

**Sociology 118a. Observing the Social World:
Doing Qualitative Sociology
Brandeis University
Fall 2006**

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Office Hours: Wednesday 1-2pm, Thursday 11:30-12:30pm, and by appointment
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Class Meetings: Wednesdays 2:10-5pm, Pearlman 203

“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

Course Description

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). By reading about these methods, seeing examples of how sociologists use them, and doing each yourself, you will develop the skills required to evaluate and do sociological research. Themes to be addressed include the strengths and weaknesses of each of these methods, the kinds of methods appropriate for different research questions, and ways of evaluating researchers' claims based on the evidence they present.

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) and 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.

Course Readings

The following books are available in the university bookstore.

- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (Required)

- Robert Weiss. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (Required)
- Howard Becker. 1988. *Writing for Social Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Recommended)
- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Recommended)

These books are also on reserve in the university library. All other required course readings are available on-line via WebCT.

Course Requirements

1. **Attendance** is required. Class will begin promptly at 2:10pm. Please be on time out of respect for me and your fellow classmates. You are encouraged not only to attend class but to raise questions and 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 attendance comprises 5% of your final grade and your class participation 15%. Everyone starts with a *class attendance* grade of an A. If you miss two classes you will earn a B, three classes a C, four classes a D and five or more classes an F. 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. If you are too ill to attend class, I will excuse the absence only with a note from the Health Center. Your *class participation* grade is based 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 as much feedback as possible 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.
2. **Reading** is required. All course readings must be done each week as indicated on the syllabus.
3. **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 is being distributed with the syllabus.

A Word of Advice: Unlike “traditional” 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 Friday October 13 by noon
- The second assignment is due on Friday November 3 by noon
- The third assignment is due on Monday November 20 by noon.
- The fourth assignment is due on Monday December 11 by noon

Papers are due to my mailbox in the department office by the date and time listed. I will not accept papers by email. Papers turned in to me after noon 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.

There will be no final exam.

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). The grading scale, as outlined by the University in the Bulletin (p. 35) is as follows:

“The following grades will be used with plus or minus where appropriate:”

A: “High Distinction”

B: “Distinction.”

C: “Satisfactory.”

D: “Passing, but Unsatisfactory.”

F: “Failure.”

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

5. **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 Outline

I. Getting Started

Week 1. September 6. Introductions

Reading: None

Writing: None

Topics for today:

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)

Week 2. September 13. Getting Started and Getting In

Reading:

- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (c. 1 “Starting Where You Are,” c. 2 “Evaluating Data Sites,” c.3 “Getting In”)
- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 1 “Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research”)
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Introduction, c. 1 “The Book Vendor” and “Afterward”).

Writing:

Please bring to class a one paragraph of summary of the topic you would like to investigate this semester and a list of questions you have about the topic.

Topic for today:

Selecting a research site / research problem, getting in, questions of objectivity and subjectivity, relations between researcher and researched, overt and covert research, reciprocity, an example.

Week 3: September 20. Considering Ethical Issues

Reading:

- Laud Humphries. 1970. *The Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company. (c. 2 “Methods: the sociologist as voyeur” and Postscript “A Question of Ethics”)
- Schemo, Diana Jean. “What a Professor Learned as an Undercover Freshman” *The New York Times*. August 23, 2006

- Nathan, Rebekah. 2005. *My Freshman Year: What A Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. Penguin Books. (“Afterword: Ethics and Ethnography”)
- Code of Ethics: American Sociological Association
- Martin Tolich. 2004. “Internal confidentiality: When confidentiality assurances fail relational informants.” *Qualitative Sociology*. 27(1): 101-106.

Writing:

Please bring to class a one paragraph summary of some ethical issues you might face in your research.

Topics for today:

History of sociological research ethics, codes of ethics, institutional review panels, tradeoffs in the field, informant integrity and respect, responding to ethical issues

II. Participant Observation

Week 4. September 27. Participant Observation: Developing Relationships

Reading:

- Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley. 1994. “Ethnography and Participant Observation,” in Norma Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln Eds. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (c. 4 “Getting Along”)
- Mary Pattillo-McCoy and Rueben Buford May. 2000. “Do You See What I See? Examining a Collaborative Ethnography.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 6:1 (65-87)

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.

Topics for today:

Establishing rapport and building relationships, trust, reciprocity, authority and power re: race, class, gender, age, insider v. outsider dilemmas, managing relationships over time.

Week 5: October 4. Participant Observation: Writing Fieldnotes

Reading:

- 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”)

- Cadge, Wendy. 2005. *Heartwood: the First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 1 “Arrivals and a Map of the Journey,” Appendix A “Research Methods”)

Writing:

No writing for today. 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.

Topics for today:

Writing different kinds of fieldnotes, organizing them, creating scenes, starting to think about analysis, completing your first paper assignment.

III. Interviewing

Week 6. October 11. Interviews as Qualitative Data

Reading:

- Robert Weiss. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 1 “Introduction,” c. 2 “Respondents: Choosing Them and Recruiting Them,” c. 3 “Preparation for Interviewing”)
- Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press (“Appendix B”)
- Sara Shostak. 2005. “The Emergence of Toxicogenomics: A Case Study of Molecularization.” *Social Studies of Science* 35(3): 367-403. (skim)
- Sara Shostak. 2004. “Environmental Justice and Genomics: Acting on the Futures of Environmental Health.” *Science as Culture* 13(4): 539-562. (skim)

Writing:

No writing for today. Be working on your first assignment due Friday by noon. Be prepared to say a few words about who you might interview for your second assignment and why that person makes sense.

