

FIELD METHODS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Prof. Shestakofsky
University of Pennsylvania

Sociology 553-301
Spring 2021

Seminar

Fridays, 2:00-5:00pm

Office Hours

Mondays, 3:00-5:00pm, and by appointment

Sign up at: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/gqrru/>

Zoom link for seminar sessions available on your Canvas Calendar
Zoom link for office hours available on our course's Canvas homepage

A Note on Our Unique Circumstances

Because these are extraordinary times, this syllabus should be viewed as both a provisional plan and a living document. In traditional applications of sociological field methods, the researcher gathers data while in the physical presence of others. We may decide to alter the content or volume of our topics, readings, and assignments—or, perhaps, even the entire format of the course—based upon the needs of students and the particular opportunities and challenges that inevitably arise from learning and conducting fieldwork amid an ongoing pandemic. Our first set of readings are designed to guide our discussion of these matters and to help us collectively chart a course for the semester.

COURSE OVERVIEW

This graduate-level course introduces students to field methods of sociological research, with a particular focus on ethnographic participant-observation and in-depth interviewing. The course is designed as a research practicum in which you will apply skills and concepts while building toward a semester-long project based on intensive fieldwork at a research site of your choosing. You will present your work and share your research experiences on a regular basis in a workshop setting. We will also discuss key issues in qualitative research, including the role of the researcher in the field, the ethics of field research, and the strengths and limitations of field methods.

REQUIREMENTS

This course is a research practicum in which you will learn by doing, and by participating in the projects of your colleagues. There are seven requirements to complete this course:

1. A research proposal
2. 12 weeks of fieldwork
3. Writing fieldnotes after each expedition into the field, and submitting three sets of fieldnotes to me
4. Completing assigned exercises (e.g. crafting an interview transcript, coding fieldnotes, writing an analytic memo)
5. Participation in a seminar that meets for three hours each week, giving multiple written presentations of your own fieldwork, and commenting on others' presentations
6. A focused literature review around the topic of your research
7. A final paper

The contract grading system will work as follows:

- 1 and 2 gets a C-
- Plus 3 and 4 and 5 gets a B-
- Plus 6 and 7 gets a B/B+/A-/A/A+

ASSIGNMENTS

Our assignments are designed to guide you through the process of gathering and analyzing data and writing up your findings. We will discuss each assignment in further detail during our seminar meetings.

Research Proposal

When researchers enter the field, they are immediately confronted with a deluge of information. It is important to begin your research with some sort of guiding lens to help you focus your observations.

You will produce an initial proposal of 3-5 double-spaced pages. Your proposal should a) describe the site you want to study, b) explain why you are interested in that site, and c) outline what you expect to find when you get there. The more precise and detailed your expectations, the more likely you will be wrong. In fieldwork, this is a good thing! Discovering disjunctures between your expectations and your observations will force you to confront your assumptions and to ask why these gaps exist. In other words, you will already have a puzzle to solve through your research. Many (if not most) fieldworkers change their minds about what is interesting about their research site once they begin their fieldwork. That's OK. The proposal will still have value as a point of departure.

Fieldwork and Fieldnotes

How much time you spend in the field may vary depending on the project, but you should plan on being in the field at least two morning, afternoons, or evenings a week. You must also make a habit of writing fieldnotes immediately after leaving the field. Every set of fieldnotes should also be followed by analysis. It is important that you continually ask yourself how the data you have recorded speak to the substantive problem you are studying.

Your first set of fieldnotes will consist of an observational exercise at a generic setting assigned in class. Thereafter, your fieldnotes will derive from a setting and/or settings in which you will conduct original research. You will submit copies of your fieldnotes to our course's Canvas site. We will spend part of each seminar period discussing students' fieldnotes, as well as related problems and issues that students may have encountered during their fieldwork. Receiving regular feedback on your project and participating in ongoing discussions with your colleagues about your challenges and accomplishments in the field is a crucial component of the work, helping you to sharpen and refine your fieldwork skills and to recognize and produce rich, detailed, and organized fieldnotes.

The importance of generating high-quality fieldnotes cannot be overemphasized. Oftentimes the only data you have once you leave the field are those contained within your fieldnotes. You will likely be relying on these notes many months or even years after completing your fieldwork. If your notes are thin, unclear, and disorganized, your analysis will be no better. Conducting ethnographic research and generating useful data is an arduous, but ultimately rewarding, process. The circumstances of your fieldwork may vary, but in general you should plan on spending at least an hour writing fieldnotes for each hour that you are in the field.

