

## Sociology 18a. Observing the Social World: Doing Qualitative Sociology

### Contact Details

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### Meeting Times/Locations

#### Classes

Wednesdays, 9:05-11:55am, Lown 103

#### Office Hours

Thursdays, 9-10a and by appointment, Pearlman 109

### Course Description

*“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 shakedown; 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)

This course will introduce you to the basic tools and concepts of qualitative social research. We begin by exploring how to choose and develop 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 learn how to code data, develop concepts, and write up qualitative research findings. We conclude by considering next steps for your projects.

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 eating in the dining hall or something more complex such as gender and sports, religious identities and observances, or political organizing on campus. Your topic must be feasible, ethical, 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. [Undergraduate Research and Creative Collaboration](#)

[Office](#) is a key partner for you moving forward and has funding available to support you while you do your research.

### **Learning Goals**

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.

### **Credit Hours**

Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of nine hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for the exams, etc

### **Course Requirements**

#### **Attendance**

**Attendance** in-person 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 absence will not affect your grade, but a pattern of missing classes will affect your grade (both directly and, likely, indirectly). Please note that instruction begins on the first day of class; students are responsible for learning material and completing assignments from the beginning of the course. Students who do not attend the first two class sessions run the risk of not being able to succeed with subsequent assignments.

#### **Participation**

**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 through the shared google doc you sent up for you and me. 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 provide written feedback to you in a single google doc where you will complete all of these exercises that we will share for the semester.

#### **Reading**

**Reading** is required. All course readings must be done each week as indicated on the syllabus. The following books are available in the university bookstore and on reserve at the library.

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)

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Required)

All other required course readings are available via LATTE.

### **Classroom Environment**

Learning how to do research is an exciting, fun, and sometimes challenging experience. Together, we will co-construct a classroom environment that is a creative and collaborative space, in which we 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. Towards these ends, we will collaboratively generate guidelines for class discussion, to ensure the confidentiality of research subjects, as well as to support your learning.

### **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 and consider its implications for your next step(s). Each of these four assignments is worth 20% of your final grade. Additional information about each assignment will be distributed. 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 and consider its implications for your next step(s). 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 4

The second assignment is due on October 25

The third assignment is due on November 8

The fourth assignment is due on December 13

Papers are due at the beginning of the classes listed above through Latte. 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.

### **Final Grades**

**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

### **Accommodations**

Brandeis seeks to create a learning environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all students, and I want to support you in your learning. If you think you may require disability accommodations, you will need to work with Student Accessibility Support (SAS) (781-736-3470, [access@brandeis.edu](mailto:access@brandeis.edu)). You can find helpful student FAQs and other resources on the [SAS website](#), including guidance on how to know whether you might be eligible for support from SAS. If you already have an accommodation letter from SAS, please provide me with a copy as soon as you can so that I can ensure effective implementation of accommodations for this class.

### **Academic Integrity**

Every member of the University community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. A student shall not submit work that is falsified or is not the result of the student's own effort. Infringement of academic integrity by a student subjects that student to serious penalties, which may include failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension from the University or other sanctions. Please consult [Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities](#) for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work via TurnItIn.com or similar software to verify originality. A student who is in doubt regarding standards of academic integrity as they apply to a specific course or assignment should consult the faculty member responsible for that course or assignment before submitting the work. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Department of Student Rights and Community Standards. Citation and research assistance can be found at [Brandeis Library Guides - Citing Sources](#). My policy is to give a "0" for any assignment that contains plagiarized materials.

### **Course Outline**

#### **I. Getting Started**

September 6. Welcome.

- No assigned reading or writing. Please start a single google doc for this class and share it with me. Please name is Soc18YourLastName. Complete weekly writing exercises in this google doc and share it with me each time you complete an assignment so we can be in conversation back and forth through the semester.
- Please put two or three possible topics for your research this semester in your google doc and a few questions you could ask about each topic.
- If you would like a quick refresher on sociology as a discipline, skim Evan Willis. 1996. *The Sociological Quest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press which is on reserve in the library.
- *Key questions for class: What is sociological research? What is data? How do sociologists evaluate data? What research topic and / or question might you explore in this course?*

September 13. Starting Where You Are, Developing Vocabulary

- Erikson, Kai. 1997. "Prologue: Sociology as a Perspective," in Kai Erikson Ed. *Sociological Visions*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers (p. 3-10).
- 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)
- Mears, Ashley. 2011. *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*. University of California Press. (c. 1 Entry and Appendix: The Precarious Labor of Ethnography)
- Before class, please add to your google doc a one paragraph summary of the topic you would like to investigate this semester and a list of questions you have about the topic. Plan to settle on your topic and at least a few possible research questions by today.