Topics for today:

Identifying and contacting informants, sampling issues, taping and transcribing interviews, structured and unstructured interviews, issues of social position. We will learn in class about how Professor Sara Shostak has responded to these issues in her own research. (Guest speaker, Professor Sara Shostak)

Assignment 1 due Friday October 13 by noon.

Week 7. October 18. The Art of Interviews and Interview Guides

Reading:

- Robert Weiss. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 4 “Interviewing” and c. 5 “Issues in Interviewing”)
- Joseph Hermanowicz. 2002. “The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed.” *Qualitative Sociology*. 25(4): 479-499.

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.

Topics for today:

Conducting interviews, working with interview guides, writing an interview, using probes and following up

Week 8. October 25. Practicing Interviews and Interpreting Interview Data

Reading:

- Robert Weiss. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 6 “Analysis of Data”)
- Blake Poland and Ann Pederson. 1998. “Reading Between the Lines: Interpreting Silences in Qualitative Research.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 4(2): 293-313.
- Carl A.B. Warren et al. 2003. “After the interview.” *Qualitative Sociology*. 26(1): 93-110.

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) or with one of mine if needed. Please be prepared with any questions you have as you start to write your second paper.

Topics for today:

The social process surrounding the interview, analyzing interview data, coding and the development of analysis, completing your second assignment

IV. Document Analysis

Week 9. November 1. Identifying and Working With Contemporary and Historical Documents

Reading:

- Michael Hill. 1993. “Archival Strategies and Techniques.” Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. (c. 2 “Archival sedimentation” and c. 4 “Getting started, targets and tool kits”)

- Ian Hodder. 1994. "The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln Eds.. London: Sage Publishers
- Rachel Maines. 1999. *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (c. 1 "The Job Nobody Wanted")
- Emily Martin. 1991. "The egg and the sperm: how science has constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles." *Signs* 16(3): 485-501.

Writing:

No writing for today. Be working on your second assignment due Friday by noon. Be prepared to say a few words about what kinds of documents you might analyze for your third paper and why.

Topics:

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.

Assignment 2 due Friday November 3 by noon

Week 10. November 8. More Documents: Visual Media

Reading:

- Douglas Harper. 1998. "An argument for visual sociology." in Jon Prosser Ed. *Image-Based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Falmer Press.
- Peter Lozios. 1992. "Admissible evidence? Film in Anthropology," in Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton Eds. *Film as Ethnography*. Manchester UK: Manchester University Press.
- Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels. 1989. "Images of homework: a pastoral essay," in Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels. *Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- In class we will watch the film *Rolling* by Gretchen Berland

Writing:

Please bring to class a one paragraph summary of the documents you will be working with for assignment 3. Be prepared to describe any challenges / questions you have about these documents and the assignment.

Topics for today:

Gathering and using visual information, combining sources of information, multimedia ethnography

V. Analyzing Qualitative Data: Ideas to Concepts to Representations

Week 11. November 15. Coding and Thinking About Qualitative Data

Reading:

- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c.6 “Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing”)
- Robert Weiss. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 6 “Analysis of Data”) – again!
- David Cunningham and Barb Browning. 2004. “The Emergence of ‘Worthy’ Targets: Official Frames and Deviance Narratives within the FBI,” with Barb Browning. 2004. *Sociological Forum* 19, 3: 347-369 (skim)
- David Cunningham. 2003. “Understanding State Responses to Right Vs. Left - Wing Threats: The FBI, the Klan, and the New Left.” *Social Science History* 27, 3: 327-370. (skim)

Writing:

If possible, please bring to class one of the documents you are analyzing for assignment 3 and be prepared to talk about it and how you are analyzing it.

Topics for today:

Types of coding, memoing, “tacking” between theory and data, completing your third assignment. We will learn in class about how Professor David Cunningham has responded to these issues in his own research (Guest speaker Professor David Cunningham)

Assignment 3 due Monday November 20 by noon.

Week 12. November 22. From Codes to Concepts to Narratives

Reading:

- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (c. 8 “Arousing Interest,” c. 10 “Writing Analysis”)
- Howard S. Becker. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 4 “Concepts”)
- Levitt, Peggy. 2000. “Local-level Global Religion: The Case of U.S.-Dominican Migration.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 37(1): 74-90.

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.

Topics for today:

More on coding, emerging concepts, framing concepts and reports, writing as a process, audience

Week 13: Wrapping Up and “Using” Sociological Research

Reading:

- William Julius Wilson. 1998. “Engaging publics in sociological dialogue,” *Contemporary Sociology*. 27(5): 435-38
- David Brooks. “Both Sides of Inequality,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2006.
- Eric Klinenberg. “Dying Alone...” *Boston Globe*, August 31, 2003.

Writing:

No writing for today. Be working on assignment 4. Bring to class any questions you have about it.

Topics for today:

The uses for sociological research, qualitative research as a public endeavor, the responsibilities that accompany qualitative research, completing assignment 4 and the course.

Assignment 4 due Monday December 11 by noon