
Crim 321 Oral History Research Project

Project Guidelines/Specifications for Fall/2010

Doing a piece of research is the best way to understand the complexities that are involved and to show not only that you have learned the research techniques and general principles that we will cover in this course, but also that you understand how to apply them in a particular study. You will do one semester-long **research project** in this course, which will contribute a total of **50%** to your final grade in the course: **5%** for a brief (maximum 2-page) proposal you submit by 11 October (and must continue re-submitting until approved); and **45%** for your final report.

Your project must involve an **oral history** of one sort or another that you design, administer, analyze and write up, involving a person (or persons) and a topic of your choosing. The study must be primarily "**qualitative**" as understood within this course and you cannot have any more than **three** participants. Your topic does not need to be explicitly "criminological;" just find a topic that is interesting to you and feasible within the context of a one-semester course.

This may sound simple, but it is not. Get started as soon as you can because the semester will go quickly and doing a good job takes time. Quality qualitative research is not something you knock off in a weekend.

In deciding what to do and how to proceed, consider the following guidelines, rules and suggestions:

1. Enjoy yourself. This may be one of the few opportunities you get in your life to really sit down and systematically understand a process or event or research site or whatever that is meaningful for you and that may well relate to something about your life and/or those close to you such as your dearest friends and family. The more you care about and enjoy what you are researching, the better your project will be, the more we will enjoy reading it, and the better you will do.
2. This is a course in qualitative methods, so of course your project must be primarily "**qualitative**." Its core method must involve an **oral history**, but beyond that can include any other sorts of information/data you wish (e.g., observation, archival analysis). Whatever you choose, your project must involve the creation of **new data**.
3. **Sampling** is a key issue when it comes to qualitative research. Instead of relying on big numbers of respondents or trying to acquire supposedly "representative" samples, qualitative researchers emphasize strategic sampling. Choose your person or persons carefully.
4. Your research project must be "**minimal risk**" when considered in light of the definition for "minimal risk" that appears in the [SFU ethics policy](#). In part this is simply good ethics

– you need to build up experience with less complex situations before you (and the research participants for whom you are responsible) dive into more challenging waters. It is also the more pragmatic option: the REB has delegated to me the responsibility for ethics review of minimal risk class projects; any research project that is "greater than minimal risk" needs to be submitted to the university Research Ethics Board (REB). In either case, ***you cannot begin to formally gather data until you have submitted a proposal and received approval by me or the REB to proceed.***

5. "Minimal risk" does not necessarily mean avoiding discussions that pertain to someone's involvement in criminal activity. This is criminology, after all, and part of understanding and learning how to do research in criminology involves learning how to address all the complexities that arise when you start talking to people about sensitive topics such as criminal involvements, victimizations, and loss. That said, these are not issues to be jumped into by the naïve and innocent; the more sensitive your topic, the more you will need to convince me in your proposal that you understand what you are getting into and know how to deal with the issues that may arise.
6. Because of both ethical complexities and pragmatic concerns, you also should consider the following when formulating your project for this course:
 - Avoid situations/institutions/agencies where you have to apply for permission to do your research. Pick research sites/samples that are public and/or involve people you already know (e.g., family members; friends; work colleagues);
 - Avoid research involving children and/or persons who are challenged in their ability to understand and consent to being a research participant, or where you might create discomfort/suspicion (e.g., asking strangers about security precautions they take in their house) unless the person you are talking to is someone who already knows and trusts you;
 - Do not undertake research in an Aboriginal community to which you are a stranger;
 - Do not undertake research that involves information that is subject to mandatory reporting laws (e.g., regarding ongoing child abuse or children in need of protection) because of the ethical complexities that are involved;
 - Do not undertake research that involves deception as to your "true" motives in undertaking the research or the "real" focus of study;
 - Unless there is an ethical reason for doing so, **do not** use signed consent forms. Such records make confidentiality more difficult to maintain and are not likely to be in the interests of research participants. On the other hand, you may decide to create an "information sheet" that summarizes your agreement and shows what commitments you are making to your participant(s).