PLS424 Issues in Philosophy of Social Science: Interpretivism as Philosophy and Method

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Format: Seminar | **Prerequisites:** PLS210 | **Semester:** Fall 2026

Course Description

This course introduces students to the ontology, epistemology, and method of interpretive research tradition, focusing on the contextualisation of knowledge, patterns of meaning production in academia, and investigation of the researcher's role as a co-creator of knowledge frameworks, not simply an external observer.

The first half of the course (Weeks 1–7) is theory and readings intensive. We begin with three weeks on the philosophy of social science: what counts as knowledge, how positivism shaped the field, why its critics matter, and what the paradigm debates mean for how we do research. We then spend two weeks engaging deeply with interpretivism as a distinct philosophical and methodological tradition, using Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's textbook as our anchor. The final two weeks of the theory half turn to a question that is reshaping the field: can artificial intelligence participate in interpretive research? We examine the ontological status of AI, the debate over whether machines can understand meaning, and the ethical arguments for and against integrating AI into qualitative inquiry.

Beginning in Week 4, students form research teams and start planning their within-university ethnographic research projects alongside the theoretical work. Teams prepare and submit their SSH IREC (Institutional Research Ethics Committee) applications by the end of Week 7, so that ethics approval is secured before fieldwork begins after the break.

The second half of the course (Weeks 8–14) is devoted to research and fieldwork. Working in teams, students design and conduct a small-scale ethnographic study on the university campus. Teams may choose between two tracks: a standard ethnography track or an AI-enhanced track, in which AI is deliberately integrated into the research design and data analysis process as a collaborator. The AI-enhanced track requires teams to grapple with the theoretical and ethical questions raised in the first half of the course and to treat AI as a research collaborator whose ontological status and positionality must be accounted for.

Course Aims

- Provide students with an introductory background on the philosophy of social science and interpretive research methods.
- Assist students in identifying types of research agenda best pursued with interpretive research methods.
- Allow students to get acquainted with the basics of interpretive research methods and ways of data gathering and analysing evidence in interpretive tradition.

- Develop practical skills in conducting ethnographic research through a hands-on field project.
- Foster reflexivity and ethical awareness in the research process, with particular attention to power dynamics and researcher positionality.
- Critically examine the role of artificial intelligence in interpretive research, including its ontological status, capabilities, limitations, and ethical implications.

Course Learning Objectives

CLO	Students will...	PLOs
1	Understand the ontological and epistemological foundations of interpretive research from positivist approaches to social science.	1
2	Explain how interpretive researchers understand knowledge production, meaning-making, and the role of the researcher as co-creator of knowledge.	1, 2
3	Design and conduct a small-scale ethnographic research project, including site selection, observation, fieldnote writing, interviewing, and data analysis.	2, 4, 6
4	Critically reflect on researcher positionality, power dynamics, and ethical considerations in interpretive research.	2, 5
5	Present interpretive research findings using appropriate evidence and reflexive analysis in oral and written formats.	3
6	Evaluate the trustworthiness and quality of knowledge claims in interpretive research.	1, 2
7	Lead a seminar discussion that connects theoretical readings to practical research applications.	3, 5
8	Critically assess the ontological status of AI and articulate a reasoned position on whether and how AI can participate in interpretive research.	1, 2, 5

Program Learning Objectives

PLO	Description	CLOs
1	Describe the discipline of political science and its subfields in terms of content, purpose, and methods.	1, 2, 6
2	Critically examine data or texts.	2, 3, 5, 6
3	Explain their knowledge about political science to others using the necessary oral and written skills.	5, 7
4	Apply their knowledge of political science to analyze domestic and international socio-political issues.	3
5	Listen to and be tolerant of different ideas.	4, 7, 8
6	Apply political science knowledge and skills to actual problem-solving and community service.	3

Graduate Attributes

GA	Description	CLOs
1	Possess an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of their domain of study.	1, 2, 3
2	Be intellectually agile, curious, creative and open-minded.	2, 6, 8
3	Be thoughtful decision makers who know how to involve others.	3, 7
4	Be entrepreneurial, self-propelling and able to create new opportunities.	3
5	Be fluent communicators across languages and cultures.	5, 7
6	Be cultured and tolerant citizens of the world.	4
7	Demonstrate high personal integrity.	4, 6
8	Be prepared to take a leading role in the development of their country.	3

Inclusivity and Non-Discrimination Policy

This course is dedicated to creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment for all students. We adhere to a strict zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination, harassment, or hate speech. Students are encouraged to report any incidents of discrimination or harassment. We will take these reports seriously and address them promptly and sensitively.

