

SOCIOLOGY 403: METHODS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH
(Graduate Field Methods)
Winter 2011

Carol Heimer
office: 1808 Chicago Ave., #105
phone: 491-7480
e-mail: c-heimer@northwestern.edu

class meeting: Thurs. 3-5 PM
class: 222 Parkes Hall
office hours T Th 11-12:30

OVERVIEW

The problem with learning to do fieldwork is that you need to learn everything all at once. Fieldwork defies compartmentalization or much setting of priorities. For the most part, people learn to do fieldwork rather than being taught to do it. On the theory that learning to do fieldwork is more a matter of being socialized rather than of learning techniques, the course is arranged to provide a concentrated exposure to fieldwork. Through your own and your colleagues' field experiences and four quite different books by fieldworkers, you will be exposed to a wide variety of field settings. These monographs and your own experiences will also provide us with a common base to draw on in reflecting on the methodological and ethical issues addressed in the pieces on how to do fieldwork and ethnographic writing.

ASSIGNMENTS

Writing is a core part of doing fieldwork, and you will be doing a lot of it. For weeks 2 through 9, you will be handing in field notes and memos on your field research every week. I will expect to receive some written document from each class member **Thursday at the beginning of class**. Memo topics will be emailed or handed out. At the beginning of the quarter, your notes will probably mostly be about the difficulties of negotiating access, working out an appropriate role in the field, and figuring out what to focus on. As you spend more time in the field, your attention (and your notes) will probably shift from trying to sort out basic features of the situation to concentrating on some more restricted issues, and then later to figuring out whether your early hunches make any sense and how you can support your arguments. While you may wish to do some interviewing, you should plan mainly to do participant observation.

By the end of the quarter you will prepare a draft of a professional paper drawing on your field research. By this point, you will be able to make a first stab at combining argument, fieldwork evidence, and some citations to others' work. Do not think of writing the paper as a separate activity, though. You should begin working on the paper near the beginning of the quarter so that you begin processing your fieldwork observations and so later observations are guided by what you have already learned.

In a fieldwork class, students typically face substantial time pressures. Here are some suggestions about how to manage your time: (1) Fieldwork and writing fieldnotes should take priority over reading for class. (2) Although entire monographs are assigned, you should expect to skim rather than read carefully. The point is to get the main argument, to get some sense of how the researcher conducted the fieldwork, and to learn about the variety of ways in which fieldwork evidence is used in constructing the argument or storyline of a book or article. Start by glancing through the book to get an idea of what it is about, then choose which sections you are

going to read more carefully. For instance, you might decide to read the introduction, conclusion, methodological appendix and then only one of the empirical/analysis chapters. Read beyond those portions as needed to fill in gaps. (Obviously this works better for some pieces than others.)

READINGS (you'll need to order books; articles mostly available through JSTOR or other electronic resources that you can find through NUcat; if all else fails, get them from me by email)

- Burawoy, Michael. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory* 16 (1):4-33. (JSTOR)
- Burawoy, Michael. "Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography." *American Sociological Review* 68 (5):645-679. (JSTOR)
- Culyba, Rebecca J., Carol A. Heimer, and JuLeigh Coleman Petty. 2004. "The Ethnographic Turn: Fact, Fashion, or Fiction." *Qualitative Sociology* 27 (4):365-389. (NUcat)
- DeVault, Marjorie. 2004. "What is Description? (One Ethnographer's View)." *Perspectives* 27 (1):4, 6, 18. (available online on the ASA theory section website: www.asatheory.org)
- Emerson, Robert M, ed. 2001. *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*, Second Edition. Waveland Press. (In assigning chapters, I've used this edition but have put chapter authors' names so you can match if you get a different edition.)
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*. University of Chicago Press.
- Feldman, Martha S., Jeannine Bell, & Michele Tracy Berger. 2003. *Gaining Access: A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2003 (1998). *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (For comparison, articles and chapters drawing on this material: Fine and Lori Holyfield, 1996, "Secrecy, Trust, and Dangerous Leisure: Generating Group Cohesion in Voluntary Organizations." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 59: 22-38; Fine, 1997, "Naturework and the Taming of the Wild: The Problem of 'Overpick' in the Culture of Mushroomers," *Social Problems* 44 (1):68-88; Fine, 2001, "Enacting Norms: Mushrooming and the Culture of Expectations and Explanations." Pp. 139-64 in Michael Hechter and Karl-Dieter Opp (eds.), *Social Norms*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation (this one not available online).)
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2004 "The When of Ethnographic Theory." *Perspectives* 27 (1):4, 5, 11. (available online on the ASA theory section website: www.asatheory.org)
- Glaeser, Andreas. 2004. "Theory by Way of Ethnography." *Perspectives* 27 (1):4, 7, 18. (available online on the ASA theory section website: www.asatheory.org)
- Heimer, Carol A., and Lisa R. Staffen. 1998. *For the Sake of the Children: The Social Organization of Responsibility in the Hospital and the Home*. University of Chicago Press. (For comparison, articles drawing on this material: Heimer, 1999, "Competing Institutions: Law, Medicine, and Family in Neonatal Intensive Care," *Law & Society Review* 33 (1):17-66; Heimer and Staffen, 1995, "Interdependence and Reintegrative Social Control: Labeling and Reforming 'Inappropriate' Parents in Neonatal Intensive Care Units," *American Sociological Review* 60 (October):635-54; Heimer and Mitchell Stevens, 1997, "Caring for the Organization: Social Workers as Front-Line Risk Managers in Neonatal Intensive Care Units," *Work and Occupations* 24 (2):133-163; Heimer, 1996, "Explaining Variation in the

