Researching Contemporary Cosmologies

Seminar 1 - Introducing Qualitative Research

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Overview

- Module aims.
- Moodle, contact, etc.
- Essential readings.
- Schedule.
- Assignment details and deadlines.
- Overview of project choices.

Module Aims

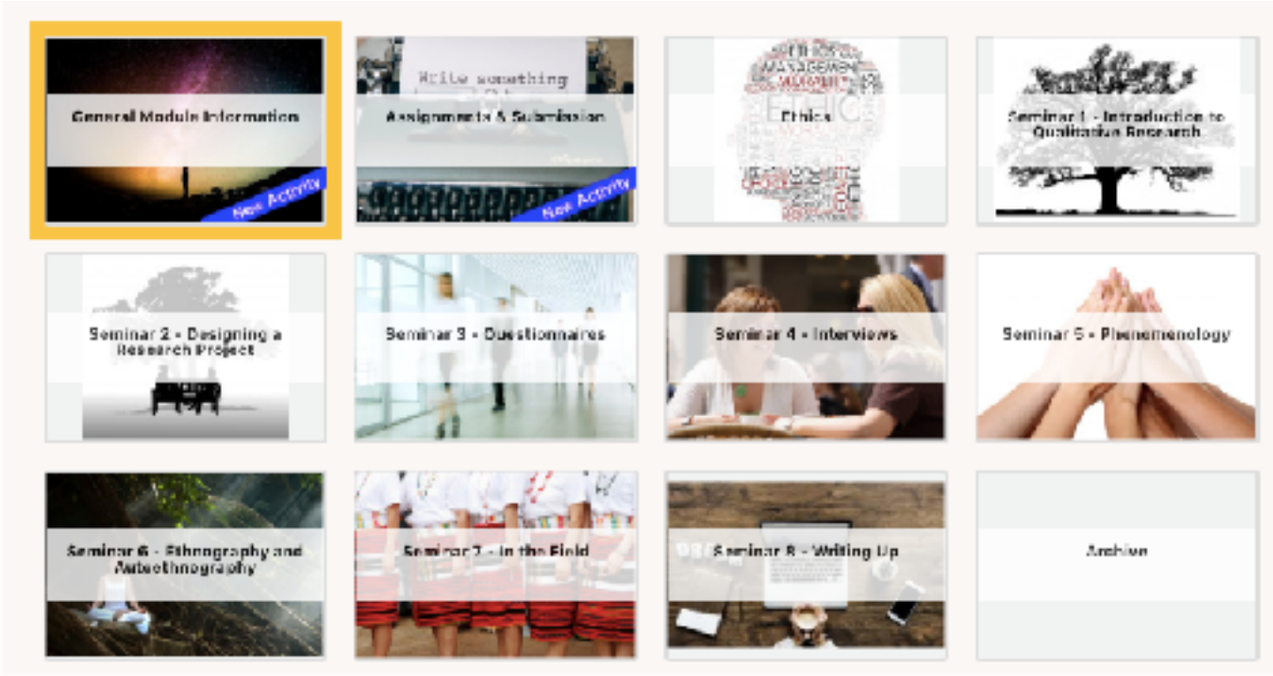
- To introduce the principles of qualitative research – working with what people think and believe.
- To explore the use and relevance of different research methods, principally questionnaires and interviews.
- To investigate theoretical principles relevant to qualitative research, especially phenomenology, reflexivity and the insider-outsider question.
- To examine and evaluate existing research – developing critical faculties.
- You will learn how to do qualitative research by conducting a project on a subject area relevant to your MA programme. This will give you the tools to carry out qualitative research in your dissertation (if you wish to).

Contacting Tutors

- Dr. Jack Hunter - jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk
- Dr. Dawn Collins - d.collins@uwtsd.ac.uk
- Wendy Stacey-Alidina - w.stacey-alidina@uwtsd.ac.uk

