

SOCI 410 Urban Ethnography
Fall 2019

Monday: 2:35-5:25pm
Leacock Building, room 721

Instructor: Dr. Jan Doering
Email: jan.doering@mcgill.ca
Office hours: Tuesdays, 12-1pm, Leacock Building, room 826
Please sign up online: <https://calendly.com/jandoering>

Course Description

Ethnography aims to produce portraits of social life as it appears to specific individuals, groups, and communities. These portraits serve a variety of purposes. Readers can use them to assess whether assumptions contained within sociological theories are consistent with how the people in question (those whose behavior “is theorized”) actually feel, think, and act. Readers can also draw on ethnographic findings to create new theories that more correctly incorporate individual perspectives. For these and other reasons, ethnographers cherish validity: they seek to produce a close match between people’s life-worlds and the end result of ethnography, the ethnographic text.

At the same time, there is little agreement among sociologists or even ethnographers themselves about how to assess the validity of ethnographic work. Criteria of validity are also rarely enforced. This is troubling, because sociology as a whole has become much more robustly scientific over the last three decades or so.

In this course, we will discuss the procedures and goals of ethnography, the status of ethnography as a scientific method, recent debates and controversies, and consider criteria that distinguish good from bad work. We will do so specifically by reading and discussing scholarship from the tradition of urban ethnography in the United States, which focuses heavily on race, class, and poverty.

Learning Goals

- To develop “qualitative literacy,” the ability to critically assess qualitative data and the inferences one can draw from them. Qualitative literacy is an important skill for all social scientists but also for informed citizens, because many “texts” (including film, speeches, etc.) from the realms of art, journalism, and politics rely on the quasi-ethnographic analysis of individual cases to convey a larger message.
- To learn the fundamental aspects of sociology’s ethnographic tradition, including the moral, practical, and theoretical challenges of learning about human behavior and perception.
- To critically assess foundational theories of urban poverty and related phenomena.

Readings

Most readings are contained in the required coursepack for this class. Occasionally, I will ask you to read additional material, which could not be included in the coursepack due to copyright restrictions. This additional material is available to you through eBooks or the course reserve system at the McGill library. While you do not have to buy any books for this course, you may find it helpful to own *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, by Robert Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw (University of Chicago Press, second edition). Depending on your final paper topic, you may also have to purchase one or more additional books. Regardless of how you do the readings, you must have the readings accessible in class, because we will actively work with them.

Assignments and Grading

First and foremost, your performance in this course hinges on closely reading the assigned material. Your overall grade will comprise the following components: attendance, reading responses, in-class participation, discussion leadership and final paper presentation, and a final paper.

Attendance: 5%

- You are allowed to miss one session during the semester. It does not matter to me why you miss it, and there is no need to email me to explain your absence or to supply medical notes or similar documentation. Obviously, it will be your responsibility to catch up with the course material. In that case, ask a friend to share their notes.
- If you have to miss more than one session, you have to justify your absence with appropriate documentation in order to avoid a reduced participation grade. I may also ask you to take on an additional task (such as writing an additional reading response) to compensate for your absence.
- If you miss a second session without acceptably justifying and compensating for your absence, you will receive an attendance grade of 2.5%. If you miss a third session without acceptably justifying and compensating for your absence, you will receive an attendance grade of 0%.

Reading responses: 10%

- During the semester, you must submit three reading responses, each comprising approximately 800 words. You can pick any session for submitting your responses. Note that there will be no readings for the final (13th) session so you have to complete the three responses by the 12th session. Post your response on MyCourses -> discussions at least 24 hours before class (i.e., Sunday, 2:30pm). If you post your response later, I will not have enough time to read your response and I will therefore not count this response towards your grade.
- A good reading response is not a summary but an analysis. It may, for example, highlight contradictions between different pieces of scholarship, contradictions within one specific text, pose pertinent questions that remain unanswered, or identify methodological problems.

- I will grade reading responses as unacceptable (0%), acceptable (1.1%), good (2.2%), or excellent (3.3%). Note that an excellent reading response really has to be excellent to receive that grade.

In-class participation: 15%

The best-case-scenario for a seminar is that we all thrive through our mutual company. My goal is to improve your methodological knowledge and your overall grasp of sociology. This should also be your goal in relation to your fellow students. I am asking you to do everything in your power to make this goal attainable. In particular, you should:

- Maintain your focus, engagement, and motivation. Ask questions and volunteer your knowledge. Talk when you have something to say that might advance the discussion. On the other hand, especially if you are an extroverted person, it is good to consider whether the discussion currently needs your intervention or not. If it does not, it might be better to listen. In other words, more isn't always better.
- Be constructive. In particular, this means that you should always engage the strongest-possible interpretation of the point (whether made by in class or by an author in writing) that is being presented to you. That is, rather than looking for easy ways to dismiss it, try to imagine the best version of the argument that could be made. If you want to familiarize yourself with the downsides of engaging weakest-possible interpretations, watch half an hour of Fox News or MSNBC.
- I will use the following rubric in assessing your in-class participation: level of engagement and participation, analytic quality of contributions, level of familiarity with the readings, and value of the contributions to the overall discussion (this includes etiquette and your impact on class morale). If you want feedback on your in-class participation during the course, I can provide it after week 7.