Recommended, Not Required

- Roberts, Kessa J., Pavlakis, Alexandra, and Meredith Richards. 2021. "It's More Complicated Than It Seems: Virtual Qualitative Research in the COVID-19 Era." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 20:1-13.
- Moore, Mignon. 2018. "Challenges, Triumphs, and Praxis: Collecting Qualitative Data on Less Visible and Marginalized Populations." In Schilt, Kristen, Tey Meadows and D'Lane Compton Eds. *Other, Please Specify: Queer Methods in Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 168-184.
- *Key questions for class: What is the difference between a research topic and a research question? What is the difference between your epistemology and your methodology? Why do people do research? How to qualitative and quantitative methods compare? What is Mear's research topic and research? Is Mear's approach more idiographic or nomothetic? What is a variable? As you start to think about research topics and question for your own project, how do the approaches in Lofland & Lofland's help if at all?*

## II. Research Design and Situating Questions in Existing Literatures

September 20. Engaging Literatures and Doing Article X-Rays

Guest: Maric Kramer, Research Librarian, Brandeis University

- Becker, Howard. 2007. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c. 8 Terrorized by the Literature)
- Practical Suggestions:
  - <https://guides.library.brandeis.edu/soclitreviews>

- <https://guides.library.brandeis.edu/sociology>
- How to read an academic article – handout from ICPSR in Latte.
- Nicole Dezrea Jenkins. 2019. “Contested Identities: African Diaspora and Identity Making in a Hair Braiding Salon.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 48(6): 1-30. Please cut and paste the text in the Source Matrix Worksheet in Latte into the google doc you share with me and complete the matrix based on this article before class.
- *Key questions for class: What is a literature review? Why conduct one? How do researchers find and evaluate sources? What are basic and advanced search strategies? How do you structure a literature review? Who can help when you are stuck?*
- Assignment 1 Distributed, due October 4

#### September 27. Conceptualization, Operationalization, Measurement

- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (c. 7 Asking Questions)
- Amy Schalet. 2011. *Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. (c1. Raging Hormones, Regulated Love and Methodological Appendix)
- Please add to your google doc the Source Matrix Worksheet in Latte with summaries of 2-3 peer reviewed *sociological* articles related to your topic and share your google doc with me for comment. Before you share your google doc, you will need to a) do a search on your topic; b) read 2-3 articles; c) complete the matrix for each article. I will comment in your google docs to help you with your first paper.
- *Key questions for class: What is a variable? Unit of analysis? Errors in logic? How do you understand causality and what are the criteria for causality?*

#### October 4. Research Ethics and Wrap up on Research Design

Guest: Lara Kuhn, Director of Research Integrity and Compliance, Office of Research Administration, Brandeis University

- Complete CITI training online and add a screen shoot your certificate to our shared google doc. This will take several hours – do not leave it until the last minute!
- Martin Tolich. 2004. “Internal confidentiality: When confidentiality assurances fail relational informants.” *Qualitative Sociology*. 27(1): 101-106.
- *Key questions for class: History of research ethics, codes of ethics, institutional review panels, informed consent, informant integrity and respect, responding to ethical issues, practical steps of writing an IRB and moving through the process.*
- Assignment 1 due
- Assignment 2 distributed

### III. Participant Observation and Interviewing

#### October 11. Participant Observation

- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.. (c. 1 Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research, c. 2 In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes, c.3 Writing Up Fieldnotes I: From Field to Desk)

- *Key questions for class: 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 18. Reflexivity and Ethnographic Analysis

- Please add to your google doc at least three pages of fieldnotes you have taken for assignment 2 and share the doc with me. Please also print and bring two copies of these fieldnotes with you to class. Be prepared to talk about any challenges you are having with assignment 2.
- Mary Pattillo-McCoy and Rueben Buford May. 2000. "Do You See What I See? Examining a Collaborative Ethnography." *Qualitative Inquiry*. 6:1 (65-87)
- *Key questions for class: Considering authority and power re: race, class, gender, age, insider v. outsider dilemmas, collaborative ethnographies, writing ethnography.*

#### October 25. Interviewing Basics

- 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)
- *Key questions for class: Identifying and contacting informants, sampling issues, recording and transcribing interviews, structured and unstructured interviews, issues of social position.*
- Assignment 2 due
- Assignment 3 distributed.

#### November 1. Interview Guides

- Please draft a rough outline of the interview guide you will use for your interviews for assignment 3, put it in your google doc, and reshare it with me. Also please bring two copies of your draft interview guide to class. For an example of an interview guide please see in Latte: Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press (Methodological Appendix B)
- Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c.4 Interviewing, c. 5 Issues in Interviewing)
- Joseph Hermanowicz. 2002. "The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed." *Qualitative Sociology*. 25(4): 479-499 (skim)
- *Key questions for class: Conducting interviews, working with interview guides, writing an interview, using probes and following up, responding to common challenges in interviews.*

### **IV. Data Analysis and Writing**

#### November 8. Organizing and Analyzing Data

- Please bring to class two copies of 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.

- Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 6 Analysis of Data)  
OR
- Jon Lofland and Lyn Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (c. 8 Arousing Interest, c. 10 Writing Analysis)  
OR
- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c.6 Processing Fieldnotes” Coding and Memoing)
- *Key questions for class: Analyzing interview data, coding and the development of analysis, Types of coding, memoing, “tacking” between theory and data, doing analysis, completing your third assignment*
- Assignment 3 Due

November 15. Coding

Guest: Margarita Corral, Data Analyst Specialist (10:30a)

- 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)
- Blake Poland and Ann Pederson. 1998. “Reading Between the Lines: Interpreting Silences in Qualitative Research.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 4(2): 293-313.
- *Key questions for class: Continued conversation of the themes from last week*

November 22. No class, Break

December 6. Writing and Wrapping Up

- Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (c. 7 Writing the Report)  
OR
- Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (c.7 “Writing An Ethnography”)
- *Key questions: Concepts, in theory and practice, and more on writing, crafting reports, writing as a process, audience, uses of sociological research, qualitative research as a public endeavor, the responsibilities that accompany qualitative research, completing assignment 4 and the course.*

*Assignment 4 Due to through Latte by NOON on December 13*