

Ethnographic Field Research

Cary Beckwith

This course introduces students to the practice of ethnographic research. Ethnography—literally, the writing of people—is a form of qualitative social research grounded in localized, participatory observation of people’s behaviors and interactions. Ethnographers place themselves into the everyday situations of the people they study while recording what their research subjects say and do. By observing and probing social life in a natural setting, the ethnographer can collect highly contextual data about how people map, manage, and maneuver their social worlds.

This course takes a learning-by-doing approach. Coursework prepares students to do independent ethnographic research and guides them through the process. The class begins with an overview of the concerns and techniques of ethnographic fieldwork, including research design, data collection, and research ethics. Reading assignments and class discussions will invite students to consider what ethnography can and cannot accomplish, and what it takes for an ethnography to “succeed.” During this time students will identify a topic and a field site for an ethnographic project of their own.

In the second and longer portion of the course, students enter “the field” to collect and analyze ethnographic data. Each student is expected to spend at least two hours a week doing independent field research. Class meetings will support this research with workshops on ethnographic writing and discussions of exemplary ethnographic studies. This leads to a final research paper and class presentation. The course serves as methodological training for students interested in undertaking an independent senior research project, and more generally it encourages students to see themselves not just as consumers of knowledge but as producers of it.

Goals

- Understand and appreciate the contributions of ethnographic research.
- Learn how to do rigorous, thorough, and ethical participant observation fieldwork.
- Shape ethnographic data into an original sociological argument.
- Acquire research skills to undertake a successful senior thesis.

Requirements

Workshop and discussion

Our class meetings will take two forms. In some of our sessions we will read and discuss ethnographies as models of successful (or perhaps unsuccessful) social research. Once students have placed themselves at a field site, we will treat some class meetings as writing workshops in which we read and reflect on each other’s responses to assigned writing exercises. Absences

will be excused for family, medical, or other personal emergencies; religious holidays; and varsity athletic travel.

Reading

Reading is assigned regularly, but the volume is kept to a minimum to allow time for fieldwork and writing. The majority of the assignments are excerpts from ethnographic studies, which we will read and discuss as potential models for our own writings and analyses. A few readings reflect on the practice of participant observation research.

Reading assignments will be available online. Reading must be completed prior to the class meeting for which it is assigned.

Research project

Most of the work we do over the course of the semester serves the purpose of developing your own research project. Beginning no later than week 5, students are expected to spend two hours a week at their field site collecting data. Time in the field should be followed as soon as possible (hours, not days) by writing field notes.

Students begin analyzing their data in a series of short (one page, single-spaced) writing exercises assigned on a weekly basis beginning in week 6. These assignments are due 24 hours prior to the class meeting for which they are assigned.

The final assignment is a 15-page research paper. This assignment gives students a chance to develop and refine the analyses initiated in the weekly exercises, and to put this research into conversation with the relevant academic literature.

Grading

- Research paper: 40%
- Writing exercises: 35% (assessed on whether or not the assignment was adequately completed)
- Participation: 25%

Course Outline and Assignments

Part 1: So you want to do ethnography...

Week 1: Introduction

What is ethnography? Why do it? What does it accomplish?

Reading:

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." Pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Stack, Carol. 1974. "Swapping." Pp. 32-44 in *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row.

Week 2: The contribution of ethnography

What kinds of questions is ethnography suited to answer? How does ethnography compliment other types of social research?

Reading:

Khan, Shamus and Colin Jerolmack. 2013. "Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege." *The Sociological Quarterly* 54(1):9–19.

Stack, Carol. 1974. "Child-keeping." Pp. 62-73 in *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row.

Turco, Catherine J. and Ezra W. Zuckerman. 2017. "The Distinctive Logic and Contribution of Ethnography." Pp. 1280-85 in "Verstehen for Sociology: Comment on Watts." *American Journal of Sociology* 122(4):1272–91.

Week 3: Designing a project and gaining access

Part A: How does an ethnographic research project take shape? We will consider some of the ways that ethnographers identify a topic, an object of study, a research question, and a research site.

Reading:

Jerolmack, Colin and Shamus Khan. 2017. "The Analytic Lenses of Ethnography." *Socius* 3:1–11.

