

SOCIOLOGY 104

FIELD RESEARCH METHODS

Spring 2013

Wed, 10:00a-12:50p, SSB 101

Prof. Tom Medvetz

Office hours: Tue, 11:30a-12:30p & Wed, 5-6p; and by appointment (office: 485 SSB)

Email: tmedvetz@ucsd.edu (please include the phrase "Soc 104" in the subject line)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Field research is something you have to learn by doing, so most of this class will revolve around a field research project that you'll design and carry out yourself. Your projects will become the "grist for our mill" in at least two senses. First, our discussions will touch on every aspect of their design and implementation—from the preliminary challenge of gaining access to an unfamiliar research site to the tasks of distilling and evaluating evidence and developing a sociological argument from your work. Second, the inevitable differences among your projects will ensure that our discussions will vary widely in subject matter. We'll talk about everything from the most concrete aspects of field research to seemingly loftier issues related to epistemology and the linkage between theory and data.

To begin with, you'll have to choose one of three project types:

- **Option 1: Participant observation study**

The basic requirement of this project is to carry out at least 15 hours of ethnographic fieldwork (i.e. participant observation) at a research site of your choosing. Your ethnographic research must begin by Week 3 of the quarter and continue through Week 9. (I would urge you to begin earlier.) During the quarter, you must do at least one hour per week of field observation and make at least five visits to your field site. See below for further rules, restrictions, and expectations.

- **Option 2: Interview study**

The basic requirement is to conduct at least 7 in-depth interviews of 45+ minutes each. You can pace yourself as you like, but I would advise you to aim to do at least one interview per week, starting in week 3. Prior to doing any interviews, you will need to provide a specific rationale guiding your choice of interviewees. In other words, there must be a coherent theoretical question or purpose guiding your project. You must also, with the permission of your interviewees, record at least four of the seven interviews.

- **Option 3: Hybrid study**

This approach combines elements of the first two types. If you choose to do this type of study, you must conduct at least 10 hours of participant observation and 4 in-depth interviews in the manner described above.

Your choice of a research site and/or interviewees is very important, so you'll need to begin thinking about this immediately. Furthermore, your early decisions will strongly shape your later experiences, so please don't decide lightly. As we'll discuss, you'll need to articulate a clear, coherent research question and design a study that allows you to gather data that speak to this question.

How should you begin? I'd advise you to start by reflecting informally about your own interests—what you'd like to learn about. Very soon, though, you'll have to formalize your research question

and methodological design. As the course goes on, we'll talk extensively about what constitutes a good research question and how you can design a study that allows you to address it.

MORE SPECIFIC POLICIES

Attendance in the seminar is mandatory. Because each one of our meetings is equivalent to a week of classes (and because our time is very limited), we'll need to get rolling immediately. In particular, we have to get the class roster finalized as soon as possible. The class is capped strictly at 25 students—and as I write this there are 12 additional people on the waiting list. If you're enrolled in the class but still "on the fence" about taking it, please decide as soon as possible.

On the other hand, if you're on the waitlist and (even after reading this syllabus) still want to take this class, you will have to continue attending until you're admitted. Of course, you'll be doing so at your own risk. There's no guarantee that a slot will open up. Next week, we'll get everyone signed up for the first set of presentations (see below for more details) through a semi-random process. If you're on the waitlist and you gain access to the class sometime after next week's meeting, you'll inherit the presentation slot of the person who dropped the class ahead of you.

Your choice of a research topic

One aim of this course is to get you to venture somewhat outside of your "comfort zone" and into a new social setting. With this goal in mind, here are a few rules regarding potential field sites and interviewees.

For those doing participant observation:

- You may not choose an ethnographic site in which you are already employed or have ever been employed in the past.
- You cannot choose as a research site a place that you frequent in your everyday life or have visited regularly in the past. (For example, you can't carry out research in your fitness center, your fraternity, or your church.)
- Your research site should not be on the UCSD campus. I'm willing to make *a few* exceptions to this rule, but if you'd like an exemption, the burden is on you to offer a clear rationale as to why your proposed research site is still in keeping with the spirit of the rule.

For those doing interviews:

- Your interview subjects cannot be friends, family members, acquaintances, co-workers, or anyone with whom you already have routine interactions. You may use friends, family members, etc. for *establishing* contacts, but your acquaintances cannot be the interviewees.

NOTE: Despite my emphasis on venturing outside of your comfort zone, please don't choose a topic or research site that is likely to put yourself in harm's way, either physically or mentally. If at any point during your research, you do find yourself concerned about your own safety or wellbeing, deal first with those concerns and then we can then discuss options for moving forward with the class.

GRADING & ASSIGNMENTS

Participation: attendance (10%) + discussion & engagement (10%)

Your participation grade has two parts: attendance (10%) and classroom participation (10%). I'll take attendance at the start of every session. The attendance portion of your grade is 10%, and here's how I'll calculate the final score:

10%	Zero absences or one excused absence (w/ a doctor's note or some other official documentation)
5%	One unexcused absence or two excused absences
0%	Two absences, of which at least one is unexcused, or more than two absences of any kind

If you believe there is any possibility that you could miss three or more of the nine remaining sessions (i.e. 33% of this course), then I'd strongly advise you to take the class during a different quarter.

