SOC 118a: Observing the Social World: Doing Qualitative Sociology
Fall 2018

Mondays and Wednesdays, 2-3:30pm
Shiffman Humanities Center, Room 122

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 1:30-3pm, 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 Ventkatesh (2008: 3)

Course Description and Learning Goals:

This course will introduce you to the basic tools and concepts of qualitative social research. We begin by exploring how to define research topics and research questions, which includes engaging with the academic literature, considering our own identities, attending to research ethics and guidelines. We then focus primarily on two qualitative research methods used regularly by sociologists – participant observation and interviews – and how they can be used in various study designs. We conclude by learning how to code data, develop concepts, and write up qualitative research findings.

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 skills in participant observation and interviewing by using each method to investigate a topic or question of their choice.
4. Learn how to do qualitative data analysis, through coding, memo-writing, and reflection, and report on their results.
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 learning the literature, doing participant observation, conducting interviews focused on a topic that you select. The second and third 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 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 weeks 1-2), ethical (we will discuss this during weeks 3-5) 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, do an IRB protocol, gather and analyze data, and write up your findings. You will learn how to do a research project, however, and I will encourage you to continue with your research in subsequent semesters through independent studies, summer projects, and senior theses. For helpful listings of funding available to support your research projects, see: https://www.brandeis.edu/acserv/fellowships/fellowshipopps/urf.html & http://www.brandeis.edu/sociology/undergraduate/funding.html

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. One or two absences will not affect your grade, but a pattern of missing classes will affect your grade (both directly and, likely, indirectly).

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.

   a. 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).
b. 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.** I will respond to email within 48 hours during the week or following the weekend. If I can’t answer your question in a sentence or two, I 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, I 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 assignment asks you to engage with the literature on your topic and reflect on its implications for your work. The next two assignments ask you to gather data and to reflect on your experience substantively and methodologically in a short (5 page) paper. The last assignment asks you to analyze the data you have collected in a 6-8 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. **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 3.
• The second assignment is due on October 24.
• The third assignment is due on November 14.
• The fourth assignment is due on December 10.

7. Papers are due at the beginning of the classes listed above. **I will not accept papers by email.** Papers turned in to me after 2pm 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.

8. **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     74-76   C  
   90-93   A-    70-73   C-  
   87-89   B+    67-69   D+  
   84-86   B     64-66   D   
   80-83   B-    60-63   D-  
   77-79   C+    <60    F  

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.

**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](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/).

**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
Overview of the course, getting to know each other

August 29
• No assigned reading or writing

Week 2 – Choosing a Topic
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 3 – No Class, Labor Day

September 5

September 6 – Brandeis Monday

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


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 3-5 – Engaging the Literature, Considering Ethics

**September 10** – *No Class, Rosh HaShanah*

**September 12** – *Engaging the Literature, Part 1*

*Joining an academic “conversation,” understanding how research literatures evolve, different kinds of reviews and search strategies*

**Guest: Marie Kramer, Research Librarian, Brandeis University**

**NOTE:** We are asking you to read these articles for form, not for content. Please review the guiding questions *before* you begin reading!


**Writing:** Bring your answers to the guiding questions to class. I will not ask you to turn these in, so they do not have to be typed. However, you will need to be able to share your answers with your classmates.

**September 17** – *Considering Ethical Issues, Part 1*

*History of research ethics, codes of ethics, institutional review panels.*

**Guests: Marissa Hamilton and Lara Kuhn, Human Research Protection Program**

- “An In-Depth Look at the IRB”
- “An In-Depth Look at Informed Consent”
- Complete CITI training online: [https://www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/training.html](https://www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/training.html)

**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 19** – *No Class, Yom Kippur*
**September 24** – *No Class, Sukkot*
September 25 – Brandeis Monday – Engaging the Literature, Part 2
Evaluating sources, advanced search strategies, structuring a review

Guest: Maric Kramer, Research Librarian, Brandeis University


Writing: Please bring to class today the “matrix” worksheet with summaries of 2-3 peer reviewed sociological articles related to your topic. This means that before class today, you will need to a) do a search on your topic; b) read 2-3 articles; c) complete a worksheet for each. We will work with your matrices in class, and this will help you complete your first paper.

**Please bring a laptop to class today. You can borrow one from the library!**

September 26 – Considering Ethics, Part 2
Facing tradeoffs in the field, informant integrity and respect, responding to ethical issues


II. Participant Observation

Week 6&7 – Field Work and Field Notes
Selecting a research site / research problem, getting in and building rapport, questions of objectivity and subjectivity, relations between researcher and researched; Writing different kinds of fieldnotes, organizing them, creating scenes, starting to think about analysis.

October 1 – No Class, Shemini Atzeret

October 3

Writing: **Assignment 1 Due**
October 8


October 10

**Guest: Wendy Cadge, Professor of Sociology and Chair, WGS, Brandeis University**


**Week 8 – Reflexivity and Ethnographic Analysis**

*Considering authority and power re: race, class, gender, age, insider v. outsider dilemmas, collaborative ethnographies, writing ethnography.*

October 15


**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 17


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

Week 9 -- Interviews as Qualitative Data
Identifying and contacting informants, sampling issues, taping and transcribing interviews, structured and unstructured interviews, issues of social position.

October 22

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

October 24

Writing: **Assignment 2 due**

Week 10 -- 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 29

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 31
Week 11 – Interpreting Interview Data
Analyzing interview data, coding and the development of analysis, completing your second assignment

November 5

November 7
- 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”) 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 3). Please be prepared with any questions you are encountering as you write your third paper.

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, doing analysis!

November 12

November 14

Writing: **Assignment 3 due**

November 19
- No reading! Time to get caught-up!

Writing: Please bring to class a list of at least ten codes you might use to code/analyze the data.
Week 14 – Concepts
Concepts, in theory and practice, and more on writing, crafting reports, writing as a process, audience

November 26

November 28
Choose one of the following:


Week 15&16 – Writing Sociology, Engaging with Publics
The uses for sociological research, qualitative research as a public endeavor, the responsibilities that accompany qualitative research, completing assignment 4 and the course.

December 3
- Thomson, Pat and Barbara Kamler. 2012. Writing for Peer Reviewed Journals: Strategies for Getting Published. Abingdon: Routledge. (c. 3 “What's the Contribution?”)

December 5
Choose one of the following pairs of reading:

On Race and Education
On Prisoner Re-Entry

On Abortion (Criminalization) in El Salvador

December 10 – Last day of class
- Short presentations and holiday potluck!

Writing: **Assignment 4 due**