The Nazarbayev University Special Learning Needs Committee (SLNC) is committed to creating an equitable and inclusive education environment for all students. If you have a qualified special learning need (physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and psychological), please contact the SLNC as early as possible to ensure you receive the fullest support available. If you already have approved SLNC accommodations, please share them with your teaching faculty as soon as possible. Accommodations cannot be applied retroactively, and will only be active once your teaching faculty has received them. For more information: SLNC@nu.edu.kz.

PSIR Department AI Policy

There are situations and contexts within this department where you will be asked to use AI tools to explore how they can be used. Any student work submitted using AI tools should clearly indicate what work is the student's work and what part is generated by the AI, through citation or a declaration. Unacknowledged use of AI tools will be treated as plagiarism and penalties will be applied according to the NU Student Code of Conduct. The course instructor will indicate the extent to which you may use these tools on these assignments in their classroom. Outside of those circumstances, you are discouraged from using AI tools to generate content (text, video, audio, images) that will end up in any student work (assignments, activities, responses, etc.) that is part of your evaluation in this course. Critical thinking and the creative process of generating your own ideas/products are essential in these courses. Instructors are free to devise more restrictive AI policies according to the demands of the specific courses they offer. Students are well-advised to consult their course syllabus or consult with their instructor in person regarding AI use in the course.

My AI Policy

This course engages directly with AI as both a subject of study and, for teams choosing the AI-enhanced track, a research collaborator. In the first half of the course, we examine the philosophical, ontological, and ethical dimensions of AI in interpretive research. In the second half, teams on the AI-enhanced track will deliberately work with AI as part of their ethnographic projects.

For the AI-enhanced ethnography track: AI involvement must be fully transparent, documented (with complete conversation logs submitted as appendices), and critically reflected upon. AI is not a substitute for human interpretation, judgment, or fieldwork. The first encounter with data must always be human: team members must read all fieldnotes and interview transcripts themselves and develop their own initial codes and impressions before consulting AI. AI may then contribute to research design critique, pattern recognition, and identifying themes or tensions the team may have overlooked. All human interactions, observations, and interpretive judgments remain the researchers' own work.

For all other coursework (reading portfolio, seminar chairship): AI-generated content is not permitted. If you use AI for copyediting, save original unedited versions. Participation is assessed on in-class engagement only.

My Class Philosophy

I believe that academic (and non-academic) relationships should be built on trust, equality, and respect. You are welcome to address me by my first name, and I do not care about titles (professor and such). When reaching out via email, feel free to skip the formalities. I appreciate concise, clear messages that get straight to the point.

Course Policies

Attendance. According to the NU policy, attendance is compulsory. Meaningful participation and preparation are expected for each seminar.

Academic Misconduct & Plagiarism. I expect zero plagiarism and cheating in this class (it is your responsibility to know and abide by the Student Code of Conduct for Nazarbayev University). Everyone should use references and in-text citations where appropriate (everywhere). Improper or undisclosed AI involvement will result in an academic misconduct report in this course.

Assessment Scheme

Seminar Chairship (25%)

In Weeks 2 to 13, two students will chair a three-hour seminar discussion on the week's assigned readings. The chair is responsible for determining the structure of the seminar, preparing discussion questions, and designing at least one interactive activity that engages the class with

Component	Weight
Participation	10%
Seminar Chairship	25%
Critical Reading Portfolio	15%
Ethnography Research Proposal	25%
Ethnography Presentation	10%
Ethnography Final Report	15%

the theoretical concepts. Chairs may upload supplementary materials and are welcome to involve the instructor to any extent they wish.

The chairship is assessed across four dimensions, weighted equally:

- **Mastery of material** (up to 6 pts): Demonstrates thorough reading and understanding of assigned texts. Can explain key arguments accurately, identify tensions between authors, and respond to questions without relying heavily on notes.
- **Discussion facilitation** (up to 7 pts): Poses open-ended questions or tasks that generate genuine debate. Manages the flow of conversation: draws out quieter students, redirects tangents productively, builds on student contributions rather than lecturing.
- **Interactive activity** (up to 6 pts): Designs at least one activity (mapping exercise, structured debate, close reading, case application, etc.) that actively engages the class with the theoretical content. The activity has a clear purpose and produces a useful outcome for the group.
- **Structure and time management** (up to 6 pts): The seminar has a clear arc: opening, main discussion, activity, and synthesis. Time is used effectively across sections. The chair provides a brief summary or set of takeaways at the end.