This course is designed to provide you with the opportunity to learn to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. However, if your study is fundamentally an interview-based project, you may be able to swap some field visits and fieldnotes for interviews. Please meet with me to confirm your plans.

Methodological Exercises

I will assign occasional exercises to provide you with opportunities to improve your research skills and to reflect on the research process. We will also workshop some of the materials you produce for these exercises in class.

Seminar Meetings and Class Participation

We will meet for three hours each week, with designated breaks. I expect you to attend every seminar meeting, so you should not schedule fieldwork during our course sessions.

The success of any doctoral seminar depends as much upon the vitality of the discussion, questions, and investment by students as it does upon the instructor. This means that you should

be ready to participate in discussions in an engaged and respectful manner. You should be prepared to discuss your project and others' projects, as well as the readings assigned for each seminar meeting. I also ask that every participant in the course join me in taking responsibility for keeping the discussion on track and monitoring the flow of the conversation to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak and that no one person dominates the discussion.

The bulk of our course sessions will be devoted to discussing your individual projects. Each student will present their work on multiple occasions, distributing it ahead of time so that we can come prepared with questions and comments.

It is important that we each think of ourselves as participating in every project that emerges from this course. Workshopping each other's projects will be just as important to learning the craft of ethnography as your own fieldwork. We will learn about the dilemmas and tradeoffs of ethnography both from our own experiences and from discussing the diverse problems encountered by others.

Mid-Semester Literature Review

The purpose of this paper is to locate your study in a pre-existing literature that deals with—or, you may argue, *should* deal with—the emergent problem of your research. In crafting your literature review, I encourage you to consult with others who are conversant in your substantive area. You may find it helpful to distinguish between those studies or theories that you refute or reject, and those that you wish to further develop or reconstruct. The literature review should be no longer than 10 double-spaced pages.

Final Paper

Beginning with your initial proposal, and building on your fieldnotes, analysis, and literature review, you will continually be in the process of producing the final paper. Your final paper should be no longer than 30 double-spaced pages. You should write the final paper as if it were being submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed social science journal. It should make a clear argument and a memorable point. Thus, the final paper should include:

- Research question that frames the project and addresses significant theoretical issues.
- Relevant literature review that provides a foundation for your research question.
- Description of the empirical site(s) where you conducted research, and of your access.
- Thorough accounting of your data collection and analytic strategies.
- Preliminary empirical findings presented in a conceptually illuminating and compelling fashion. (Findings will most likely be tentative given the compressed timeframe of the semester.)
- Discussion and conclusion that summarize your findings and discuss their implications for existing knowledge or theory.

COURSE TEXTS

You should purchase the following books:

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd edition. University of Chicago Press.
- Weiss, Robert S. 1995. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. Simon and Schuster.

All other course texts will be made available in a course reader or online.

TENTATIVE SEMINAR SCHEDULE

January 22

Introductions

Doing Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19

Readings

- Fine, Gary Alan and Corey M. Abramson. 2020. "Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19: Vectors and the Vulnerable." *Etnografia: E Ricerca Qualitativa* 13(2):165-174.
- Hidalgo, Anna and Shamus Khan. 2020. "Blindsight Ethnography and Exceptional Moments." *Etnografia: E Ricerca Qualitativa* 13(2):185-193.
- Sharon M. Ravitch. 2020. "The Best Laid Plans...Qualitative Research Design During COVID-19."
- Laura Mauldin. 2020. "Research During COVID (Part 1): Taking Care of Each Other."
- Laura Mauldin. 2020. "Research During COVID (Part 2): Centering Care In/With the Mechanics of Virtual Fieldwork."
- Lupton, Deborah, ed. 2020. "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic" (Crowd-sourced document). Available at:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#>
 - o Skim the above document, reading more closely the sections in which you are more interested.

January 29

The Ethics of Fieldwork: Positionality, Power, Reflexivity, and Representation Navigating the Institutional Review Board

Readings

- Emerson, Robert M. 2001. *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*. 2nd ed. "Fieldwork Practice: Issues in Participant Observation." Pp. 113-151.
- Hanson, Rebecca, and Patricia Richards. 2017. "Sexual Harassment and the Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge." *Sociological Forum* 32(3):587-609.
- Lareau, Annette. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. 2nd ed. Chapter 14: "Reflections on Longitudinal Ethnography and the Families' Reactions to *Unequal Childhoods*." Pp. 312-332. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jack Thornton's IRB Protocols

February 5

Case Selection and Comparisons

Readings

- Small, Mario. 2009. "How Many Cases Do I Need? On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research" *Ethnography* 10(5):5-38.
- Burrell, Jenna. 2009. "The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research." *Field Methods* 21(2):181-199.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2017. "On Desmond: The Limits of Spontaneous Sociology." *Theory and Society* 46:261-284.
- Abramson, Corey. 2015. "Methodological Appendix" from *The End Game: How Inequality Shapes Our Final Years*, pp. 149-167.