Pascoe, C.J. 2007. "Methodology." Pp. 15-22 in *Dude, You're a Fag*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Part B: How do ethnographers access a field site? How do they insert themselves into the proceedings there?

Reading:

Bourgois, Philippe. 1995. "Violating Apartheid in the United States." Pp. 19-47 in *In Search of Respect*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mears, Ashley. 2011. "Entry." Pp. 1-2, 17-21 in *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Assignment:

Describe, in one paragraph each, three settings that you are exploring for your research project (e.g., a public place, an informal group, a formal organization, a repeated situation). If you have already chosen a research site, explain why this site interests you and how you have gained or will gain access. Consider the barriers you might face and how you will address them.

Week 4: Research ethics

What ethical questions does the practice of participant observation research raise? What ethical responsibilities does the fieldworker hold, and to whom? We will ground our discussion in two cases: Arlene Stein's reflections on the response to her book *The Stranger Next Door* and a journalist's reflections on the controversy surrounding Alice Goffman's *On the Run*.

Reading:

Stein, Arlene. 2010. "Sex, Truths, and Audiotape: Anonymity and the Ethics of Exposure in Public Ethnography." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39(5): 554-68.

Neyfakh, Leon. 2015. "The Ethics of Ethnography." *Slate Magazine*.

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/06/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_is_the_sociologist_to_blame_for_the_inconsistencies.html.

Assignment:

Complete online human subjects protection training.

Part 2: Writing Ethnography

Week 5: Field notes and other evidence

An ethnographer is only as good as her field notes. These written records constitute the primary data for ethnographic research. They can be supplemented with evidence from interviews, documents, pictures, videos, and audio recordings.

Reading:

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chapter 2, "In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes"

Chapter 3, "Writing Fieldnotes I: At the Desk, Creating Scenes on a Page"

Assignment:

Begin research in your field site, if you haven't already.

Week 6: The written document

As you begin your own research, we consider what a particular ethnographic work can teach us about how to write about and analyze the social world.

Reading:

Pachirat, Timothy. 2011. "Quality of Control." Pp. 208-32 in *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Workshop #1:

Turn in one set of fieldnotes from your first week(s) of research. Unless you have received explicit permission to use real names, be sure to anonymize your research subjects by using pseudonyms and by obscuring identifying details.

Week 7: Setting the scene

The ethnographer has a responsibility to present the people, places, and processes of her research setting in precise and vivid language. A sharp descriptive introduction can animate the research site not only for people who are unfamiliar with it but also for those who are.

Reading:

Mitchell, Joseph. 1940. "The Old House at Home." *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1940/04/13/the-old-house-at-home> (first paragraph only).

Duneier, Mitchell. 1992. "Valois as a 'Black Metropolis.'" Pp. 49-56 in *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Orwell, George. 1937. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Penguin Books. Chapter 2, pp. 18-31.

Workshop #2:

Describe the site of your research in one single-spaced page. Use details of people, social situations, and the built environment to give the reader a sense of what distinguishes it. Reading assignments offer models of how you might do this.

Week 8: Showing people and using quotes

An ethnographer has a special responsibility to the people who have given her access to their lives. In addition to honoring ethical research principles, one way to uphold this responsibility is to depict research subjects with honesty, sympathy, and insight.

Reading:

Duneier, Mitchell. 1992. "Slim and Bart." Pp. 3-24 in *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jerolmack, Colin. 2013. "New York's Rooftop Pigeon Flyers." Pp. 79-98 in *The Global Pigeon*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Workshop #3:

In one single-spaced page, describe two "characters" (aka research subjects) who appear in your project.

Week 9: Depicting interactions and social order

Ethnography as a method is uniquely suited for understanding how people interact *in situ*. Careful participant observation can reveal how people create and maintain social order in a particular setting or under particular conditions.

Reading:

Lee, Jooyoung. 2009. "Battlin' on the Corner: Techniques for Sustaining Play." *Social Problems* 56(3):578-98 (especially pp. 583-92).

Workshop #4:

Identify a particular interaction you've observed that you believe is important for understanding something about your field site. Using details from your field notes (not just your memory), depict this interaction as it transpired and briefly explain its significance.

Alternately, describe a *type* of repeated interaction that happens at your field site and briefly explain its significance. You might try introducing this category of interaction by depicting one particular instance of it and then generalizing.