Grade bands:

23–25 points – Excellent across all four dimensions. The seminar feels purposeful and well-paced. Students leave with a deeper understanding of the readings than they came in with.

20–22 points – Strong overall, with one dimension underdeveloped. For example: good questions but the activity felt rushed, or strong material knowledge but the discussion was dominated by a few voices.

15–19 points – Adequate in most areas but two or more dimensions are weak. Common issues: surface-level engagement with readings, questions that elicit yes/no answers, or no clear seminar structure.

10–14 points – Weak preparation evident. The chair struggles to explain key concepts, the discussion stalls, or the activity is absent or purely decorative.

0–9 points – No substantial preparation. The seminar does not function as an intellectual exchange.

Participation (10%)

Meaningful participation is expected throughout the course. This includes coming to class prepared, contributing to seminar discussions, engaging constructively with peers' ideas, and actively participating in workshops and group activities. During the fieldwork phase, participation also includes contributing to your team's collective work and engaging with other teams'

progress during class sessions.

Participation is assessed holistically across the semester. You do not need to speak the most or the loudest. Thoughtful questions, substantive engagement with the readings, and genuine intellectual curiosity all count. I will provide informal feedback at mid-semester if participation is a concern.

Grading criteria:

- **Preparation** (up to 3 pts): Evidence of having done the readings: references specific arguments, raises questions that come from the text, brings annotated readings to class.
- **Quality of contribution** (up to 4 pts): Contributions go beyond agreement or summary. Asks questions that open new lines of discussion. Makes connections across weeks or between theory and practice. Responds to and builds on what others say rather than waiting to deliver a pre-formed point.
- **Consistency and engagement** (up to 3 pts): Participates regularly across the semester, not just in a few sessions. Engages in workshops, group exercises, and peer feedback. During fieldwork phase, actively contributes to team progress discussions.

Grade bands:

9–10 points – Consistently prepared, regularly makes contributions that move the discussion forward. Engages with peers' ideas. Active and reliable in group work.

7–8 points – Generally prepared and participates regularly, but contributions are sometimes surface-level or inconsistent across the semester.

5–6 points – Participates occasionally. Some evidence of preparation but contributions tend toward summary or agreement. Uneven engagement in workshops.

3–4 points – Rarely contributes. Little evidence of preparation. Passive in group activities.

0–2 points – Absent or entirely disengaged.

Critical Reading Portfolio (15%)

Over the theory-intensive first half of the course (Weeks 1–6), students will write four short critical reading responses (1–2 pages each). You may choose any four out of the six weeks. Each response should engage critically with the week's readings: identify key arguments, raise questions, draw connections to other weeks or your own experience, and offer your own analysis. This is not summary; it is critical engagement.

The portfolio is submitted as a single document at the end of Week 6 and graded holistically.

Grading criteria:

- **Analytical depth** (up to 5 pts): Each response engages with the arguments in the readings, not just the topics. You identify what the author is actually claiming, assess the strengths and weaknesses of their reasoning, and offer your own position. A response that says "Kuhn argues that paradigms shift" is summary. A response that asks "Is Kuhn's account of crisis applicable to the interpretive turn in political science, or does it only describe natural science?" is analysis.
- **Cross-week connections** (up to 5 pts): The portfolio as a whole shows development. Later responses build on earlier ones. You draw connections between authors, identify

tensions across weeks, and track how your own thinking evolves. The best portfolios read as an intellectual journey, not four isolated reactions.

- **Writing quality and engagement** (up to 5 pts): Responses are clearly written, concise, and demonstrate genuine curiosity. You take risks with ideas rather than playing it safe. Responses that wrestle with difficulty are valued over responses that avoid it.

Grade bands:

14–15 points – Consistently sharp analysis. Genuine intellectual development visible across responses. Original connections between authors and weeks. Writing is clear and confident.

12–13 points – Strong analysis in most responses, with some cross-week connections. Occasional missed opportunities for deeper engagement. Writing is generally clear.

9–11 points – Responses engage with readings but lean toward summary. Limited connections across weeks. Analysis stays at the surface of arguments rather than interrogating them.

