SOC 118a: Observing the Social World: Doing Qualitative Sociology
Fall 2012

Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:30-5pm
Location TBA

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Office Hours: Thursday, 10:30am-12noon, and by appt.

“Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short, gentlemen [sic], go get the seats of your pants dirty in real research.”
-Robert Park (1920s)

“I liked the questions these researchers were asking, but compared with the vibrant life that I saw on the streets of Chicago, the discussion in these seminars seemed cold and distant, abstract and lifeless. I found it particularly curious that most of these researchers didn’t seem interested in meeting the people they wrote about…”
- Sudhir Venkatesh (2008: 3)

Course Description and Learning Goals:

This course introduces you to the basic tools and concepts of qualitative social research. We focus on three qualitative research methods used regularly by sociologists -- participant observation, interviews, and document analysis (including visual documents).

Students in this course will:
1. Learn about qualitative research methods by reading about them, seeing examples of how sociologists use them, and practicing them in class exercises.
2. Gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of different types of qualitative methods, the kinds of methods appropriate to different research questions, and how to evaluate researchers’ claims based on the evidence they present.
3. Develop their skills in participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis by using each method to investigate a topic or question of their choice.

To learn how to do qualitative research you have to, in the words of Robert Park, “get the seat of your pants dirty.” In addition to completing weekly reading and participating in class discussions, this class is built around participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis you will conduct focused on one topic or question that you select. Your topic may be something as seemingly straight-forward as grocery shopping or eating in the dining hall or something more complex such as interactions in gyms, religious centers, or on athletic teams. Your topic must be feasible (we will talk about this in the first and second weeks), ethical (we will discuss this in the third week) and must be approved by me before you get started. I encourage you to continue with your projects in subsequent semesters through independent studies, summer projects, and senior theses.

* This syllabus owes much to Professor Wendy Cadge.
Course Requirements

1. **Attendance** is required. Class will begin promptly. Please be on time out of respect for me and your fellow classmates. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. The only absences that will not influence your grade are those for religious holidays that you speak with me about at least one week in advance, or documented illnesses.

2. **Participation** You are encouraged not only to attend class but to raise questions and make comments. You will get out of this class what you put in, and the course will be more fun for all of us if you are actively engaged. Your class participation grade is based both on your participation in class and the small writing exercises that are due in class some weeks. These small exercises are designed to help you progress with your research and to enable me to give you feedback about your assignments as they are developing. I will not grade individual exercises but will note whether you have completed them and will sometimes collect them so I can provide written feedback to you.

3. **Reading** is required. All course readings must be done each week as indicated on the syllabus.

4. **Written Assignments.** There are a four written assignments in this course. The first three assignments ask you to gather data (through participant observation, an interview, and an analysis of documents, respectively) and to reflect on your experience substantively and methodologically in a short (5 page) paper. The last assignment asks you to analyze one of the three sets of data you have collected in a 5 to 7 page paper. Each of these four assignments is worth 20% of your final grade. Additional information about each assignment will be distributed.

**A Word of Advice:** Unlike papers you might write for other classes, these writing assignments cannot be completed at the last minute. Each requires that you spend time identifying sources of information, gaining access to research sites, making appointments with informants (which requires being flexible to their schedules!), and gathering and managing the data you gather BEFORE you start to write your paper. Scheduling dilemmas and unforeseen surprises are part of the research process and you need to plan and be prepared for them. If you are having difficulty with an assignment, please let me know as soon as possible. I rarely accept late papers and will do so only if you have made me aware of the dilemma ahead of time and we have been working together towards an appropriate solution.

- The first assignment is due Wednesday, October 17.
- The second assignment is due on Wednesday, November 7.
- The third assignment is due on Monday, November 19.
- The fourth assignment is due on Wednesday, December 12.

Papers are due at the beginning of the classes listed above. I will not accept papers by email. Papers turned in to me after 3:30pm on these days are late. You will lose one full letter grade for each 24 hours after the due date the assignment is turned in (i.e. if you would have received an A but your paper is turned in within the first 24 hours after it is due, you will receive a B, etc.). I expect you to properly cite and reference any articles from the syllabus you refer to when completing these assignments. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I encourage you to use the writing center for your assignments.
4. **Final Grades** will be based on your class attendance (5%), your active class participation and the completion of small written exercises described in the syllabus (15%) and the four written assignments (20% each; 80% total). There will be no final exam.

Final grades will be calculated using the following distribution:

- 94-99: A
- 90-93: A-
- 87-89: B+
- 84-86: B
- 80-83: B-
- 77-79: C+
- 74-76: C
- 70-73: C-
- 67-69: D+
- 64-66: D
- 60-63: D-
- <60: F

All written work must be completed to receive a passing grade in this class.

**Academic Integrity**: You are expected to be familiar with and to follow the University’s policies on academic integrity (see [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/ai/index.html](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/srcs/ai/index.html)). My policy is to give a “0” for any assignment that contains plagiarized material. Additionally, I will refer any suspected instances of alleged dishonesty to the Office of Student Development and Conduct. Instances of academic dishonesty may result in sanctions including but not limited to failure in the course, failure on the assignment in question, suspension from the University and/or educational programs.

**University Policy on Academic Accommodations**: If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and give me a copy of your letter of accommodation in the first two weeks of the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu). Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

**Course Readings**

The following books are available in the university bookstore.