No class on February 12: University "Day of Engagement"

February 19

Varieties and Warrants of Participant Observation In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Taking Notes

Readings

- Emerson et al. 2011. "Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research" and "In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes." Chapters 1 and 2 in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*.
- Lofland et al. 2005. "Getting In." Chapter 3 from *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*.

February 26

Ethnography in/and Online Settings

Readings

- Hine, Christine. 2015. Chapters 1 and 3 in *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*.

March 5

Linking Theory and Method

Readings

- Snow, David A., Calvin Morrill, and Leon Anderson. 2003. "Elaborating Analytic Ethnography: Linking Fieldwork and Theory." *Ethnography* 4(2):181-200.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory* 16(1):4-33.
- Timmermans, Stefan and Iddo Tavory. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." *Sociological Theory* 30(3):167-186.

March 12

Varieties and Warrants of In-Depth Interviewing Constructing an Interview Schedule

Readings

- Gerson, Kathleen and Sarah Damaske. 2020. Chapters 1 and 4 in *The Science and Art of Interviewing*.
- Read interview guides and vignettes (p. 6-11 of the PDF) from Ann Swidler's Methodological Appendix from *Talk of Love*.

March 19

Conducting an Interview

Readings

- Gerson, Kathleen and Sarah Damaske. 2020. Chapter 5 in *The Science and Art of Interviewing*.

March 25

Coding and Analyzing Field Data

Readings

- Emerson et al. 2011. "Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing." Chapter 6 in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*.

- Gerson, Kathleen and Sarah Damaske. 2020. "Analyzing Interviews: Making Sense of Complex Material." Chapter 5 in *The Science and Art of Interviewing*.
- Morrill, Calvin and Michael Musheno. 2018. *Navigating Conflict: How Youth Handle Trouble in a High-Poverty School*. Pp. 236-242.

April 2

The Writing Process

Assignment Due

- Literature Review

Readings

- Emerson, et al. 2011. "Writing an Ethnography." Chapter 7 in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*.
- Gerson, Kathleen and Sarah Damaske. 2020. "Pulling It All Together: Telling Your Story and Making Your Case." Chapter 7 in *The Science and Art of Interviewing*.
- Zhao, Mengyang. 2021. "Solidarity Stalled: When Chinese Activists Meet Social Movements in Democracies." *Critical Sociology* 47(2):281-297.
- Baldor, Tyler. Forthcoming. "Acquainted Strangers: Thwardted Interaction in Digitally Mediated Urban Gay Bars." *Social Problems*.

April 9

The Methods Section: Part I: Deconstructing Methods Sections

Readings

- Introductions and methods sections selected by students

April 16

The Methods Section: Part II: Workshopping Methods Sections

Readings

- Your colleagues' draft methods sections

April 23

Challenging Dominant Research Paradigms

Readings

- Chilisa, Bagele. 2011. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Washington, DC: SAGE. Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 8.

Final Paper due May 7

Some Suggestions for Further Reading

Research Design and Case Selection

- Robert K. Merton. 1987. "Three Fragments from a Sociologist's Notebooks: Establishing the Phenomenon, Specified Ignorance, and Strategic Research Materials." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Selecting a research topic

- Lofland et al. 2005. "Starting Where You Are." Chapter 1 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.

Turning a research interest into a research question

- Kristin Luker. 2008. "What Is This a Case of, Anyway?" Chapter 4 in *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*.

Participant-Observation

On starting research

- Kristin Luker. 2008. "Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty?" Chapter 7 in *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*.

On research sites:

- George Marcus. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology*.
- Burrell, Jenna. 2009. "The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research." *Field Methods*.

On data:

- Ken Plummer. 1983. "On the Diversity of Life Documents." In Documents of Life.
- Howard Becker. 1971. "Fieldwork Evidence." In *Sociological Work*.

On fieldwork practice

- Duneier, Mitchell. 2011. "How Not To Lie With Ethnography." *Sociological Methodology*.
- Erving Goffman. 2001. "On Fieldwork." *Contemporary Field Research*.
- Lofland et al. 2005. "Getting in" and "Logging Data." Chapters 3 and 5 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.
- Robert Emerson. 2001. "Fieldwork Practice: Issues in Participant Observation." *Contemporary Field Research*.
- Robert Emerson and Melvin Pollner. 2001. "Constructing Participant/Observation Relations." *Contemporary Field Research*.
- Snow et al. 1982. "Interviewing By Comment." *Qualitative Sociology*.
- Lofland et al. 2005. "Problems of Error and Bias." Pp. 90-95 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.