5–8 points – Mostly descriptive. Responses restate what authors say without offering analysis or critique. Little evidence of intellectual development.

0–4 points – Incomplete portfolio, missing responses, or no meaningful engagement with readings.

Ethnography Research Proposal (25%)

Working in teams of 2–3, students will submit a research proposal for their ethnographic project. The proposal is due at the end of Week 10. Teams choose one of two tracks:

Track A: Standard Ethnography

The proposal should include: a research question with rationale, site selection and justification, methodological approach (observation strategy, interview plan), positionality statements for each team member, ethical considerations and consent procedures, and a fieldwork timeline. Length: 8–12 pages. One submission per team.

Track A grading criteria:

- **Research question and rationale** (up to 5 pts): The question is clear, specific, and answerable through ethnographic methods. The rationale explains why this question matters and why ethnography is the right approach. Weak questions are too broad ("What is student life like?") or too narrow to sustain a project.

- **Site selection and justification** (up to 4 pts): The chosen campus site is well-suited to the research question. The team explains why this site (and not others) will yield meaningful data, and demonstrates awareness of access considerations.

- **Methodological design** (up to 6 pts): The observation strategy and interview plan are specific and grounded in interpretive principles from the course readings. The team explains what they will observe, how they will record observations, whom they will interview and why, and how they will analyse data. Vague statements like "we will do participant observation" without further specification are insufficient.

- **Positionality statements** (up to 5 pts): Each team member writes a substantive positionality statement reflecting on how their background, assumptions, and relationship to the site may shape the research. These should be honest and specific, not formulaic.

- **Ethics and timeline** (up to 5 pts): Consent procedures are clearly described. The team has thought through risks to participants and how to mitigate them. The fieldwork timeline is realistic given IREC timing and the semester calendar.

Track A grade bands:

23–25 points – Strong across all five criteria. The proposal reads as a coherent research design that the team could actually execute. Positionality statements are thoughtful and specific.

20–22 points – Solid overall, with one or two criteria underdeveloped. Common issue: good question and site but vague methodology, or strong methods but formulaic positionality.

15–19 points – Covers all required elements but several are shallow. Research question may be unfocused. Methodology relies on generalities rather than specific plans.

10–14 points – Significant gaps. Multiple required elements missing or superficial. The proposal does not demonstrate understanding of interpretive research principles.

0–9 points – Missing or fundamentally inadequate.

Track B: AI-Enhanced Ethnography

All standard proposal requirements apply, plus the following additional components:

- **AI Integration Plan:** how the team will work with AI during research design and data analysis. Specify which stages of the research process will involve AI, what AI will contribute, and what remains exclusively human. Be specific: the team must read all data and develop initial codes before consulting AI.

- **AI Positionality Statement:** the team's reasoned position on AI's ontological status and what that means for the research. How does the team conceptualise AI's role? Is it an interlocutor, a collaborator, a co-researcher, something else entirely? This position must be grounded in the course readings.

- **Ethical Justification:** why working with AI is appropriate for this specific project, addressing concerns raised in the Week 7 readings.

- **Documentation Protocol:** how AI interactions will be logged and made available (full conversation logs will be required as appendices in the final project).

Length: 10–15 pages. One submission per team.

Track B grading criteria:

All five standard criteria apply (research question, site selection, methodology, positionality, ethics/timeline) for a combined 17 points. The remaining 8 points are allocated to the AI-specific components:

- **AI integration plan** (up to 2 pts): Specifies which research stages will involve AI, what AI will contribute at each stage, and what remains human-only. The plan is concrete, not aspirational. The team has thought about how to operationalise the "humans first" data rule in practice.

- **AI positionality statement** (up to 3 pts): The team articulates a reasoned position on AI's ontological status grounded in Week 6–7 readings. This is not a formality. The statement should reflect genuine philosophical engagement: is AI a collaborator, an interlocutor, a pattern-matching device, something else? What follows from that position for how the team will treat AI output?

- **Ethical justification and documentation protocol** (up to 3 pts): The team directly addresses the Jowsey et al. critique and explains why working with AI is defensible for this specific project. The documentation protocol specifies how conversation logs will be maintained, stored, and presented.

Track B grade bands:

23–25 points – Standard criteria strong. AI components are philosophically grounded, specific, and show genuine engagement with course readings. The positionality statement would hold up in a seminar discussion.

