

Philosophy and Methods of Conflict Research
CONF 610 Fall 2008
Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution
George Mason University

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with purpose.
-Zora Neale Hurston-

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 5:00-7:00 p.m. and by appointment

Course time and location: Wednesday, 7:20-10:00 p.m., Truland Building 648
courses.gmu.edu

Course Description

This course introduces students to the philosophies behind social science research and the methods for conducting research in the field of conflict resolution. The concepts we will cover include the identification of valid knowledge (*epistemology*), the nature of the world and how we view the causes of conflicts (*ontology*), and the means (*methodology*) by which we conduct research to test existing knowledge or generate new knowledge about conflicts and conflict resolution.

This course provides an overview of the research process and asks that you acquire hands-on experience with that process. Accordingly we will focus on the:

- 1) identification of research problems associated with particular conflict situations.
- 2) selection of appropriate research methods for use in exploring the problem at hand.
- 3) design of effective research projects.

Course Objectives

- Develop familiarity with research concepts and tools to use in examining and analyzing conflict and conflict resolution and be able to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of different methods.
- Demonstrate ability to frame and communicate a feasible research question pertinent to conflict resolution and design research to answer it.
- Improved ability to critically evaluate research, your own and that of other social scientists.
- Gain skills in locating and assessing research information relevant to conflict and conflict resolution from different academic disciplines.

- Understand forms of research for multiple contexts, including academic, organizational, and community contexts and develop awareness of the expectations of different audiences and applications.
- Understand the ethical implications of research.

Course Guidelines, Policies and Procedures

Active engagement: Research skills, like any other skills, can best be acquired through practice, reflection and application. Therefore students will learn by doing in all aspects of the course. Most of our time will be divided between discussion, hands-on exercises and peer feedback on research proposals. I expect you to have studied the required readings prior to class. Take time to digest the new methods and ideas before you come to class and be prepared to apply them or to ask about points that remain unclear. Each week we will spend some time hearing from class members on the development of your research project. Perhaps the most important part of the course is this process of creating a research community that shares ideas, experiences, expertise, challenges, and reflective thought. Everyone must come to class prepared to offer constructive feedback and suggestions. Since these assignments build on each other, you will be able to leverage your work and your understanding most effectively by completing and reflecting on each piece as assigned. Expect this course to have a moderate to heavy workload. Ask questions and raise concerns. If something is unclear or is not working effectively for you educationally, please tell me. I am reachable by e-mail and/or during office hours.

Missed classes: As this class is taught in a seminar/discussion format, its success depends on active and sustained participation by all those in the course. The more each person participates, the more learning will take place for everyone. If you miss a class, you should take responsibility for finding out what you missed and get the notes from a colleague. You will be asked to evaluate your own participation in and preparedness for class at the end of the semester.

Due dates: You are responsible for completing assignments on time. Late assignments may be penalized.

Assistance: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

The ability to write papers that are clear, analytical and your own work is essential. If you aren't already good at this, you can learn. The Writing Center is available to all Mason students and offers online and individual consultations as well as workshops and mini-courses.

Academic integrity: You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and following Mason's Honor Code, which can be found at: <http://www.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/#Anchor12>. Be sure that all work submitted is your own and that you use sources appropriately. I strongly recommend that you review requirements regarding use, paraphrasing and citation of sources prior to submitting your final work.

Of special concern is plagiarism, both intentional and inadvertent. The following passage from the English Department at Mason offers some basic guidelines:

Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving that person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes; a simple listing of books and articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in an academic setting. Student writers are often confused as to what should be cited. Some think that only direct quotations need to be credited. While direct quotations do need citations, so do paraphrases and summaries of opinions or factual information formerly unknown to the writers or which the writers did not discover themselves. Exceptions for this include factual information which can be obtained from a variety of sources, the writers' own insights or findings from their own field research, and what has been termed common knowledge. What constitutes common knowledge can sometimes be precarious; what is common knowledge for one audience may not be so for another. In such situations, it is helpful, to keep the reader in mind and to think of citations as being "reader friendly." In other words, writers provide a citation for any piece of information that they think their readers might want to investigate further. Not only is this attitude considerate of readers, it will almost certainly ensure that writers will never be guilty of plagiarism.

The writing center provides excellent resources on research and avoiding plagiarism at: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/plagiarism.html> .

