SOC 118a: Observing the Social World: Doing Qualitative Sociology
Fall 2016

Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:30-4:50pm
Shiffman Humanities Center 125

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“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 Ventkatesh (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.
Experiential Learning

This is an experiential learning course. 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 that you will conduct focused on a topic that you select. The first three papers in the course ask you to reflect on the process of doing research, and what you have learned by engaging with each method. Once you have reflected on each method, and its strengths and weaknesses in answering questions that you care about, you will be invited – in the final paper for the class – to choose one approach to develop a more in-depth analysis.

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. This course is meant to guide you in the process of becoming a social science researcher.

Note: You will not complete a full research project in this class. There simply isn’t time in one semester to learn research methods, design a study, gather and analyze data, and write up your findings. I will encourage you to continue with your research in subsequent semesters through independent studies, summer projects, and senior theses.

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 it, 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 often collect them so I can provide written feedback to you (note: this means that you must type these writing exercises and be prepared to turn them in).*

   Additionally, I ask that **you come to my office hours at least once during the semester**, to talk about your research and writing in the class.
3. **Reading** is required. All course readings must be done each week as indicated on the syllabus.

4. **Communications.** We will respond to email within 48 hours during the week, or following the weekend. If we can’t answer your question in a sentence or two, we will invite you to come to office hours. If you have questions about how to complete an assignment or about how an assignment was graded, we will invite you to come to office hours.

5. **Classroom Environment.** Learning how to do research is an exciting, fun, and occasionally anxiety provoking, experience. Our class is meant to be a safe, creative, and collaborative space, in which we will work together to reflect on our experiences “in the field,” brainstorm solutions to any problems that arise in the conduct of research, consider the impact of our identities/selves on our research projects, and support each other as we begin the journey of becoming a social scientist. To support this collaborative and cooperative spirit, I ask you to bring to every class all of your trust, sensitivity, maturity, and sincere commitment to intellectual inquiry. We will collaboratively generate guidelines for class discussion, to ensure the confidentiality of research subjects, as well as to support your learning.

6. **Written Assignments.** There are 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.

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

**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 on October 10
- The second assignment is due on November 9
- The third assignment is due on November 21.
- The fourth assignment is due on December 12.
Papers are due at the beginning of the classes listed above (and by 3:30pm on December 12, though we do not have class that day). **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.

7. **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.

Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class.

Final grades will be calculated using the following distribution:

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<th>Score Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>94-99</td>
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<td>90-93</td>
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<td>87-89</td>
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<td>84-86</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>80-83</td>
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<td>70-73</td>
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**Academic Integrity**: You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please be sure to follow the University’s policies on academic integrity (see: [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/)). I will refer any suspected instances of alleged dishonesty to the Director of Academic Integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. 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. My policy is to give a “0” for any assignment that contains plagiarized material. Citation and research assistance can be found via LTS library guides.

**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 and on reserve at the library.


All other required course readings are available via LATTE or other online source, as noted.
Course Outline

I. Getting Started

Week 1 -- Introductions and Topic Selection
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)

August 29
• No assigned reading or writing

August 31

Week 2 – What is Qualitative Research?
Selecting a research site / research problem, getting in, questions of objectivity and subjectivity, relations between researcher and researched, overt and covert research, reciprocity, some examples

September 7

Please read these for comparison, rather than for content. Our discussion in class will focus on the difference between quantitative and qualitative research methods.

September 8 (Brandeis Monday)

We will sort into groups, with each reading one of the following. Come to class prepared to describe what you read to your classmates.

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 12

• Code of Ethics: American Sociological Association
• Review the Brandeis IRB website: http://www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/

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.

September 14


• And one review/critique from the list of links posted on LATTE (we’ll choose in class).
II. Participant Observation

Week 4 -- Doing and Writing About Field Work
Establishing rapport and building relationships, trust, reciprocity, managing relationships over time. Writing different kinds of fieldnotes, organizing them, creating scenes, starting to think about analysis.

September 19


September 21


Week 5 – Reflexivity and Ethnographic Analysis
Considering authority and power re: race, class, gender, age, insider v. outsider dilemmas, collaborative ethnographies, writing ethnography, completing your first paper assignment.

September 26


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.

September 28


Writing: Nothing to turn in today, but please be prepared to describe any challenges you are facing in re: your first paper assignment.
III. Interviewing

Week 6&7 -- Interviews as Qualitative Data
Identifying and contacting informants, sampling issues, taping and transcribing interviews, structured and unstructured interviews, issues of social position.

October 3    No class

October 5


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

October 10


Writing: **Assignment 1 due**

October 12    No class

Week 8&9 -- The Art of Interviews and Interview Guides
Conducting interviews, working with interview guides, writing an interview, using probes and following up, focus group interviews

October 19


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.

October 24    No class
October 25  (Brandeis Monday)

October 26
- Sara Shostak, Beth, He, and Norris Guscott. 2016. *Evaluating The Food Project’s Garden Programs: The Experiences and Perspectives of Gardeners*. Submitted to The Food Project, Boston, MA.

Week 10 -- Interpreting Interview Data
*Analyzing interview data, coding and the development of analysis, completing your second assignment*

October 31

or


**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.

November 2

No reading. Peer review of papers in class. Please bring an outline or draft to class, and be prepared to comment on a classmate’s paper.
IV. Document Analysis

Week 11 -- 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 7

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

November 9
• “FIELD TRIP” TO THE BRANDEIS ARCHIVES [tentative]

Writing: **Assignment 2 due**

Week 12 -- More Documents: Visual Media
Gathering and using visual information, combining sources of information, multimedia ethnography

November 14

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 16
V. Analyzing Qualitative Data: Ideas to Concepts to Representations

Week 13&14 -- Coding and Analyzing Qualitative Data
Types of coding, memo-ing, “tacking” between theory and data, completing your third assignment. Also consideration of framing concepts and reports, writing as a process, audience

November 21

Writing: ** Assignment 3 Due**

November 23 No class

November 28

November 30

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 15 – Writing Sociology, Engaging the Public
The uses for sociological research, qualitative research as a public endeavor, the responsibilities that accompany qualitative research, completing assignment 4 and the course.

December 5

December 7 – Last day of class
- Short presentations, Q&A, and holiday potluck!

December 12 – **Assignment 4 due**