20–22 points – Standard criteria solid. AI components present and reasonable but positionality or ethical justification could be deeper.

15–19 points – Standard criteria adequate. AI components exist but are superficial. Positionality statement does not engage meaningfully with the readings. Ethical justification is generic.

10–14 points – Weak on standard criteria. AI components missing or poorly conceived.

0–9 points – Missing or fundamentally inadequate.

Ethnography Presentation (10%)

In Week 14, each team delivers a 15–20 minute presentation of their ethnographic research, followed by 10 minutes of questions and feedback. All team members must participate in the delivery.

All presentations should include:

- Research question and rationale
- Brief overview of methodological approach and fieldwork process
- Key findings with supporting evidence (fieldnote excerpts, interview quotes)
- Reflexive discussion on team positionality and how it shaped the research
- Theoretical and practical implications

AI-enhanced track presentations should additionally address:

- How the team worked with AI and what AI contributed to the research
- What AI got wrong or failed to understand
- How the team's understanding of AI's ontological status evolved through the project
- Whether the team would work with AI in interpretive research again, and why

Grading criteria (both tracks):

- **Content and findings** (up to 3 pts): The presentation communicates a clear research story. Findings are grounded in evidence, not assertion. The team demonstrates analytical thinking, not just description of what they saw. For AI-enhanced teams: the AI reflection section is substantive and honest, not performative.
- **Delivery and structure** (up to 3 pts): The presentation has a clear arc. Transitions between speakers are smooth. Slides or visual materials support the content rather than replacing it. The team stays within time. Presenters speak from understanding, not from scripts.

- **Team balance and Q&A** (up to 4 pts): All members contribute meaningfully to both the delivery and the Q&A. Responses to questions demonstrate genuine understanding of the research and its limitations. The team handles critical questions constructively rather than defensively.

Grade bands:

9–10 points – Compelling presentation. Clear narrative, strong evidence, all members contribute substantively. Handles Q&A with confidence and intellectual honesty.

7–8 points – Solid presentation with good content, but delivery or balance could improve. Q&A responses are adequate but not always sharp.

5–6 points – Covers basic elements but lacks analytical depth or evidence. Uneven contributions. Struggles with Q&A.

3–4 points – Weak content or delivery. Major imbalance in contributions. Findings are unsupported or superficial.

0–2 points – Very poor or incomplete. Absent team members or no evidence of fieldwork.

Ethnography Final Report (15%)

Teams submit a written report consolidating their ethnographic research findings. The report is due before the first class of Week 14.

Track A: Standard Ethnography

Length: 10–15 pages. One submission per team. The report should include:

- Research question and rationale
- Methodological approach: what the team did in the field, how observations and interviews were conducted, and how data was analysed
- Key findings with supporting evidence from fieldnotes and interviews. Direct quotes and thick description are expected, not just claims.
- Reflexive discussion: how the team's positionality shaped what they saw, what they missed, and how they interpreted the data
- Theoretical and practical implications: what does this research contribute beyond the specific site?

Track A grading criteria:

- **Research question and framing** (up to 2 pts): The question is clearly stated and the report explains how the fieldwork addressed it. The framing connects to interpretive theory from the course.
- **Methodology description** (up to 3 pts): The team gives a concrete account of what they actually did. How many observations? How many interviews, with whom, and why? How were fieldnotes recorded and coded? A reader should be able to understand and evaluate the research process.
- **Findings and evidence** (up to 4 pts): Findings are analytical, not just descriptive. The team identifies patterns, tensions, or themes and supports them with specific evidence: fieldnote excerpts, interview quotes, observed interactions. Thick description is present. Claims without evidence lose points.

- **Reflexivity** (up to 3 pts): The team reflects honestly on how their positionality shaped the research. This is not a formality at the end of the report but woven through the analysis. What did they expect to find? What surprised them? Where might their assumptions have led them astray?

- **Writing quality** (up to 3 pts): The report is clearly written, well-organised, and free of major errors. The writing has a consistent voice. Citations are properly formatted.

Track A grade bands:

14–15 points – Strong across all criteria. The report reads as a cohesive piece of interpretive research. Evidence is rich, analysis is sharp, reflexivity is genuine.

12–13 points – Good overall, with one or two criteria underdeveloped. Common issue: solid findings but thin reflexivity, or good reflexivity but evidence is sparse.

