**Field Methods of Sociological Research**

**Fall 2017**

Department of Sociology

Mondays 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

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Office Hours: Monday 1:30 -3:30 p.m. or by appointment

**Course Description:**

This class is intended as an introduction to the field methods of sociological research, with a focus on ethnographic observation and interviewing. Since the best way to learn how to do qualitative research is by doing research, all of you will conduct a piece of original research as part of the course. You will file an application with the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). You will move through the steps of framing a preliminary question, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing up the results in a “mini ethnography.” Along the way, we will discuss issues such as the social role of the field researcher, the ethics of field research, and the strengths and limitations of field methods.

**Academic integrity:**

Please familiarize yourself with Penn’s Code of Academic Integrity, <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/osl/acadint.html>, which applies to this course as well as the American Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics, <http://www.asanet.org/membership/code-ethics>.

**About the course:**

Our class is a seminar. Its purpose is to explore together the data collection experiences, readings, and thoughts you have as you complete this intellectual journey. Each person is an important member of the seminar. For a seminar to work well, it is important that each person complete the reading before class, share his or her thoughts and ideas with the group, help to keep the discussion on track, and monitor the flow of conversation to help produce a discussion where everyone has a chance to speak and no one person dominates the discussion.

In this class, you will learn how to formulate a research question that can be answered by ethnographic methods, how to collect qualitative data through observational and interview techniques, and how to analyze and write up your data. You will need to: find a site in which to conduct your research; gain access to that site; formulate a research question; collect field notes at the site; conduct interviews with key informants at the site; perform data reduction, analysis, and interpretation; and write up your study. You will also present a poster based on your project at a conference-style poster session at the end of the course. In ethnography, as in all qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of data collection. The main goal of the course is to teach students how to act as participant or non-participant observers in naturalistic research settings.

Hence, this is a hands-on course. It involves an abbreviated “ethnography” you will conduct in a site of your choosing. Doing good fieldwork takes time - lots of it. Ideally, you would spend many hours in the field before attempting to draw any conclusions or produce any writing. Given the constraints of this course, however (particularly the need to balance readings with fieldwork), it does not make sense for you to spend more than two or three hours each week in the field. However, you must make sure you do complete at least a full two-three hours of fieldwork each week. You must be prepared to turn in (via Canvas) a typed copy of your fieldnotes as indicated on the course calendar while you are in the field. You must be prepared to discuss your research experiences and develop ideas with others in class each week. Each week you will be deciding what to look for in your site based on what you have learned already. As the course progresses, you will be constantly building and rebuilding your analysis of the site.

All important, original studies are in conversation with the current literature. In other words, almost all significant social science studies seek to correct an existing gap, hole, or weakness in the current literature. Sometimes the contributions are focused. Scholars argue that the conceptualizations currently are too rigid, static, incomplete, distorted, and narrow. Other times scholars reject the ways that questions have been framed. Instead, they seek to develop an alternative conceptualization. On the other hand, ethnographic work is emergent. These data that you collect will “speak to you” in a fashion. While you want to have a starting question, the ending question will not usually be the starting question. You will have an intellectual journey.

**Readings:**

These books have been ordered at the Penn Bookstore:

Emerson, Robert M, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda Shaw*. Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Second Edition. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Van Maanen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography.* Second Edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

**Recommended:**

Lofland, John, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn Lofland. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis 4th Edition*. Wadsworth, 2005.

Burawoy, Michael, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, Kathryn J. Fox, Joshua Gamson, Nadine Gartrell, Leslie Hurst, Charles Kurzman, Leslie Salzinger, Josepha Schiffman, and Shiori Ui. *Ethnography Unbound.* University of California Press. 1991.

Nippert-Eng, Christena. *Watching Closely: A Guide to Ethnographic Observation*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Spradley, James. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Waveland. 2016.

Weiss, Robert S. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies.* Free Press. 1995.

**Course requirements:**

There are four aspects to the course requirements: data collection exercises, class presentations, and the gathering of your data into a paper to build a coherent argument.

**Data collection exercises: 25%**

Since the best way to learn how to do ethnographic research and in-depth interviewing is to carry out your own “mini ethnography,” you will spend time collecting data in this course. You will do a series of exercises. Since they are workshop pieces, they should not be perfect. They are designed to provide opportunities for you to improve your research skills and to reflect on that process. All exercises are due by Friday morning at 10:00 a.m. before our next class.