In all likelihood, you'll end up learning as much from discussing your peers' research projects as you'll learn from your own. It's therefore crucial that we establish an environment where mutually supportive, intellectually vibrant discussions are possible, and where everyone can give and take feedback comfortably. With this goal in mind, everyone will need to participate. Rudeness or dismissiveness toward other people won't be tolerated. On the other hand, we're here to build our knowledge, so constructive criticism is often the most valuable kind of feedback.

Initial research proposal (5%)

By Friday of Week 2, everyone must send me a brief (i.e. two to three paragraph) description of his or her research question, proposed field site, and/or interview sample. When you write this, try to be as specific as possible: What are you studying and why? What sociological question do you want to answer? How will the evidence you gather from your research (i.e. either your direct observation of the field site or the responses of your interviewees) help you answer the question? Think carefully about the linkage between the two. Oftentimes, people get tripped up on this step. In other words, they ask a question that is either fundamentally unanswerable or that can't possibly be answered using the empirical data they propose to gather. So think carefully about the relationship between your question and the evidence you intend to gather in terms of a match.

In the memo, you might also want to write about how you would define the empirical boundary of your study. In other words, do not concentrate simply on what is included in your proposed research, but also about what falls outside of its purview. The ability to specify the limits of your study—what's in and what's out—is very important.

A word of warning: I won't be able to provide extensive feedback on this proposal, but I will tell you if I think you're going in a completely wrong direction. This memo will count for 5% of your overall grade and can be submitted to me via email by Friday, April 12.

First presentation & write-up (15%)

During Weeks 3 and 4, everyone in the class will give a brief presentation describing his or her research project (~5 minutes from you followed by a 5 minute Q&A discussion). I'll give more details about this part of the class next week. But broadly speaking, the goal will be to define the boundaries and purposes of your study and move toward formulating a clear research question. You will then need to hand in a 1-2 page write-up of your presentation during the class session after you do it. The write-up can be a refined or improved version of the emailed proposal from Week 2. Together, the first presentation and write-up constitute 15% of your overall grade.

Second presentation + fieldnote or interview transcript (20% + 10%)

During Weeks 6–9 of the quarter, everyone will give a longer, more formal presentation (20 minutes total: 15 minutes of discussion, plus a 5 minute Q&A period). In contrast to the first presentation, the emphasis here will be on what you’ve learned from your research. However, one overarching theme of the class will be that empirical findings and methodological designs can never be separated fully, so your second presentation will inevitably touch on your methods.

Along with the second presentation, you’ll need to hand in an ethnographic fieldnote (length: TBD) or one interview transcript. The presentation will count for 20% of your overall grade and the field note or transcript will count for 10%.

Final paper (30%)

Last but not least, everyone is responsible for a final paper in the form of a research report summarizing your project. The paper will be split between a discussion of your empirical findings (that is, what you have concluded from your study based on the evidence you gathered) and the methodological lessons you took from the project. I’ll discuss my expectations for the paper in further detail as we proceed.

To summarize:

Participation	
Attendance	10%
Class discussion	10%
Research topic proposal	5%
First presentation & write-up	15%
Second presentation	20%
Interview transcript or fieldnote	10%
Paper	30%

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: Intro
WEEK 2: Topic session: Some nuts and bolts of field research

Required readings:

Joseph C. Hermanowicz. 2002. “The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed.” *Qualitative Sociology* 25(4): 479-499.

William F. Whyte. 1943. “Appendix” to *Streetcorner Society*, p. 279-357.

****PROJECT PROPOSAL DUE ON FRIDAY, 12 APRIL (by email)****

WEEK 3: Presentations (# 1)
WEEK 4: Presentations (# 1)

WEEK 5: Topic session: Theory and data meet and mesh

Required readings:

David Wellman. 1994. "Constituting Ethnographic Authority: The Work Process of Field Research: An Ethnographic Account." *Cultural Studies* 8(3): 569-584.

Loic Wacquant. 2003. "Ethnografeast: A Progress Report on the Practice and Promise of Ethnography." *Ethnography* 4(1): 1-10.

Robert K. Merton and Patricia L. Kendall. 1946. "The Focused Interview." *American Journal of Sociology* 51(6): 541-557.

Mark Benney and Everett C. Hughes. 1956. "Of Sociology and the Interview: Editorial Preface." *American Journal of Sociology* 62(2): 137-142.

WEEK 6: Presentations (#2)
WEEK 7: Presentations (#2)
WEEK 8: Presentations (#2)
WEEK 9: Presentations (#2)
WEEK 10: Summing up and possibly catching up

Final papers due during finals week, as per UCSD rules—but owing to the near impossibility of grading so many papers before final grades must be handed in, I'll look with special favor on those of you who can submit your papers during week 10.

All required readings will be made available on TED or via a Dropbox link.