9–11 points – Adequate but surface-level. Findings are mostly descriptive. Evidence is present but not thick. Reflexivity feels formulaic.

5–8 points – Significant weaknesses in multiple areas. Thin evidence, minimal analysis, or no genuine reflexivity.

0–4 points – Missing, incomplete, or no evidence of fieldwork.

Track B: AI-Enhanced Ethnography

Length: 12–18 pages, plus appendices. All standard report requirements apply (for a combined 10 points). The remaining 5 points are allocated to AI-specific components:

- **Complete AI conversation logs as appendix** (up to 1 pt): All interactions with AI during the research process, unedited. Missing or selectively edited logs will lose this point.

- **Critical reflection on AI contributions** (up to 2 pts): What did AI notice that the team initially missed? What did AI get wrong or fail to understand? Where did human judgment override AI, and why? This section should be analytically honest, not a sales pitch for AI.

- **AI positionality evolution** (up to 1 pt): How the team's understanding of AI's ontological status changed (or didn't) over the course of the project. Did the proposal's positionality statement hold up in practice?

- **Human/AI delineation** (up to 1 pt): Clear evidence that all fieldwork, human interactions, and initial data encounters were the team's own work. AI contributed to design critique, pattern recognition, and identifying overlooked themes only after the team had done their own first reading.

Track B grade bands:

14–15 points – Standard criteria strong. AI logs are complete and show genuine, sustained engagement. Critical reflection is honest and sharp. Clear evidence that the team critically evaluated AI output rather than deferring to it.

12–13 points – Standard criteria solid. AI documentation complete. Reflection present but could be deeper.

9–11 points – Standard criteria adequate. AI logs present but sparse. Reflection is superficial. Limited evidence of genuine collaboration.

5–8 points – Weak on standard criteria. AI components missing or suggest outsourcing rather than collaboration.

0–4 points – Missing, incomplete, or no evidence of ethical AI integration.

Important note on the AI-enhanced track: Choosing the AI-enhanced track is not easier than the standard track. It requires additional intellectual work: formulating an AI positionality, maintaining complete logs, and critically reflecting on the human-AI boundary throughout the research process. Teams should choose this track because they are genuinely interested in exploring what AI can and cannot do in non-positivist research, not because they want to save time.

Grading Scale

A	95–100	B+	85–89	C+	70–74	D+	55–59
A-	90–94	B	80–84	C	65–69	D	50–54
		B-	75–79	C-	60–64	F	0–49

Literature

Primary textbooks:

- Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine, and Dvora Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. Routledge, 2012.
- Moses, Jonathan W., and Torbjørn L. Knutsen. *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

For ethnographic methods:

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. Routledge, 2018.
- Roulston, Kathryn. *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Sage, 2010.
- Van Maanen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Alvesson, Mats. "At-Home Ethnography: Struggling with Closeness and Closure." In *Organizational Ethnography*, edited by Sierk Ybema et al., pp. 156–174. Sage, 2009.

Philosophy of social science:

- Hollis, Martin. *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 4th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

- Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. Routledge, 2010.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 3–32. Basic Books, 1973.
- Marsh, David, Selen A. Ercan, and Paul Furlong. "A Skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science." In *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 4th ed., edited by Vivien Lowndes, David Marsh, and Gerry Stoker, pp. 177–198. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

AI and interpretive research:

- Bender, Emily M., Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 2021, pp. 610–623. [Note: "Shmargaret Shmitchell" is a pseudonym for Margaret Mitchell, used in protest after her dismissal from Google during the paper's review process. The publication history of this paper is itself a case study in power dynamics and knowledge production.]
- Coeckelbergh, Mark. "The Grammars of AI: Towards a Structuralist and Transcendental Hermeneutics of Digital Technologies." *Technology and Language* 3, no. 2 (2022): 148–161.
- Shanahan, Murray. "Talking About Large Language Models." *Communications of the ACM* 67, no. 2 (2024): 68–79.
- Crawford, Kate, and Vladan Joler. "Anatomy of an AI System." anatomyof.ai, 2018.
- Jowsey, Tanisha, et al. "We Reject the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence for Reflexive Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* (2025).
- Chatzichristos, Georgios. "Qualitative Research in the Era of AI: A Return to Positivism or a New Paradigm?" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025).
- Morgan, David L. "Exploring the Use of Artificial Intelligence for Qualitative Data Analysis: The Case of ChatGPT." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (2023).
- Nicmanis, Mitchell, and Harry Spurrier. "Getting Started with Artificial Intelligence Assisted Qualitative Analysis." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025).