- Michael Bloor. “Techniques of Validation in Qualitative Research: A Critical Perspective.” *Contemporary Field Research*.

What is ethnography?

- Robert Emerson. 2001. “The Face of Contemporary Ethnography.” *Contemporary Field Research*.
- Herbert Gans. 1999. “Participant Observation in the Age of Ethnography.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.
- Robert Emerson. 2001. “Development of Ethnographic Field Research.” *Contemporary Field Research*.

What can participant-observation illuminate that cannot be gleaned from interviews alone?

- Shamus Khan. 2011. *Privilege*, or Shamus Khan and Colin Jerolmack. 2012. “Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege.” *The Sociological Quarterly*.
- Robert Emerson and Melvin Pollner. 1988. “On the Uses of Members’ Responses to Researchers’ Accounts.” *Human Organization*.

Geertz’s well-known exemplar and explanation of ethnographic writing

- Clifford Geertz. 1972. “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight” *Daedalus*.
- Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.”

Interviewing

- Lofland et al. 2005. “Asking Questions” Chapter 7 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.
- Kristin Luker, 1984. “Appendix I: Methodology.” *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*.
- Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein. 1999. *Making Ends Meet*.
- Ann Swidler. 2001. Methodological Appendix in *Talk of Love*.
- Michelle Lamont. 2000. Introduction, Chapter 1, and Appendix p. 254-7. *The Dignity of Working Men*.
- Sandra Smith. 2007. *Lone Pursuit*, pp. 1-5, 12-30, and Appendices B & C (In-Depth Interview Protocol and Survey Instrument).
- Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep*.
- Robert Stuart Weiss. 1994. Chapters 2-3 in *Learning from Strangers*.

Analysis of Field Data

Coding and Analyzing Data

- Lofland et al. 2005. “Thinking Topics.” Chapter 6 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.

Writing

- Howard Becker. 1986. “Freshman English for Graduate Students” and “One Right Way.” Chapters 1 and 3 in *Writing for Social Scientists*.
- Lofland et al. 2005. “Writing Analysis.” Chapter 10 in *Analyzing Social Settings*.

- Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba. 1985. "Establishing Trustworthiness." Chapter 11 in *Naturalistic Inquiry*.
- Howard Becker. 1998. "Concepts." Chapter 4 in *Tricks of the Trade*.
- Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson. 1996. "Concepts and Coding." In *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*.
- Robert Stuart Weiss. 1994. "Writing the Report." Chapter 7 in *Learning From Strangers*.

Linking Theory and Method

- Michael Burawoy. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory*.
- Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory. 2009. "Two Cases of Ethnography." *Ethnography*.
- Howard Becker. 1986. "Terrorized by the Literature." Chapter 8 in *Writing for Social Scientists*.
 - Compare uses of theory in these two articles:
 - Alice Goffman. 2009. "On The Run." *American Sociological Review*.
 - Lynne Haney. 1996. "The State and the Reproduction of Male Dominance." *American Sociological Review*.

Ethics, Power, Reflexivity, and Representation

- Judith Stacey. 1988. "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women's Studies International Forum*.
- Dorothy Smith. 2005. *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*.
- Greggor Mattson. 2007. "Urban Ethnography's 'Saloon Problem' and its Challenge to Public Sociology." *City & Community*.
- Annette Lareau. 2011. "Reflections on Longitudinal Ethnography and the Families' Reactions to *Unequal Childhoods*." Chapter 14 in *Unequal Childhoods, Second Edition*.
- Alice Goffman. 2014. Methodological Appendix from *On the Run*.
- Calvin Morrill. 1995. Methodological Appendix from *The Executive Way*.
- Kimberly Kay Hoang. 2015. Methodological Appendix from *Dealing In Desire*.
- Howard S. Becker. 1967. "Whose Side are we On?" *Social Problems*.
- Alvin Gouldner. 1968. "The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State." *The American Sociologist*.
- Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein. 1997. "Postmodernism." *The New Language of Qualitative Method*.
- James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority." *The Predicament of Culture*.
- Katherine Borland. 1991. "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research." Chapter 4 in *The Feminist Practice of Oral History*.
- Jack Katz. 2004. "On the Rhetoric and Politics of Ethnographic Methodology." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*.
- Jack Katz. 2004. "Ethnography's Warrants." In *Contemporary Field Research*.