Discussion leadership and final paper presentation: 5%

Between weeks 5 and 12, you should serve as a discussion leader during one class session together with 1-2 other students. For this session, you should do the readings particularly carefully and come to class with a combined list of questions and text passages you think we should discuss. Prepare together with your group members. Text passages you select may include those that reveal a key finding, unclear but seemingly important passages, passages that reveal a methodological challenge or limitation, passages that contain questionable interpretations, etc. I can talk with you about the upcoming session and your discussion leadership preparation on the Friday before class. If you want to do this, please let me know before or after class during the prior class session.

Furthermore, in week 13, each student should briefly present their final paper topic and discuss their project with the other students. (I describe options for selecting final paper topics below.) The purpose of this exercise is to a) make sure that students select and prepare in due time a final paper topic that is both feasible and interesting, and b) to solicit input into what this paper might comprise and incorporate.

I will grade both your discussion leadership and your final paper presentation on a pass/fail basis. To receive a “pass,” you must show up, reveal (through your participation) that you have prepared, and advance the class discussion.

Final paper: 65%

Final papers can come in wide range of forms: a comparison of findings about a particular issue (e.g., social status among low-income workers or patterns in drug consumption) that several ethnographic studies present; a comparison of how different ethnographic studies depict life-worlds of the same kind (e.g., poor Latino neighborhoods, criminal gangs, or low-wage retail workplaces); an analysis of how ethnographic studies deal with a particular methodological problem (e.g., assessing the truth of verbal claims their respondents make, or how to recruit respondents); an in-depth critique of one specific ethnographic work; etc. Any good paper must use the methodological and analytical tools you learn in this class.

For the final paper, I expect you to do at least some additional reading beyond the assigned course material. For example, you may choose to critique one ethnography in detail. In that case, you should read and write about that book as a whole. If you compare two ethnographies, you should read the relevant parts of both of those books. Certain topics might require you to read articles or book chapters that expand your background knowledge. The amount and type of those additional readings depends on your final paper topic. I will be able to help you find additional scholarship that you might need, but it will ultimately be your responsibility to identify and procure the necessary readings. This also means that you will need enough time to borrow the books from the library or to buy them. Consider that books may be checked out from the library when you need them!

As part of your final paper grade, I will consider how ambitious your project is. For example, if you write about a book we discussed in class, I hope to find a very strong and comprehensive analysis in your paper. On the other hand, you might choose to compare several ethnographies that we did not discuss in class at all. Under these circumstances, I will expect a somewhat lower level of perfection, because you are doing extra work for your final paper.

Your final paper should comprise approximately 10 pages of text (2,500-3,000 words), not counting the bibliography, front page, etc. Double-space your text and use 12-point font and regular page margins. Additionally, the paper must include a proper bibliography that follows ASA citation style. I will share with you a document that describes this style. The paper itself should comprise indirect and direct in-text citations, as appropriate. Use direct citations to back up specific claims that you are making, but use them sparingly—that is, without cluttering the text by using up more space than necessary.

Policies

- Late assignments: Avoid late assignments. Late reading responses will not count towards your grade at all. Late final papers will incur a penalty of one letter grade per 24-hour period. For instance, an A- will turn into a B- if it is submitted late. If it is submitted more than 24 hours late, it will turn into a C.
- Inclusive learning environment: As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the [Office for Students with Disabilities](#), 514-398-6009.
- Academic integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information). If you are caught engaging in fraudulent activity, you may fail the assignment in question or the entire course, and I may report you to the Dean of Students.
- Language: In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.
- Extra credit policy: I never give extra credit as a matter of principle. Please don't ask for it.
- Course communication: You have to regularly check your email and read course-related email communication. Before emailing me, please consult the syllabus for relevant information. If the answer to your question is in the syllabus, I reserve the right to ignore your email.

Schedule

Week 1. Labor Day. No class.

Week 2. Session 1: Course overview and introductions.

Week 3. Session 2: The Ballad of Alice Goffman.

