Special Paper: Research Methods in Middle Eastern Studies

Dr. Maha Shuayb
Centre for Lebanese Studies, Visiting fellow
Middle East Centre, St Antony's College

Aims of the Paper

This special paper for the MPhil/MSt in Modern Middle Eastern Studies aims to provide students with 1) a basic knowledge of social sciences and 2) a broadly-based training in research methodologies which enables them to understand the principles of research design and be able to use a range of research instruments and analyse data. In particular, the paper will focus on developing students’ ability to:

- understand the philosophical and epistemological issues underpinning the major research paradigms and their applications in any research study.
- define and formulate research problems and questions and decide on the most appropriate research methods.
- examine and critique a range of research instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, and observation.
- analyse various qualitative data including interviews and documents.
- address ethical issues and codes of ethics in social research.

Week 1

Epistemological foundations of social sciences: The session will explore epistemological and ontological issues in the philosophy of social science and the philosophical underpinning of the major research theories and paradigms of social sciences. The session will also introduce students to the main philosophical debates and critiques of the major research theories.

Essay Questions

- Do we need research paradigms when conducting research?
- What are the main criticisms and shortfalls of social sciences?

Reading list:

Alan Bryman, Social Science Research Methods, Oxford University Press (3rd edition, 2008, especially pp 159-60, 391-5)
it can succeed again. Cambridge University Press.


Social Science and the Middle East Context


Week 2: Research design: formulating research questions and design and critiquing research papers.

The session will examine a range of research questions and explore various issues related to research design. Students will explore ways of planning research, including purpose, conceptual framework, research questions, methods and questions of validity.

Essay Questions:

• How can research paradigms shape and influence the research design?
• Students will be given a research paper and will be asked to write an essay critiquing the research paper.
• Students will be asked to develop a research proposal, state the main research question, describe the research design and the rationale underpinning their choice of instruments and explore the main limitations.

Reading list:


Research Design and the Middle East Context


Week 3

Non-empirical research approaches: Historical research.
This session will discuss different approaches to the use of archival documents and texts for historical research. We will address changing perspectives on the relation between historians and written sources, particularly the question of objectivity and the status of truth/fact. The aim will be to bring out the relevance of historical methods of interpreting texts to research in development studies.

Essay questions:
Can we generate theories on the basis of documentary sources?
Assess the merits and demerits of historical analysis.
Historical analysis can never be objective. Discuss.

Reading list:

Historical Research and the Middle East Context

Gavin D. Brockett (2009), “Provincial Newspapers as a Historical Source: Buyuk Cihad and the great struggle for the Muslim Turkish Nation (1951–53).” International Journal of Middle East Studies Volume 41, Issue 03, pp 455b-455b

Week 4

Empirical Research: Ethnography and participant observation
Session aims: to provide an introduction to ethnographic approaches, using a discussion of a number of different ethnographies. Discussion will include conducting ethnographical studies, methods of recording, the role of participant researcher ways of interpreting qualitative data through ethnography and ethical issues.

Essay
Discuss the value and limitations of ethnographic research.
How can researchers address the main ethical concerns of ethnographic research?

Readings:
Ethnographic and Participatory research and the Middle East Context


Week 5

Interviewing. This session will discuss interviews as a source of data in qualitative research. It will go over the rationale for choosing the interview method, the different kinds of interview structures, questions of reflexivity, power and researcher identity, and potential pitfalls in interviewing in developing country contexts. The session will also explore how to analyse interviews.

Essay
Assess the merits and demerits of different kinds of interview structures.
Assess the merits and demerits of adopting mixed methods and sources of data in a research project.

Reading list


**Interviews and the Middle East Context**


**Week 6**

**Analysing qualitative data.** The session will explore how to analyse qualitative data such as interviews and documents and how to generate theories from the data. It will also discuss the ethical considerations and issues of validity when analysing qualitative data.
Essay
How can researchers improve the validity of their qualitative data analysis?
Asses the merits and demerits of applying the grounded theory in analysing qualitative data.

Reading list:


Week 7

Quantitative instruments: Questionnaires. The session will explore the advantages and disadvantages of surveys and how to design a good questionnaire and select the research sample.

Essay
What are the main limitations of quantitative research?
How can researchers improve the validity and reliability of questionnaires?

Reading list


**Quantitative Analysis and the Middle East Context**


**Week 8**

**Research ethics**: the session will introduce students to the main codes of research ethics and discuss some the issues involved in carrying out ethically responsible research in the social sciences. The session will include an introduction to the ethical review/approval procedures of the University.

**Essay**

What are the ethical issues that can encounter the researchers when conducting any type of research? And how can researchers address these issues?

**Readings:**