The expectation is that you will complete ten (10) sets of detailed field notes based on data collection sessions of around two or three hours (but this will vary according to your project). If your visits are vastly shorter, then you will have more of them, and you can turn in two sets of field notes for two shorter visits. You are only required, however, to turn in eight sets of notes. You should write notes on your very first visit since you will “see” the setting with fresh eyes. You will also conduct four or five in-depth interviews, ideally from the same site where you do the data collection. The first set of field notes are due in the fifth week of class (Friday October 6th). After that, you will turn in at least one set of field notes each week, but there are some weeks where it is possible you will turn in two sets. You should finish your data collection around December 1st.

Some of you will do your in-depth interviews before you start your field work. The scheduling is up to you, but we will have a discussion of transcribing in the end of September. For that class session, you must transcribe one interview completely. It is vastly better if you transcribe an interview connected to your research project.

In some cases, if your study is really an interview study, there is flexibility on four sets of field notes which can be swapped out for four interviews. But please meet to confirm this plan with me. My preference is that you use this opportunity to learn how to do ethnographic work. However, if your project is different, then anything beyond six sets of field notes and four or five in-depth interviews is negotiable.

The first four sets of field notes will not be graded, but you will be giving a series of check marks to give you a sense of how you are doing. The fifth through tenth set of notes will be graded. Similarly, the transcripts of the first interview will not be graded, but the transcript of the second interview will be graded. You are only required to fully transcribe two of the four or five interviews.

The exercises and presentations will be graded in the following fashion:

* + flawless work, outstanding in the conception and execution
* Solid work, capable
* - flawed work, shows some wrinkles which need to be ironed out

Roughly speaking, these grades translate in to a grade which is approximately an A, A-/B+ and B/B-.

I would like you to complete the reading before class. You should come to class prepared to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the readings as well as questions raised by the readings.

**Class presentations**: 5%

We have 16 students in the class; we have 14 weeks of the semester. Each of you will give a presentation twice in the semester where you share field notes (or an interview transcript), write a memo describing your research question (broadly conceived), competing explanations, and focus of research. You will distribute three pages single-spaced of notes and a one-page memo. These documents need to be posted on Canvas no later than Thursday night at midnight. You will give a short (five minute) introduction where you say the kind of help you would like to get. You will receive feedback from the class. Each person will have 28 minutes for their presentations and reflection. As much as possible, you want only to \*listen\* to the feedback. Another person in the class will be assigned to type notes for you of what questions and comments member of the seminar had for you. Generally, we will have two presentations per class, but there will be four weeks where we need to have three. You are not graded on the first presentation. The second presentation is worth five percent of your grade, notably the memo where you state your research question, competing answers, and direction of data collection.

**First draft of paper:** 20%

This should be a complete document. It should be written as if it could go to a journal. It may be short. But it should be polished and complete. It should include references. It should have a substantive title. It should have a focus. Two members of the course and I will read the paper. We will write thorough reviews. Based on this input, you will revise the paper in a “major revision.” The first draft is due Wednesday November 29, 2017.

**Final paper**: 50%

The second paper is a major revision. You will collect more data, and you will add more data to the paper. You will do additional reading. You might change your research question significantly. The final paper will be around 20 pages in length, but it may be longer. It should not, however, be longer than 40 pages double-spaced.

The second paper is due Tuesday, December 18th at 5:00 p.m. Please email me an electronic copy and provide a hard copy with a title page and a substantive title.

**Class Calendar:**

**1st Class: Monday, September 11th**

DISCUSSION: Seminar introductions, IRB, create an interview guide in class, income cards, and asking demographic questions. Make a class calendar for presentations.

**2nd Class: Monday, September 18th**

DISCUSSION: Annette Lareau will conduct a 40-minute interview in front of the class with someone whom the class recruits. Then we will discuss it. If a videotape exists, we will watch and discuss a 10-minute excerpt from a videotape of an interview. We will discuss the Blumer piece. We will have our first two presentations.

*READING:* Blumer, Herbert, *“The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism.”* Pdf, Canvas*.* Jeromack and Khan, “Talk is Cheap,” Canvas.

*EXERCISES (Note: Exercises 2 and 3 are to be completed in week 1 and week 2):*

1) Do the CITI training OR write a two-page single-spaced memo reflecting on the ethical challenges you have faced or are likely to face in your fieldwork, different strategies for coping with them, and the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches. File an IRB with your advisor as the Principal Investigator or confirm that an IRB is on file for your project.

