by other scholars;
which of these approaches, or some combination of them, might be useful in your own studies and work.

The Work

You will produce several kinds of work as part of your participation, in addition to taking an active part in the classroom conversations:

Response papers: in advance of about eight of the class sessions, you will write short papers (< 300 words) 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 Classes site discussion board so everyone can read them.

Unit papers: at the end of each of the “form” units (quantitative, qualitative, 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 and leading a discussion on a question or topic of major importance, partly illustrating (or very possibly critiquing and problematizing) an approach to one of the forms of methodology and partly raising issues related to your own studies and work, perhaps to your possible thesis. The length of each presentation will depend on the number of students in the class, but will probably be 20-30 minutes. Small groups may choose to collaborate on a joint presentation.

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:
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 all or part of any class session. You are entitled to one excused absence (due to either illness, family emergency, or unavoidable work obligation) 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; effective participation in class discussions and Classes 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: The basic expectation is that you will hand in the work by the deadlines.

* Response papers will be posted on the course Classes site by 3 pm on the day before the class when the respective readings will be discussed (that is, on certain Tuesdays). Responses posed after that time – and especially after the related class – will be counted as missed.
* The short unit papers will be submitted by email (to david.moore@nyu.edu) by 5 pm on the day of the student-presentation sessions (see the calendar below). The long papers will be due (also by email) by noon on the Saturday following the presentations. That is, presenters will have (some) time to edit their papers based on the class conversations.
* Proposals for the presentations/long papers will be handed in no less than ten days before the session when the papers are scheduled to be presented.
* Late papers will receive significantly and incrementally reduced grades; by one week after the due date, papers will no longer be accepted, and a grade of F will be registered. On the other hand, you may choose to revise any paper, so long as the revision is received not later than one week before the next paper is due (or, in the case of the third-unit paper, one week before grades are due).
* 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.
Classes

Much of the interaction among members of the class will take place on the Classes 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 Classes 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 types of items:

- **Announcements** (also posted on the home page)
- **course information** (the syllabus, mostly, including revisions) under **Syllabus**
- **course documents** (readings, slide shows, etc.) under **Resources**
- **Assignments** (which you’ll also get in hard copy in class) under **Assignments**
- **Forums** (where you will post response papers and comment on other students’ postings, 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 Classes.*

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>
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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** (post by 3 pm Tuesday)  
**Readings:**  
* Somekh & Lewin, Part 1 (1-32)  
* From Classes  
* Bargh *et al.* (33-48)  
* Frank *et al.* (96-116)  
* Phillips (1340-1359)  
* Ross & Wu (719-745)  
* Wageman (145-180) |
| 3. 9/18 | Positivist/Quantitative 2: Theories | **Readings:**  
* Somekh & Lewin, 199-219  
* From Classes  
* Delanty, Chap. 1 (11-38);  
* Delanty & Strydom, Intro. (1-12);  
* Turner, Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 4 (1-42) |
| 4. 9/25 | Positivist/Quantitative 3: Methods (surveys, tests, experiments; statistics) | **Readings:**  
* Somekh & Lewin, Chaps. 25, 26  
* From Classes  
* Schutt, Chap. 4 (91-131), Chap. 8 (233-285) |
| 5. 10/2 | Positivist/Quantitative 4: Student presentations | **Paper #2 due** (short: 5 pm 10/2; long: 12 noon 10/5, by email) |
| 6. 10/9 | Interpretive/Qualitative 1: Examples | **Readings:**  
* McCurdy *et al.*, pp. 103-120, 139-147  
* Geertz, “Deep play”  
* Hutchins (in Chaiklin & Lave), pp. 35-63 (BB) |
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| 7. 10/16 | Interpretive/Qualitative 2: Theories | * Somekh & Lewin, Part 4  
* Stake, Chaps. 1, 2, 3  
* McCurdy * et al.*, Chaps. 1, 2 |
| 8. 10/23 | Interpretive/Qualitative 3: Methods | * Schatzman & Strauss, Chap. 1  
* McCurdy * et al.*, pp. 21-75  
* McIntyre, PAR, pp. 1-32 |
| 9. 10/30 | Interpretive/Qualitative 4: Student presentations | Paper #3 due (short: 5 pm 10/30; long: 12 noon 11/2, by email) |
| 10. 11/6 | Postmodern/Discursive 1: Examples | * Erickson, Chaps. 2, 3, 5  
* Hall, Chap. 1 |
| 11. 11/13 | Postmodern/Discursive 2: Theories | * Erickson, Chaps. 1, 6-8  
* Somekh & Lewin, Chaps. 8, 9, 10 |
<p>| 12. 11/20 | Postmodern/Discursive 3: Methods (DA, CA) | * Somekh &amp; Lewin, Chap. 16 |
| 13. 11/27 | No class: Thanksgiving | |
| 14. 12/4 | Postmodern/Discursive 4: Student presentations | Paper #4 due (short: 5 pm 12/4; long: 12 noon 12/7, by email) |
| 15. 12/11 | Wrap-up | |</p>
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