Incompletes: Per GMU policy, incomplete grades will not be granted save in cases of personal or immediate family illness or emergency.

Assignments: All assignments should be double-spaced and use standard Times New Roman-12pt font. Consistent use of a standardized citation format is required.

Course Materials

We will be using the following required texts:

Creswell, John W. (2003) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Robson, Colin. (2002) *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers, 2nd Edition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Seidman, Irving. (2006) *Interviewing As Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 3rd Edition*. Teachers College Press.

Yin, Robert. (2002) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods, 3rd Edition, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol 5*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Additional required readings and supplemental materials will be available on the class website and several assignments will utilize the discussion section for posting and feedback. All students are responsible for downloading and reading assignments *before* they are discussed in class. The course website can be accessed by directing your browser to courses.gmu.edu .

Course Requirements

Active Engagement: (10%) Attendance is extremely important as the course is interactive and elicitive in nature. Participation is critical to student learning; students will be expected to engage each other in discussions about the assigned readings and research proposals. You can also participate by asking questions, circulating emails, organizing study groups, exchanging writing or introducing new ideas and resources.



Research Log: Keeping a journal provides another mechanism for active engagement with the readings and concepts. When kept from the initial attempts to formulate a question through the analysis of results this can provide an invaluable record of your progress as well as a place to work out difficult aspects of the research process. Further guidelines will be provided in class.

Exam/Quiz: (5%) A short answer and multiple choice question quiz will be posted online in October covering key concepts in social science research.

Problem Statement and Literature Review: (20%) The first steps toward the development of your research proposal require identifying an area of investigation and the literature which informs your topic. The problem statement should contain:

- A basic introduction to the problem you are investigating.
- References to your literature review to show why this problem is significant.
- The purpose of your study. What is your aim?
- Questions or hypotheses that guide your investigation.

In conjunction with your problem statement you should conduct a fairly thorough review of the relevant literature and analyze what is known and not known about this problem, including the best methods for inquiry. The goal here is to demonstrate your familiarity with the subject and to convince the readers, myself and other class members, of the necessity for studying the problem. The literature review should contain:

- A basic definition of your problem or question.
- An overview of the arguments in the field regarding the problem or question.
- An analysis of the current literature to show a) its strengths and deficiencies and b) the necessity for your research.

Length: approximately 7 to 9 pages. We will work with your initial drafts of the problem statement and literature review in class and online prior to the final due date. Due: October 1st.

Draft Research Design: (20%) This assignment is a 4 to 5 page paper referring to your Research Question and Literature Review, but focusing on your overall research design and the methods you plan to use to collect and analyze data. The draft research design should contain:

- A *brief* reintroduction of your problem and a clear statement of your hypotheses/questions.
- An overview of your research design, including the data collection and analyses methods you intend to use. Be sure to explain why this design suits the problem at hand.
- Your sampling scheme or where you plan to obtain your data.

- A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of your design and data collection and how you plan to address any weaknesses.
- A description of the portion of the research design you intend to pilot for the purposes of producing your final Research Report

Due dates: Draft due for peer review October 22nd. Final due October 29th.

Research Portfolio and Presentation: (40%) The culminating assignment for this course will be a research portfolio that contains several elements. The first is a proposal submitted as though you were applying for funding from a particular agency. There is no word limitation on this paper, but I will find it difficult to read papers that are too lengthy—recommended length is 20 pages. The proposal should include elements from all of the previous assignments—revised and edited as necessary. You will also include in the portfolio a summary report on your pilot study addressed to fellow researchers. Finally, you will include your research log, with a final self-assessment entry. Your final proposal should include:

- Your revised Problem Statement with arguments or hypotheses.
 - A reduced version of your Literature Review focusing on highlights, analyses and why your research is necessary.
 - Your revised research design.
 - A work plan including a timeline for completion of a final study.
 - A resources required section with categories—but not monetary amounts.
 - Human subjects review application.
 - Some indication of your final product and how you plan to disseminate it.
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- A description of the pilot research you performed
 - An analysis of the pilot research you performed: how you did it, what you learned and how it has affected your research design (confirming it, requiring modifications, etc.)
 - Draft research instruments for your pilot study. Depending on your study design these may include interview questionnaires, survey instruments, focus group guides and questionnaires, observation protocols, and/or document collection protocols.

As part of this assignment, you will do an in-class oral presentation on your research process, length to be determined by the number of students in the class.