1. Conduct an interview between Sept. 11th and Sept. 25th. You want to conduct an in-depth interview with a classmate. Ideally, you will videotape each other. To reserve a video camera or make a reservation in the room which has a video camera, go here: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/computing/mms>
2. Please watch your videotape. Then select a 5 to 10 minute segment, which you will have reviewed and discussed in class. This will include something that was challenging for you, something where you did not know what to do, or a random segment. Ideally, the segment will have more about you then the respondent answering questions. We will begin showing these video segments starting on the week of Sept. 18th. We may not be able to show video segments for each and every member of the class, but we can see how it goes.

**3rd Class: Monday, September 25th**

DISCUSSION: What can ethnographic work do? Discussion of exemplary ethnographic work. Two presentations.

READING: Geertz, Clifford, “Thick Description” pdf Canvas, and a terrific ethnographic book which you haven’t read, but would like to read. Each person will make a selection. Some possibilities include: MacLeod, Jay, *Ain’t No Making It*. Third Edition, Matt Desmond, *Evicted,* William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, or some other choice. Please discuss your choice with me.

EXERCISES:

1. Conduct an in-depth interview between Sept. 11th and Sept. 25th with a classmate. Ideally, you will videotape each other. To reserve a video camera or make a reservation in the room which has a video camera, go here: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/computing/mms>
2. Begin recruiting people to interview. Remember to recruit people face-to-face as much as possible.
3. Please watch your videotape. Then select a 5 to 10 minute segment, which you will have reviewedand discussed in class. This will include something that was challenging for you, something where you did not know what to do, or a random segment. Ideally, the segment will have more about you then the respondent answering questions. We will begin showing these video segments starting on the week of Sept. 18th. We may not be able to show video segments for each and every member of the class, but we can see how it goes.

**4th Class: Monday, October 2nd**

DISCUSSION: Good interviews and bad interviews. More videos. Challenges in interviewing. How to transcribe. Thinking about a design. Design as iterative. Two presentations.

READING: Emerson, Robert, et al., *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, second edition, Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 1-43.

EXERCISES:

1. Complete a second in-depth interview; write an analytic memo.
2. Transcribe one interview. This will take at least five hours.
3. Look for a place to do ethnographic observations. Write a verbal script for how you will describe your study to others and introduce yourself to others. Post it on Canvas for members of the class to see.

**5th Class: Monday, October 9th**

DISCUSSION: Analytic decisions in transcription. What do you learn from transcription? All members of the class will practice their brief verbal scripts. Three presentations.

READING**: Weiss, “Interviewing,” Chapter 4, pp 63-119, pdf, Canvas.**

**Maxwell, J. A. (1996). Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach, ch 3, “Conceptual Content.”**

**Example of an interview transcript and an analytic memo (skim interview, look at the probes); read the analytic memo (which is brief).**

EXERCISES:

1. Write a one to two single-space page description of your research question, as well as competing answers to your question. Be sure to state your dependent variable, as well as the theoretical significance of your question. What hole in the literature or lack of clarity in the literature are you trying to help correct? Do a search of peer-reviewed articles in Sociological Abstracts or the appropriate database using the substantive terms for your topic and the terms “ethnography” or “qualitative research.”
2. Complete one interview for your study. Write an analytic memo (to be discussed in class).
3. Start to look for a place to do observation.

**6th Class: Monday, October 16th**

DISCUSSION: Getting in and negotiating Access. Reflecting on what is ethnography and what is not ethnography. Three presentations.

READING: Emerson, et al., Chapter 3, 45-87, Whitehead, “What is Ethnography?” pdf, Canvas. Verbal scripts.

EXERCISES:

1. First set of field notes ideally due or another interview.
2. Find an article or book that you admire, but write a short memo about the conceptual limitations of the work or some aspect of the argument, which leaves you dissatisfied. Here you want to focus not on a population which has not been studied, but on the conceptualization of a social process.

**7th Class: Monday, October 23rd**

DISCUSSION: Common problems in fieldwork, ethics, role management. Three presentations.

READINGS: Lareau, Annette, “Common Problems in Fieldwork: A Personal Essay,” pdf, Canvas.

Cucchiara, Maia, “Are we doing damage? Choosing an urban school in an era of parental anxiety.” Canvas.

EXERCISE: First set of field notes due! Select readings for next week which will help you with your study. Post a memo on Canvas with a list of the reading you will complete.

**8th Class: Monday, October 30th**

DISCUSSION: Framing a question: taking stock. Mapping possible pathways. Two presentations. Second presentations begin.