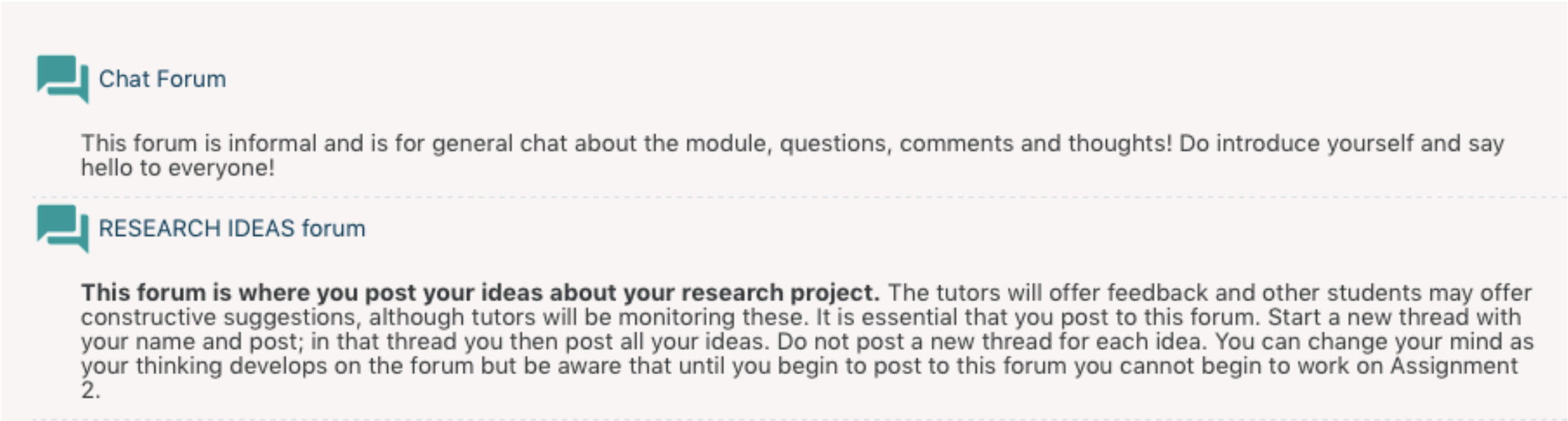
Moodle

- All materials for the module can be found on the Moodle page, including:
  - Module schedule
  - Reading lists and papers
  - Pre-recorded lectures
  - Assignment instructions, project guidance, ethics form (E1), etc…
  - Turnitin links



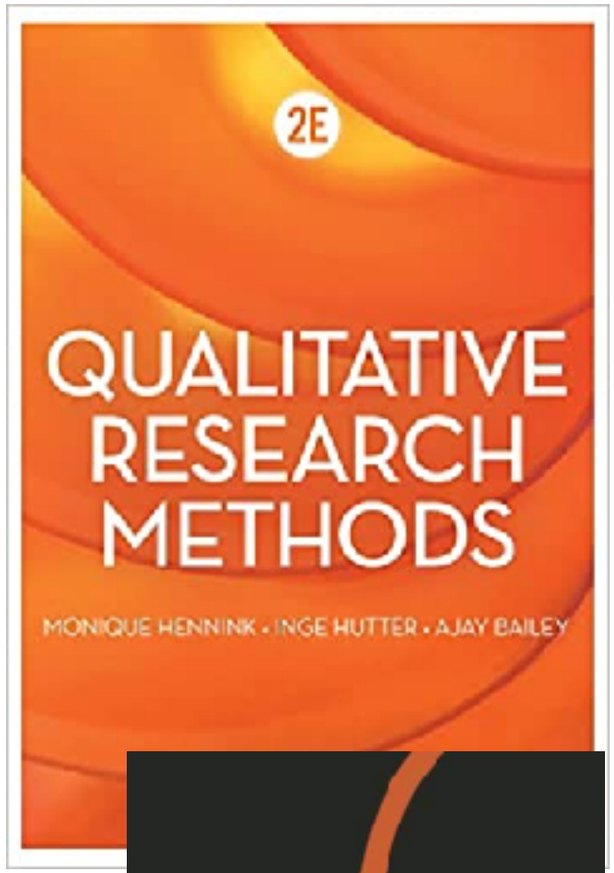
Forums

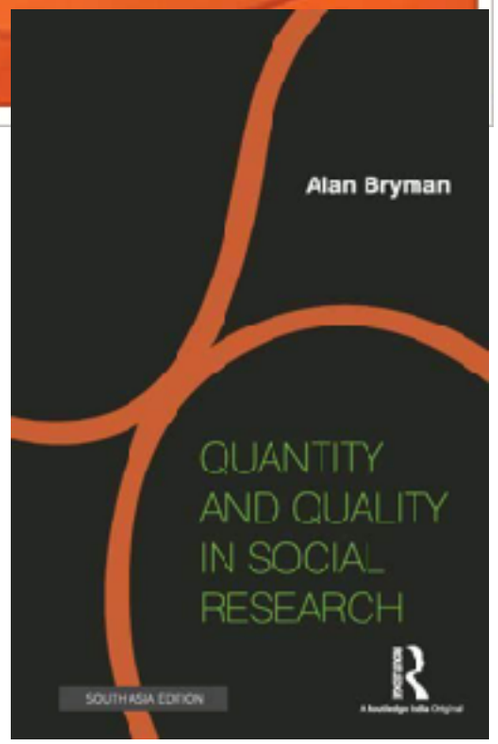
- There are two forums on the RCC Moodle page - Chat and Research Ideas.
- Say ‘hello’ and introduce yourself on the Chat forum! You can also share ideas and ask general questions that are not related to your research project.
- Post your ideas for your research project on the Research Ideas forum. Start a new thread with your name. The tutors will respond to you on the Forum and help you shape your ideas.