Final Research Portfolio: Due December 10th, by 6pm.

Initial Class Schedule and Assignments

(Note: This schedule may be modified during the semester)

Week 1, August 27:

Introduction to the course, administrative matters, conflict interests, research background.
Research as awareness and observation.

To do: Brainstorm ideas and problems in conflict and research (in class)

2, September 3:

Social science research and the multidisciplinary nature of conflict studies. Overview of research approaches: inductive and deductive, qualitative and quantitative, positivists and constructivists.

Reading: Creswell, Chapter 1
Robson, Part One—Chapters 1 & 2

Research example: Selections from *Peace and Conflict*, special issue on Forgiveness (online)

To Do: Review the articles on forgiveness and reconciliation. Which studies did you find most appealing? Difficult? Why? How would you categorize the studies?

3, September 10:

Problems & questions in conflict analysis & resolution. Developing questions; designing research. Concept mapping. Turning questions into projects. Locating background material and understanding what you've found. Purpose statements. Hypotheses and research questions.

Reading: Creswell, Chapters 2 & 3
Robson, Chapter 3

Research example: Negotiation journal research digest (webpage)

To do: Initial Problem Identification, before next class. Your first assignment will be to draft 1 to 2 pages (200-700 words) detailing a problem in conflict resolution that you feel needs to be addressed with a research project. This assignment will lead to your literature review and research question, so you should try to think of something that interests you, that you have some knowledge about and that is researchable. Post to class web page prior to the next class and respond with feedback to at least two classmates.

4, September 17:

Designing the inquiry. Fixed and flexible designs. Peer discussion of research problems.

Reading: Creswell, Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7
Robson: Chapter 4
Yin, Chapters 1 & 2 (Introduction, Designing Case Studies)

To do: Concept mapping in-class for literature review.

5, September 24:

Guest lecture. Fixed designs. Design focus: Experiments and Surveys, Thinking with numbers.

Reading: Creswell: pp. 132-170
Robson, Chapter 5

Research example: TBA

6, October 1:

Research design continued. Focus: Case Studies and Grounded Theory

Reading: Creswell, pp. 129-132, 173-202
Robson, Chapter 6

Research examples: Hill, "*Problem-solving workshops*" and Veale & Stavrou, "*Former Lord's Resistance Army Child Abductees*" (online)

To do: Literature review & problem statement due.

7, October 8:

Research design continued. Focus: Action and Evaluation research

Reading: Robson, Chapter 7 and review Chapter 6

Research examples: Research example: Rothman, Jay. (1997) "*Action evaluation and conflict resolution training: theory, method and case study*" and Wayne, Ellen. (2008) "*Is it just talk? Understanding and Evaluating Intergroup Dialogue*" (online)

To Do: (Provisional: Online quiz will be available for the next two weeks.)

8, October 15:

Data collection: Questionnaires, Documents & Interviewing. Primary and secondary sources. Operationalizing concepts and writing questions.

Reading: Robson, Part III—Chapters 8-12

Research example: TBA

To do:

9, October 22:

Data collection continued. In-class interviewing exercise.

Reading: Seidman, Interviewing as Qualitative Research
Yin, Case Study Research, Chapters 3 & 4

Research example: TBA

To do: Draft research design due for peer review and discussion in class.

10, October 29:

Analyzing data: quantitative approaches.

Reading: Robson, Introduction to Part IV and Chapter 13
Review Creswell, Chapter 8

Research example: TBA

To do: Final draft research design due.

November 5:

Analyzing data continued: qualitative approaches.

Reading: Robson, Chapter 14
Review Creswell, Chapter 8

Research examples: Goldberg and Shaw, “The secrets of successful (and unsuccessful mediators)” and “Analyzing Reconciliation: A Structured Method”

To do: Peer review of instruments for pilot. Post online for comments.

November 12:

Research ethics and principles. Standards of quality. Reporting on research.

Reading: Robson, Chapter 15
Seidman, Chapter 5
Creswell, review Chapter 4 on Ethical Considerations
Yin, Chapter 6

To Do:**November 19:**

Issues in conflict analysis and resolution research revisited: audiences, context, researcher role. Mapping the field. Loose ends.

Reading: Robson, Appendices A & B

Research example: TBA (from Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies)

December 3:

Presentations, discussion and wrap-up of the semester. Evaluations.

December 10:

Research Portfolio due by 5:30 p.m.