Week 10: Understanding local meanings

Understanding how your research subjects see things is often a first step toward an informed analysis. It's also something that ethnographers are well positioned to do. To be sure, every ethnographer has her own point of view on what she's observing, but that point of view can be greatly enhanced by taking into account the meanings that research subjects themselves attribute to their experiences.

Reading:

Pascoe, C.J. 2007. "Dude, You're a Fag: Adolescent Male Homophobia." Pp. 52-59 in *Dude, You're a Fag*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Duneier, Mitchell. 1992. "The Standard of Respectability." Pp. 65-83 in *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Workshop #5:

Identify a social practice that you have observed at your field site and explain how your research subjects understand this practice. One way to do this is to ask them about it, especially if you can do this *in situ*, quizzing them about it as it's going on or right after (retrospective questioning works too).

Week 11: Identifying variation

Among the various contributions that an ethnographer can make to understanding social life, one of them is to identify variation where a less familiar observer might mistakenly assume sameness. An ethnographer who has come to know her research site and subjects will often be able to point out distinctions that matter for the people and processes she is bearing witness to. This includes variations in social roles, interactions, meanings, identities, or outcomes. The variation may be one that the research subjects themselves identify (distinctions that shape their understanding of the world) or variations that the analyst identifies on her own.

Reading:

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. "The Men without Accounts." Pp. 81-95 in *Sidewalk*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Baldor, Tylor. 2018. "How Not to 'Take Up Space' While Taking Up Space." *Behavioral Scientist*. <http://behavioralscientist.org/how-not-to-take-up-space-while-taking-up-space/>

Workshop #6:

Identify some sort of variation you have identified that you wouldn't have registered at the beginning of your research. Some questions to stimulate your thinking:

- Can the interactions you observe be classified into different types?
- Can the people you observe be classified in some way?
- Do your research subjects adopt a range of social identities?
- How do people come to be at this site?

Week 12: Reflexivity

How does your presence shape the observations you make? How does your social identity interact with those of your research subjects? The reason for asking these questions is not to

highlight that the researcher “contaminates” the field site. It’s to remind us, rather, that the researcher’s presence may influence the kinds of situations and phenomena that she observes. This doesn’t invalidate the research, but it does shape the kinds of things one can learn. A good ethnographer is aware of this.

Reading:

Desmond, Matthew. 2007. “Appendix: Between Native and Alien.” Pp. 283-307 in *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Workshop #7: Do you relate to your research subjects as a native or an alien? Describe your relationship and how it has changed over the course of your research. How has your own social location and social identity interacted with that of the people you are doing research among? Does this affect the situations you encounter and the data you collect?

Week 13: Linking micro to macro.

How is your field site or topic of research influenced by larger social structures (e.g., public policy, stratification by race or class, historical events or trajectories)? Does your research shed any light on how those macrostructures are produced or reproduced?

Reading:

Rios, Victor. 2011. “The Coupling of Criminal Justice and Community Institutions.” Pp. 74-94 in *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Additional example:

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. “The Space Wars: Competing Legalities.” Pp. 231-52 in *Sidewalk*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Workshop #8: Consider how the local context you’re observing is shaped by factors that transcend that context. “Try on” an analysis and see what evidence you have to support that analysis.

Week 14: Using Theory

Ethnographers often use academic theories and concepts to make sense of their data, as Kanter does when using Weber’s discussion of bureaucracy to illuminate what she found in her research at a large corporation. We will consider ways you might use sociological theory as you analyze your own data.

Reading:

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1977. "Secretaries." Pp. 69-103 in *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books (especially 69-89).

Additional examples:

MacLeod, Jay. 1987. "Leveled Aspirations: Social Reproduction Takes Its Toll." Pp. 113-136 in *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Mears, Ashley. 2015. "Girls as Elite Distinction: The Appropriation of Bodily Capital." *Poetics* 53:22-37.

Walker, Gregory Wayne. 2006. "Disciplining Protest Masculinity." *Men and Masculinities* 9(1):5-22.

Workshop #9:

Choose a theory or a concept from an academic text and explain how it can clarify or explain your findings.

Week 15: Class presentations

Final paper due one week after classes end.