- Goffman, Alice. 2009. "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto." *American Sociological Review* 74(3):339–57.
- Parry, Marc. 2015. "Conflict Over Sociologist's Narrative Puts Spotlight on Ethnography." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved June 19, 2019 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Conflict-Over-Sociologists/230883>).
- Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. 2016. "The Trials of Alice Goffman." *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved June 19, 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/magazine/the-trials-of-alice-goffman.html>).

Week 4. Session 3: What is qualitative and ethnographic research (1): Theoretical foundations.

- Weber, Max. 1978 [1922]. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Selection from Chapter 1 (“Basic Sociological Terms”), pp.3-9.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Selection from Chapter 1, “The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism,” pp.1-21.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1 (“Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research”), pp.1-20. Not in coursepack. On reserve at the McLennan Library.
- Becker, Howard S. 1993. “How I Learned What a Crock Was.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22(1):28–35.

Week 5. Session 4: What is qualitative and ethnographic research (2): Practical considerations.

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 2-3 (“In the field” and “Writing fieldnotes”), pp.21-87. Not in coursepack. On reserve at the McLennan Library.
- Goffman, Alice. 2014. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Appendix (“A Methodological Note”), pp.213-263.
- Fine, Gary A. 1993. “Ten Lies of Ethnography. Moral Dilemmas of Field Research.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22(3):267–94.

Week 6. Session 5: Sexuality and parenthood.

- Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Introduction and chapters 1 and 2 (“Before we had a baby...” and “When I got pregnant”), pp.1-70. Only chapter 1 is in the coursepack. Ebook available through McGill Library website.
- Harding, David J. 2010. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 6 (“Cultural Heterogeneity, Romantic Relationships, and Sexual Behavior”), pp.162-203.

Week 7. Session 6: How should we evaluate qualitative and ethnographic research?

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 5 (“Pursuing members’ meanings”), 129-169. Not in coursepack. On reserve at the McLennan Library.
- Lubet, Steven. 2018. *Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Introduction, chapter 1 (“Testimony”), chapter 4 (“Credulity”), chapter 5 (“Selectivity”), conclusion (“Toward Evidence-

Based Ethnography), pp.1-7, 9-14, 43-59, 61-73, 127-137. Not in coursepack.
Ebook available through McGill Library website.

- Small, Mario L. 2018. "Rhetoric and Evidence in a Polarized Society," March 1, ISERP, Columbia University.

Week 8. Session 7: Racialized poverty: Four influential theories.

- Lewis, Oscar. 1966. "The Culture of Poverty." *Scientific American* 215(4):19–25.
- Murray, Charles A. 1984. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. New York: Basic Books. Chapter 14 ("The Destruction of Status Rewards"), pp. 178-191.
- Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 2 ("Social Change and Social Dislocations in the Inner City"), pp.20-62.
- Office of Planning and Research. 1965. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor. Better known as "The Moynihan Report."

Week 9. Session 8: Racialized poverty: Ethnographic investigations.

- Liebow, Elliot. 1967. *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown. Chapter 1 and 2 ("Introduction" and "Men and Jobs"), pp.1-45. Only chapter 2 is in the coursepack. Ebook available through McGill Library website.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Chapters "Introduction," "The Book Vendor," and "Conclusion," pp.3-42, 312-3. Only "The Book Vendor" is in the coursepack. On reserve at the McLennan Library.
- Newman, Katherine S. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Chapter 4 ("No Shame in (This) Game"), pp.86-121.

Week 10. Session 9: Racialized poverty: Valorization—a pitfall?

- Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. "Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(6):1468–1532.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 2002. "What Kind of Combat Sport Is Sociology?" *American Journal of Sociology* 107(6):1551–76.
- Newman, Katherine. 2002. "No Shame: The View from the Left Bank." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(6):1577–99.

Week 11. Session 10: Racial encounters.

- Grazian, David. 2003. *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1 ("The Blues in Black and White"), pp.33-59.
- McDermott, Monica. 2006. *Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Chapter 2 ("Experiences of White Racial Identity"), pp.38-58.

- Waters, Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Chapter 8 (“Identities of the Second Generation”), pp.285-325.

Week 12. Session 11: Race and class in Harlem.

- Freeman, Lance. 2006. *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification From the Ground Up*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. Chapter 3 (“There Goes the 'Hood”), pp.59-94.
- Jackson, John L. 2001. *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1 (“Making Harlem Black”), pp.17-54.

Week 13. Session 12: Taking Stock. Final project presentations (1).

- Healy, Kieran. 2017. “Fuck Nuance.” *Sociological Theory* 35(2):118–27.
- Besbris, Max and Shamus Khan. 2017. “Less Theory. More Description.” *Sociological Theory* 35(2):147–53.

Week 13. Session 13: Final project presentations (2).