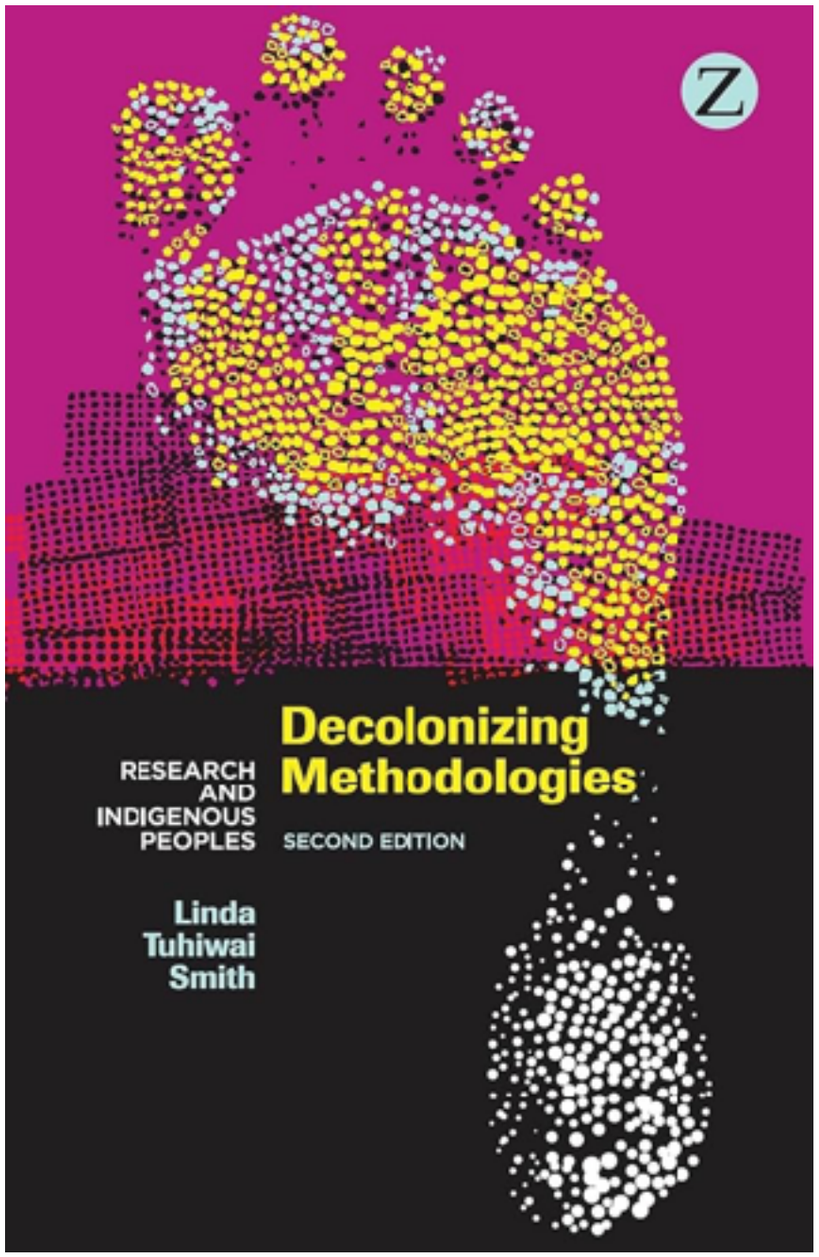
Readings

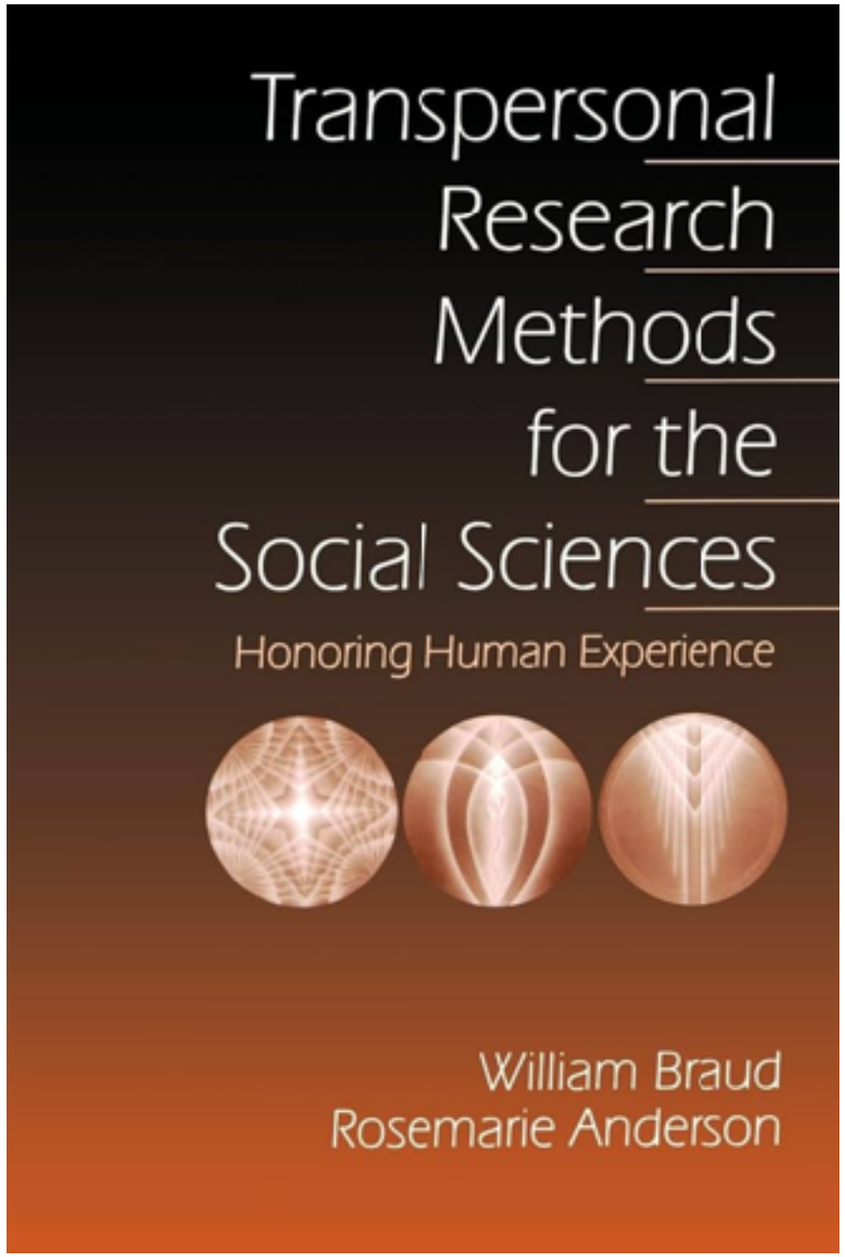
- Required books for the module:
    - Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, Los Angeles/London: Sage, 2011 or 2020).
    - Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project* (London: OUP / McGraw-Hill, 2018). Available as an eBook from the TSD library.
    - Alan Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2001). Available as an eBook from the TSD library.