READING: “Unmasking” Jeromack and Murphy, Canvas.

EXERCISE:

Second set of field notes due.

**9th Class: Monday, November 6th**

DISCUSSION: Data analysis. Two presentations.

READINGS: Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, Chapter 6.

EXERCISE: ***Write a short memo*** where you restate the criticism of the literature, the need for a study, your research question, the competing arguments, and your thesis, as well as the data you have found which you find to be interesting and exciting.

Third set of field notes due.

**10th Class: Monday, November 13th**

DISCUSSION: How to write a paper. Elements of a paper. Three presentations.

READINGS: Emerson, Chapter 7, pp 201-242.

EXERCISE: Fourth set of field notes due. Consider turning in two sets one week. Read your field notes and your interviews (or listen to the interviews again). Look for themes. Think about codes. Draft a coding guide. Think about disconfirming evidence. Write a memo about what you should look for in disconfirming evidence.

**11th Class: Monday, November 20th**

DISCUSSION: Discussion of what makes an outstanding work or a weak piece. Three presentations.

READINGS: Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field.* Second Edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

EXERCISE: Fifth set of field notes due. Grading of field notes begins. Select an outstanding article and a very weak article in your topic of inquiry. Post them on Canvas.

**12th Class: Monday, November 27rh**

DISCUSSION: Ethnography as a journey. Anxiety and hiccups. Reflections on your own strengths and weaknesses as a field worker. In-class writing assignment and discussion. Two presentations.

READINGS: Lareau, Annette, *Ethnography: A Guide for First-Time Ethnographers*, Canvas.

EXERCISE: Sixth set of field notes due. Write a memo where you lay out what you need to do to help to fill out your picture. What are you missing? Imagine that someone is skeptical about your emerging thesis? What would make your emerging thesis more persuasive?

***NOVEMBER 29ND: FIRST DRAFT OF WRITING DUE TO YOUR PEERS AND TO ME. (Please give me a hard copy in addition to an electronic copy ). Please submit your papers to your writing coaches.***

***PLEASE PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO YOUR PEERS BY SUNDAY NIGHT DECEMBER 3. PLEASE GIVE ME A COPY OF YOUR FEEDBACK. After you get your feedback, you might:***

***Create an excel document summarizing the feedback you received; write a memo where you present the thesis and summarize the key concerns of reviewers. What are your next steps? What data do you need? Think about additional literature to read, collect the literature; go back to the data to probe more deeply the patterns. Look for disconfirming evidence***

**13th Class: Monday, December 4th**

DISCUSSION: Meet with your peers to provide feedback on the papers. Two presentations. Discussion of challenges of writing a paper using qualitative data.

READINGS: Reviews and Reviewing: Bengtson, V. L., & MacDermid, S. M. How to review a journal article: Suggestions for first-time reviewers and reminders for seasoned experts. Available at <http://www.ncfr.org/jmf/jmf-reviewers/reviewer-guidelines>.

EXERCISE: Seventh set of field notes. Read two papers written by members of the course. Provide a written “peer review” of the papers. Turn in your reviews which will include summary comments as well as marginal comments.

**15th Class: Monday, December 11th Last Class!**

DISCUSSION: The craft of writing, the revision process. Three presentations.

READINGS: Read a book on writing, which you have not read: *Writing for the Social Sciences* (Howie Becker), *Good Prose* (Tracy Kidder and Richard Taylor), or *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Writer’s* Memoir (Haruki Murakami).

EXERCISE: Eighth set of field notes (you will find time to turn in the other sets of notes when you see fit).

Tuesday, December 19th, 5:00 p.m. heavily revised final paper due. Please turn in an electronic copy and a hard copy (with a title page and a substantive title). Please have it be printed single-sided to allow for comments.

Invitation: Thursday, December 7th, if the entire class can attend, then you are invited for dinner at our home, 6642 Greene Street, Philadelphia, PA 19119, near the Upsal station on the Chestnut Hill West Line (30th Street).

**OTHER RESOURCES:**

Graduate School Advice

* <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/dissertation.pdf>
* <http://www.phdcompletion.com/6-tips-on-completing-your-thesis-or-dissertation-in-the-new-year/>
* <http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/archives/2013-03-15.htm>
* Foss, Sonja K. and William Waters, *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler’s Guide to a Done Dissertation,* Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.
* <http://www.emt.orst.edu/cla/sociology/sites/default/files/pdf/socwritingguide1-7.pdf>

**Welcome to the course!**