Weekly Schedule

PART I: THEORY AND READINGS (WEEKS 1–7)

Week 1 (Aug 18): What is Social Science? Positivism and Its Foundations

Class #1: Positivism and the scientific model

- Moses, Jonathan W., and Torbjørn L. Knutsen. *Ways of Knowing*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Chapters 1–3.

- Hollis, Martin. *The Philosophy of Social Science*. Cambridge University Press, 1994. Chapter 1.

Class #2: Falsification and the limits of verification

- Grix, Jonathan. "Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research." *Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2002, pp. 175–186.

Recommended: Popper, Karl. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (selected excerpts on falsification) or Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Popper.

Week 2 (Aug 25): Challenging Positivism: Paradigms and Their Shifts

Class #1 (Chairperson-led):

- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 4th ed. University of Chicago Press, 2012. Chapters 1, 8, and 9.

- Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. Routledge, 2010. Introduction and Chapter 1.

Class #2: Discussion seminar

In-class exercise: mapping ontological and epistemological assumptions across paradigms.

Week 3 (Sep 1): The Paradigm Debates: Why Knowledge is Not Simple

Class #1 (Chairperson-led):

- Moses, Jonathan W., and Torbjørn L. Knutsen. *Ways of Knowing*. Chapters 4–6 (Constructivism, the constructivist critique, and methodological pluralism).

- Marsh, David, Selen A. Ercan, and Paul Furlong. "A Skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science." In *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 4th ed., pp. 177–198. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Class #2: Discussion seminar

- Flyvbjerg, Bent. *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Chapter 1.

In-class exercise: debate on whether social science can (or should) follow the natural science model.

Week 4 (Sep 8): Introduction to Interpretivism

Class #1 (Chairperson-led):

- Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine, and Dvora Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design*. Routledge, 2012. Chapters 1–2.

- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 3–32. Basic Books, 1973.

Class #2: Discussion seminar + project launch

- Wedeen, Lisa. "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science." *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 255–272.

- Yanow, Dvora. "Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods." *Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 2 (2003): 9–13.

Ethnography project:

- Team formation (teams of 3–4)
- Introduction to the ethnography project: timeline, tracks, and expectations
- Brainstorming potential campus field sites
- IREC application overview: what you need and when

Week 5 (Sep 15): Interpretive Research: Design and Method

Class #1 (Chairperson-led):

- Schwartz-Shea and Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design.* Chapters 3–4.
- Lin, Ann Chih. *Reform in the Making.* Princeton University Press, 2000. Appendix 2: "On Being Who You Are: Credibility, Bias, and Good Research."

Class #2 (Chairperson-led):

- Schwartz-Shea and Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design.* Chapter 5.
- Cohn, Carol. "Motives and Methods: Using Multi-Sited Ethnography to Study US National Security Discourses." In *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, edited by Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True, pp. 91–107. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Ethnography project:

- Draft preliminary research question and site selection rationale
- Begin writing positionality statements
- Start drafting IREC application: research design summary and risk assessment

Week 6 (Sep 22): AI, Meaning, and the Question of Understanding

Class #1 (Chairperson-led):

- Shanahan, Murray. "Talking About Large Language Models." *Communications of the ACM* 67, no. 2 (2024): 68–79.
- Bender, Emily M., et al. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" 2021. Focus on sections about meaning and understanding. [Note the pseudonymous authorship: the publication history of this paper is itself a lesson in power and knowledge production. We will discuss.]

Class #2: Discussion seminar

- Coeckelbergh, Mark. "The Grammars of AI." *Technology and Language* 3, no. 2 (2022): 148–161.
- Crawford, Kate, and Vladan Joler. "Anatomy of an AI System." anatomyof.ai, 2018. (Visual essay.)

In-class discussion: Can AI understand meaning or only process patterns? Can AI have positionality? What is the ontological status of a large language model, and why does it matter for interpretive research? Does Coeckelbergh's hermeneutic framing change the terms of the debate?

Ethnography project:

- Finalise IREC application: consent form templates, participant information sheets
- Preliminary track decision (standard or AI-enhanced)

Critical Reading Portfolio due by Sunday 11:59 PM.