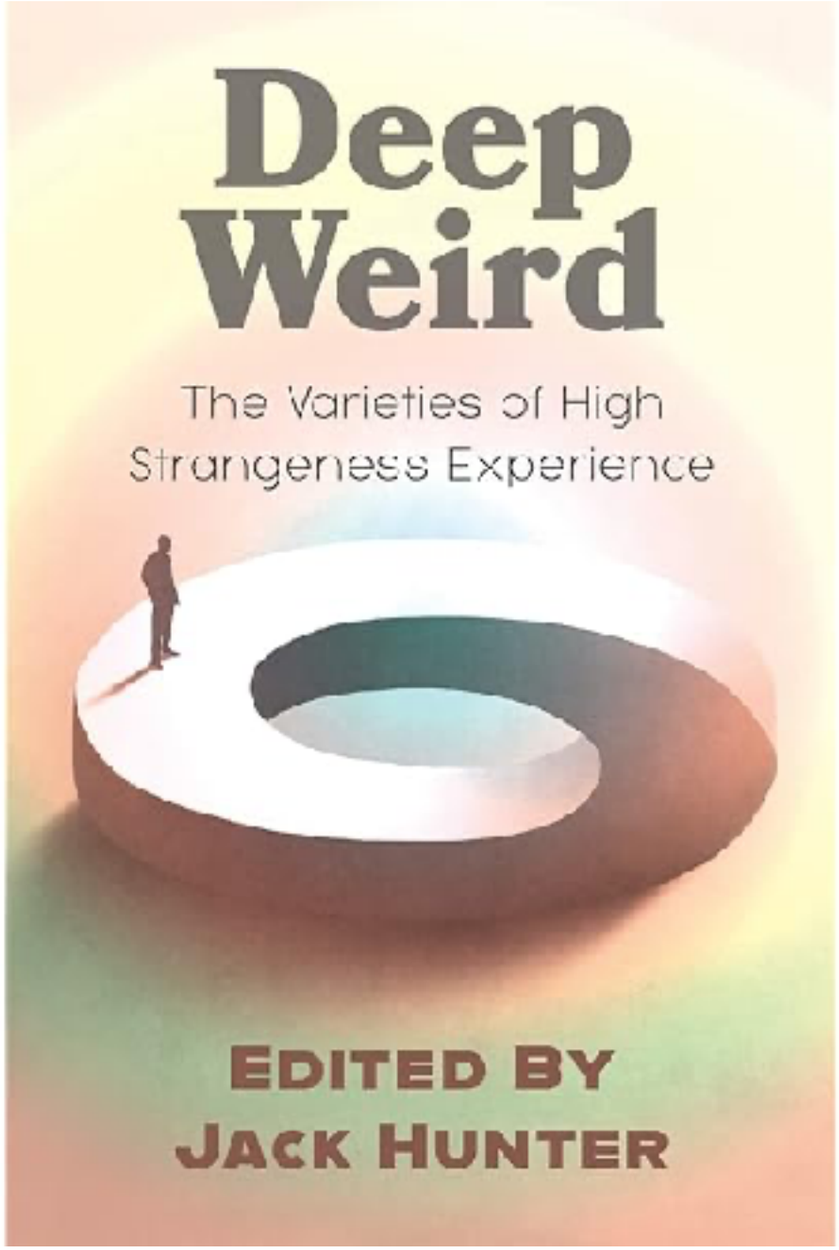




Other Reading







Schedule

- **Week 1** - 8th February - Introduction and Orientation.
  Week 2 - 15th February - Ethics and Designing a Research Project.
  Week 3 - 22nd February - Designing and Using Questionnaires.
  Week 4 - 29th February - Interviews and Mixed-Methods Approaches.
  Week 5 - 7th March - Insider/Outsider Debate and the Issue of Reflexivity in Phenomenology.
  Week 6 - 14th March - Ethnography and Autoethnography.
  Week 7 - 21st March - In the Field.
  Week 8 - 28th March - Writing up Qualitative Research.

- **Easter** - arrange tutorials to discuss research projects.

Seminars

- Seminars will be via Zoom, 4pm-6pm every Wednesday.
- All seminars are recorded and the links are posted onto Moodle, both on the RCC seminar page and the MA-CAA Video page.
- Attendance at, or listening to, to EVERY seminar is essential for your success in this module.
- Also, you will work with an allotted tutor, via the Research Forum and by email, to help you develop your project.
- This is a research-based module, so you need to be proactive.

Student Presentations

- We will be having student presentations/discussions in the next four seminars.

- **Choose one of the four papers:**

- Seminar 2, 15th February: **Gillian Bennett, '"If I Knew You were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group'.**

- Seminar 3, 22nd February: **T.L. Brink, 'Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation'.**

- Seminar 4, 29th February: T**ony Walter & Helen Waterhouse, 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England'.**

- Seminar 5, 7th March: **Jenny Blain, 'Speaking Shamanistically: Seidr, Academia and Rationality'.**

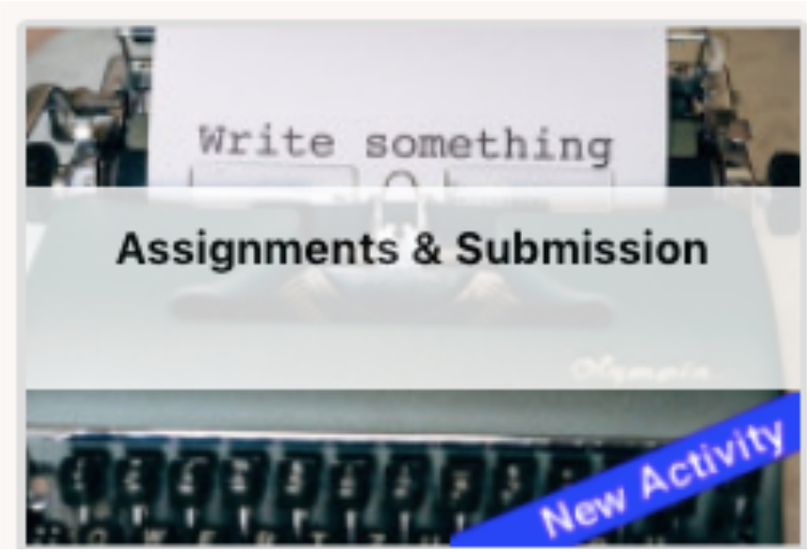
- It would be great to have volunteers to take one of the papers and do a short presentation in class (about 10 mins) on ONE aspect of it, as follows - about 3 student presentations per seminar:

  1. Research methodology - how the research was carried out.
  2. Ethical considerations and reflexive position of the researchers.
  3. Structure of the paper – how has it been written up.