These books are also on reserve in the university library. All other required course readings are available electronically.
Course Outline

I. Getting Started

Week 1 -- Introductions
Overview of the course, getting to know each other, brainstorming your research topic for the semester, brief history of qualitative sociology, and discussion of the range of reasons people do qualitative research (i.e. description, exploration, explanation, prediction, interpretation, representation)

September 5
• No assigned reading or writing

Week 2 -- Selecting a Site and Getting In
Selecting a research site / research problem, getting in, questions of objectivity and subjectivity, relations between researcher and researched, overt and convert research, reciprocity, some examples.

September 10

September 12
We will sort into groups, and each group will read one of the following:


Writing: Please bring to class -- and be prepared to turn in -- a one paragraph summary of the topic you would like to investigate this semester and a list of questions you have about the topic.
Week 3 -- Considering Ethical Issues
History of sociological research ethics, codes of ethics, institutional review panels, tradeoffs in the field, informant integrity and respect, responding to ethical issues

September 17  NO CLASS

September 19
  • Code of Ethics: American Sociological Association
    http://www.asanet.org/page ww?section=Ethics&name=Code+of+Ethics+Table+of+Contents

Writing: Please bring to class – and be prepared to turn in -- a one paragraph summary of some ethical issues you might face in your research.

II. Participant Observation

Week 4 -- Participant Observation: Developing Relationships
Establishing rapport and building relationships, trust, reciprocity, authority and power re: race, class, gender, age, insider v. outsider dilemmas, managing relationships over time.

September 24

September 26  NO CLASS

Week 5&6 -- Participant Observation: Writing Fieldnotes
Writing different kinds of fieldnotes, organizing them, creating scenes, starting to think about analysis, completing your first paper assignment.

October 1  NO CLASS

October 3

October 8  NO CLASS
October 9  “Brandeis Monday”
• Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 2 “In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes,” c.3 “Writing Up Fieldnotes I: From Field to Desk”)

Writing: Please bring to class at least three pages of fieldnotes you have written thus far based on your experiences doing participant observation. We will share/discuss them in class. Also be prepared to describe any dilemmas you are facing in your research to date.

October 10

Writing: Nothing to turn in today, but please be prepared to describe any challenges you are facing as you conclude your participant observation and begin to work on your first paper assignment.

III. Interviewing

Week 7 -- Interviews as Qualitative Data
Identifying and contacting informants, sampling issues, taping and transcribing interviews, structured and unstructured interviews, issues of social position.

October 15

Writing: Be prepared to say a few words about who you might interview for your second assignment and why that person makes sense.

October 17

Writing: **Assignment 1 due**

Week 8 -- The Art of Interviews and Interview Guides
Conducting interviews, working with interview guides, writing an interview, using probes and following up

October 22

October 24

Writing: Please bring to class a draft of your interview guide or a list of the issues you want to talk about with the person you will be interviewing. You need to have selected that person by today, confirmed that they are available, and ideally scheduled the interview. We will work on/revise your guides together as a class.

Week 9 -- Practicing Interviews and Interpreting Interview Data
The social process surrounding the interview, analyzing interview data, coding and the development of analysis, completing your second assignment

October 29

October 31
• Courtney Bender. 2003. Heaven’s Kitchen: Living Religion at God’s Love We Deliver. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 4 “Religious Practice in the Kitchen”)

Writing: Please bring to class any notes you have from your interview and any written sections of it you have already transcribed. We will work with your interview transcripts if you have them (which will help you with Assignment 2). Please be prepared with any questions you have as you start to write your second paper.

IV. Document Analysis

Week 10 -- Identifying and Working With Contemporary and Historical Documents
Using documents as a form of social observation, strategies for “reading” documents, using archives, linking historical and contemporary sources. We will spend one hour of class today learning about the documents available through the Brandeis University archives that you may wish to use for assignment 3.

November 5

Writing: Be prepared to say a few words about what kinds of documents you might analyze for your third paper and why.

November 7
• “FIELD TRIP” TO THE BRANDEIS ARCHIVES [tentative]
Writing: **Assignment 2 due**

Week 11 -- More Documents: Visual Media  
_Gathering and using visual information, combining sources of information, multimedia ethnography_

November 12  

Writing: Please bring to class – and be prepared to turn in -- a one paragraph summary of the documents you are working with for assignment 3. Be prepared to describe any challenges / questions you have about these documents and the assignment.

November 14  

V. Analyzing Qualitative Data: Ideas to Concepts to Representations

Week 12& 13 -- Coding and Analyzing Qualitative Data  
_Types of coding, memo-ing, “tacking” between theory and data, completing your third assignment._

November 19  
- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. _Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes_. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c.6 “Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing”)  

Writing: Assignment 3 Due

November 21   NO CLASS

November 26  

November 28  
Writing: Please bring to class the dataset you will be using for assignment 4 and a list of at least ten codes you might use to code/analyze the data.

Week 14 -- From Codes to Concepts to Narratives
*More on coding, emerging concepts, framing concepts and reports, writing as a process, audience*

December 3

December 5
**READER’S CHOICE (ANY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING)**

Week 15 -- Wrapping Up and “Using” Sociological Research
*The uses for sociological research, qualitative research as a public endeavor, the responsibilities that accompany qualitative research, completing assignment 4 and the course.*

December 10

Writing: Be working on assignment 4 and bring to class any questions you have about it.

December 12

**SHORT PRESENTATIONS OF YOUR RESEARCH PROJECTS & HOLIDAY POTLUCK**

Writing: Assignment 4 due.

HAPPY WINTER!!