Week 7 (Sep 29): Can AI Do Interpretive Research? Evaluating Knowledge Claims

Class #1: The case against

- Jowsey, Tanisha, et al. "We Reject the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence for Reflexive Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* (2025). [Declaration signed by 419 qualitative researchers from 32 countries.]
- Chatzichristos, Georgios. "Qualitative Research in the Era of AI: A Return to Positivism or a New Paradigm?" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025).
- Schwartz-Shea and Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design.* Chapters 6–7 (Evaluating knowledge claims).

Class #2: The case for ethical integration

- Morgan, David L. "Exploring the Use of Artificial Intelligence for Qualitative Data Analysis: The Case of ChatGPT." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (2023).
- Nicmanis, Mitchell, and Harry Spurrier. "Getting Started with Artificial Intelligence Assisted Qualitative Analysis." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025).

Synthesis discussion: where do you stand? Can AI participate in interpretive research, and if so, under what conditions? How do we evaluate knowledge claims when AI is involved in the analysis?

Final track selection (standard or AI-enhanced).

IREC application due by Sunday 11:59 PM.

Break

PART II: ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT (WEEKS 8–14)

By this point, teams have formed, selected their track, and submitted IREC applications. Fieldwork begins once ethics approval is confirmed. If your IREC approval is delayed, use the time for additional site observation, research design refinement, and (for AI-enhanced teams) initial AI consultations on methodology. Do not begin interviewing or formal data collection until IREC is approved.

Week 8 (Oct 13): Ethnographic Methods: Getting Started

Class #1: Introduction to ethnographic fieldwork

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press, 2011. Chapters 1–2.
- Alvesson, Mats. "At-Home Ethnography: Struggling with Closeness and Closure." In *Organizational Ethnography*, pp. 156–174. Sage, 2009.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- IREC status check and troubleshooting
- In-class exercise: practice observation and note-taking at a campus location
- AI-enhanced teams: begin drafting AI positionality statement and integration plan
- Fieldwork timeline and expectations

Week 9 (Oct 20): Fieldwork: Observation and Fieldnotes

Class #1: Fieldnote writing

- Emerson et al. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chapters 3–4.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- Preliminary site visits and fieldwork planning
- Group discussion: first impressions from the field
- AI-enhanced teams: first documented AI session on research design (bring logs to next class)

Week 10 (Oct 27): Fieldwork: Deepening Observation

Class #1: Coding and analysis

- Emerson et al. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chapters 5–6.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- Group fieldnote sharing and peer feedback
- Coding and organising fieldnotes
- Identifying patterns and themes
- AI-enhanced teams: share AI interaction logs with class for discussion

Ethnography Research Proposal due by Sunday 11:59 PM.

Week 11 (Nov 3): Interviewing

Class #1: The relational and reflexive interview

- Fujii, Lee Ann. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. Routledge, 2018. Chapters 1–4.
- Roulston, Kathryn. *Reflective Interviewing*. Sage, 2010. Selected chapters on reflexivity and interviewing within familiar settings.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- Interview guide development
- Mock interviews and peer feedback
- Recording and transcription techniques
- Ethical considerations in interviewing peers and community members

Week 12 (Nov 10): Analyzing Ethnographic Data

Class #1: Analysis methods

- Emerson et al. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chapter 7.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. *Interviewing in Social Science Research*. Chapter 5.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- Data analysis workshop: working with your own data
- Developing interpretive themes from fieldnotes and interviews
- AI-enhanced teams: AI-assisted pattern recognition session (team reads and codes data first, then consults AI for additional patterns)
- Reflexive journaling techniques

Week 13 (Nov 17): Writing Up and Reflexivity

Class #1: Writing ethnography and reflexivity

- Van Maanen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2011. Chapters 1–3 (Realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionist tales).
- Scott, Susie, et al. "The Reluctant Researcher: Shyness in the Field." *Qualitative Research* 12, no. 6 (2012): 715–734.

Class #2: Practical workshop

- Writing ethnographic findings: structure and voice
- Peer review of draft reports
- AI-enhanced teams: compiling and annotating AI conversation logs
- Preparing presentation materials

Week 14 (Nov 24): Ethnography Project Presentations

Ethnography Final Report due before the first class (uploaded to Moodle by 8:00 AM).

Both classes are devoted to team presentations (15–20 minutes each, followed by 10 minutes of Q&A). All team members must participate. See the Ethnography Presentation and Ethnography Final Report assessment descriptions above for detailed requirements and rubrics.