- **Go the the RCC Forum to put your name down under a paper and topic.**

Assignments

- Final submission dates are:
    - Assignment 1 must be submitted by: Midnight UK time on **Friday 15th March 2024**.
    - Assignment 2 must be submitted by: Midnight UK time on **Friday 3rd May 2024**.



- You should aim to complete the assignment a week before the official submission date, to leave time for editing, polishing and tweaking.

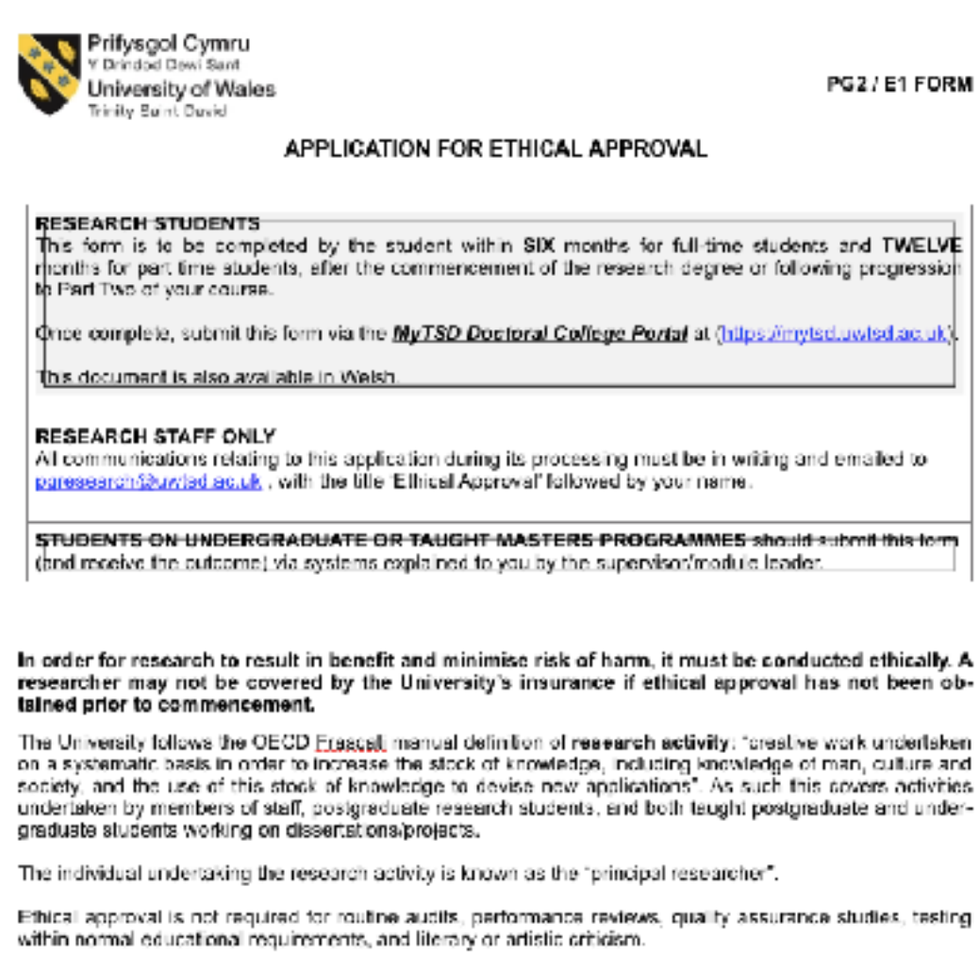
E1 Form

- In order to complete any qualitative work for your Assignment 2, you must have your project accepted and (critically) your ethic E1 form approved by the university.

- You should submit a draft of your E1 form to your allotted tutor by **Sunday 17th March 2024**, to give time for checking and editing before final submission.

- Final date for submitting your E1 form is: **Sunday 7th April 2024**.

- Please be aware submitting your E1 form after this date may well jeopardise your ability to do your field work. This form is submitted directly to your tutor.



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PG2 / E1 FORM

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

RESEARCH STUDENTS
This form is to be completed by the student within SIX months for full-time students and TWELVE months for part time students, after the commencement of the research degree or following progression to Part Two of your course.

Once complete, submit this form via the ***MyTSD Doctoral College Portal*** at (https://mytsd.uwtsd.ac.uk).

This document is also available in Welsh.

RESEARCH STAFF ONLY
All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to puresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.

STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) via systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically. A researcher may not be covered by the University's insurance if ethical approval has not been obtained prior to commencement.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: "creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications". As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the "principal researcher".

Ethical approval is not required for routine audits, performance reviews, quality assurance studies, testing within normal educational requirements, and literary or artistic criticism.

Assignment 1

- Written Assignment (33% of total marks)

- You are required to submit a 2,500-word written assignment using TWO of the four research papers we discuss in Seminars 2, 3, 4 and 5. These are listed on Moodle and available in either JSTOR or on the web (links provided). Due Friday 15th March 2024.

- In your assignment it is essential that you address the following:

  1. The methodology employed by the researchers: how valid was their choice of methodology, given the remit of the project?

  2. Ethical considerations + reflexivity (position of the researchers as insider/outsider in relation to their target groups. How has this shaped their projects?

  3. The structure and Literature Review of each paper – how have they written up their research?

- Apart from the seminars you will also find a document on Moodle showing basic principles of writing a ‘compare and contrast’ paper.

- Some of you have already written this type of essay for other modules – refer to the feedback you received for those essays. We will recap these principles in Seminar 5.

Assignment 2

- Research project.
- A piece of qualitative (ethnographical) research. 5,000 words – 67% of the module.
- Developed through the following stages:
    - **Step 1:** Think about your research proposal – what you want to investigate. Choose one of the research projects outlined on the RCC Moodle page.
    - Be influenced by your access to a group of individuals that you will be able to interview and/or send a questionnaire to – select and build your research project around this group.
    - We recommend that you use both interviews and questionnaires (although you can use just one of these methods if you wish). Aim for about 5 interviews and about 20 questionnaires, so you have enough material for your write-up (but not too much).
    - It is essential that you post to the Research Forum:
        - Enter your initial thinking in the Forum for Research Ideas. Start a new topic with your name and through your postings the tutors will give you feedback and guidance.
        - Read the posts of your fellow students and follow the forum discussions – this will aid your thinking for your own work.

Assignment 2

- **Step 2:** Select additional papers (from JSTOR or other academic resources) to use for your literature review and build your research project around these and around those supplied on the Moodle page (see PDF at top of Seminar 1 page – a brief list of research papers which might help your project).

- **Step 3:** Read the material on Ethics. You are required to complete the Ethics Form (E1) located on the RCC Moodle page. This can only be completed once you have settled on your project as you need to describe your research project on this form. Return it to your designated tutor (Carole or Jack) for feedback and eventual approval before you conduct your interviews or send out your questionnaires. You need to be aware of the ethical considerations attached to research and bear these in mind when choosing your subject and your participants.

- Expect this to take a few drafts. Your tutor will help you draft your proposal and complete the E1 Ethics form. Note: This can take you a few weeks and has to be approved before you can commence your field work. The deadline for sending us your draft E1 form is 17th March and for submitting your completed, approved E1 form is 7th April.

- **Step 4:** Conduct your research in the field.

- **Step 5:** Write up and submit your completed research project by Friday 3rd May 2024.

Assignment 2

- **Academic Rationale** – why you are doing the project; the statement/idea/prior piece of research which forms the springboard for your own research question.

- Each project choice offers a few ideas for what you could choose to do – as fuel for your own thoughts.

Project 1: Personal Cosmologies (Beliefs)

- “Freya Mathews wrote, ‘Cosmologies are not of course pulled out of the air to suit the convenience of the communities to which they are attached. They are conditioned by many and various historical, environmental, technological, psychological and social factors. A flourishing community is likely to evolve a bright, self-affirming cosmology, and a languishing community is likely to see the world in darker shades... A good cosmology, in other words, is good for its adherents’. In Chapter 2 of his Astrology and Cosmology in the World’s Religions, Nicholas Campion references such concepts as cosmogony, cosmophilia, cosmophobia and cosmovision, and develops the idea that all of us have a personal cosmology, or cosmovision, a set of beliefs about the way the cosmos is and works, and how we fit into it.”

- In this project you will, with a particular group of people, explore Campion’s idea that we all have a view about the cosmos, as well as Mathews’ view that such a personal cosmology can reflect the individual’s attitude to life.

Project 1: Personal Cosmologies (Beliefs)

- For the module we define such personal cosmologies as any personal beliefs which encompass the sky, the ecological environment or the cosmos.

- Your project could thus explore whether a group believe the universe is essentially benign or hostile, whether it has a purpose or patterns and whether this extends to individuals.

- For example, a belief that nature or ecosystems are sentient, a belief in aliens from space, or a belief in angels from the sky, a belief in cloud divination, or a belief in the need for space exploration are all topics that fit into this definition.

Project 2: What are the things and/or practices that represent or embody a cosmology? How are they used? What is their role?

- “Both rituals and material objects are used in a wide variety of ways in relation to cosmologies. Sometimes they form active and central focal points of cosmological structures (religious statues and images, sacred places), while other times they play more symbolic or passive roles. ‘Things’ and practices can also form parts of superstitions where they are thought to bring or add luck to situations. Ronald Grimes says, ‘Each cosmos has its characteristic lilt: If your universe is a womb, your rites go rotund; they moan, slip, slide. If your universe is an orderly, law-abiding, clocklike place looked after by a kindly watch-maker who prefers really, really big grandfather clocks, your rites will run regular as clockwork, be performed as if ritual were, by definition, repetitive, orderly, stately, vertical, by the book.’”

- This project therefore seeks to address the ‘objects’ and rituals/practices that are associated with, represent, or ‘embody’ elements of personal cosmology.

- Groups or individual participants can be interviewed about their engagement with, and cosmological views surrounding, these objects. This is then related back to the literature provided.

- For example, activities at stone circles, public opinions on skyscrapers, or personal habits around the new moon all fit into this project. Moving away from the sky: gardens, landscapes and ecosystems can all embody a cosmology.

Project 3: Living with the sky (Daily Life)

- Tim Ingold argues that our view of the world is altered by living most of our life indoors, inside and that we lack contact with the ‘outside’. Additionally Nicholas Campion points out that the sky has always held a sense of awe and wonder for humanity. Thus do contemporary humans still seek a connection to the sky and the outside?

- This research project allows you to select a group of people and explore, in some manner, their relationship to the sky and take your findings and relate it back to the literature provided. An example of this could be people who plant by the moon.

Project 4: What do astrologers believe? (The insider perspective)

- In 1932 the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) asked the question about astrologers:

  “Do they believe themselves in the sciences that they profess? This is a difficult question. Everything marvellous is believed by some people, and it is not improbable that professional astrologers are of this type. And even if they are aware that their own performances are largely guesswork and inferences from information obtained otherwise, they probably think that there are superior practitioners who never resort to these inferior methods.”

- Design a research project that seeks to answer, in a small way, Russell’s question. Your target group will be practising astrologers.

- Russell paper: http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rmuhamma/Philosophy/RBwritings/HearstColumns/onAstrologer.htm

Project 5: What do people think about astrology? (The outsider perspective)

- James Davidson suggests that people like astrology because it keeps them linked to the sky. In 2004 he wrote in the *London Review of Books*, Vol 26 No 23. 2 December 2004:

  "I don't believe in astrology but I am rather fond of it. In the first place I like to be reminded that things are happening in the solar system. If Neil Spencer didn't tell me in the Observer that Mercury is 'retrograde' – i.e. moving up to overtake us on the inside lane – I would have no idea that Mercury was doing anything at all in our blinded night sky, going forwards, going backwards, or indulging in figures of eight. Anything could be happening out there. The Earth could be lost in space."

- This research project uses Davidson's comments to explore how people think about astrology. For example, does astrology allow the average person to feel a connection to the planets/stars/sky?

Project 6: Your Own Project

- If you have a clear idea of a project that you wish to undertake and:

  a) it fits into the parameters of the module and the subject of your MA programme and

  b) you have an academic rationale and

  c) you have found relevant supporting literature.

- Post on the Research Forum for feedback on your own research idea. The tutors will help you to develop a clearly designed project.

- NOTE: Generally, your ideas should find a home in one of the previous five projects, which makes things a little easier as these already provide you with an academic rationale to work from.

That’s it for now…

- Welcome to the weird world of qualitative research…
- Any questions?

References

- Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project* (London: OUP / McGraw-Hill, 2018). Available as an eBook from the TSD library.

- Braud, W. & Anderson, R. *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honouring Human Experience* (New York: Sage, 1998).

- Alan Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2001). Available as an eBook from the TSD library.

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- Hunter, Jack, *Deep Weird: The Varieties of High Strangest Experience* (Milton Keynes: August Night Press, 2023).

- Ingold, T. (2007). 'Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, pp.19-38. JSTOR.

- Mathews, Freya, T*he Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 109.

- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

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