Impact of Law: Organizations, Institutions, and Professions,” *Studies in Law, Politics and Society* 15:29-59 (this one not available online.)

Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 1999. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*. University of Chicago Press. (For comparison, articles drawing on this material: Pattillo-McCoy, 1998, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” *American Sociological Review* 63 (6): 767-784; Pattillo, “Sweet Mothers and Gangbangers: Managing Crime in a Black Middle-Class Neighborhood,” *Social Forces* 76 (3): 747-774.)

Stevens, Mitchell. 2001. *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. Princeton University Press.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

I have assigned readings to particular weeks and segregated topics into weeks, but topics will undoubtedly blend together over the course of the quarter. During weeks 3-8 we will spend 1/2 to 2/3 of each session talking about class members’ fieldwork. We’ll allocate about 10 minutes per person, so each person will be “on” for a brief report on their fieldwork every other week (so three times each). You will also be reading other students’ fieldnotes (though your fieldnote reading assignments will be much lighter than mine).

Week 1, January 6—**Readings:** Feldman, Bell, and Berger. To some degree this is putting the cart before the horse, but there’s real urgency about getting into a field site. The selections in this book are short, so read all of the first part of the book (intro and part 1, so pp. vii-50), the introductory sections of each of the other chapters (pp. 53-57, 75-78, 99-102, 117-120, 139-142), and two of the “access stories” in each of chapters 6-10 (so 10 total, or about 35-40 pages). We will spend much of the first session discussing students’ decisions about field projects, focusing on how to choose a field site, how to use what you already know, choices between problem-oriented research and more wide-ranging ethnography, and negotiating access.

Week 2, January 13—**Readings:** introductory statements by Emerson in *Contemporary Field Research* (pp. 1-26, 27-53), Geertz (pp. 55-75), and Wieder (76-88). Also read articles by Burawoy. And look at the material on human subjects on the Northwestern website, especially the material on student research (www.research.northwestern.edu/research/OPRS/irb/). Situating fieldwork in the social sciences—how have field methods evolved over the years, how do the aims of fieldworkers compare with the aims of others in their disciplines, what are the limits on what an outsider can know and how do they vary from one setting to another and from one fieldworker to another? **Written work:** Along with fieldnotes, which will probably be about attempts to gain access, hand in memo on possible research focus, reasons for choice of setting, and any ethical issues in the choice of setting.

Week 3, January 20—**Reading:** Stevens. Fieldwork on education, but outside traditional school settings; participant observation combined with some interviews; mixing contemporary fieldwork with some history of a movement. How do fieldworkers deal fairly with groups whose views are very different than their own? **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Begin first round of discussions of students’ fieldwork.

Week 4, January 27—**Reading:** Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, chapters 1-5; Emerson’s introduction (pp. 113-151) to the section on fieldwork practice (in *Contemporary Field*

Research). Then choose two of the eight chapters in that section (depending on which interest you) to read. This session will be devoted largely to a discussion of access as an ongoing process, practical aspects of writing fieldnotes. **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Conclude first discussions of students' fieldwork.

Week 5, February 3—**Reading:** Fine (book). Fieldwork on a leisure activity; constructing the meaning of “nature”; how groups negotiate danger and trust. Using fieldwork from multiple settings to construct comparative argument. **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Begin second round of discussions of students' fieldwork.

Week 6, February 10— **Reading:** Emerson edited volume, part 3 (producing ethnographies, pp. 281-395). This will be mainly a discussion of how to think about evidence. **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Conclude second round of discussions of students' fieldwork.

Week 7, February 17—**Reading:** Heimer and Staffen. Fieldwork in organizations; how to think about the differences between “regulars” and their “clients.” Uses of fieldwork to advance theory. **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Begin third round of discussions of students' fieldwork.

Week 8, February 24—**Reading:** chapters 6, 7, and conclusion of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw. Theory and evidence in fieldwork (including yours); writing up fieldwork; integrating argument and evidence; summarizing evidence. What can the fieldworker add to what the “natives” could have told us all along? **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Conclude third round of discussions of students' fieldwork.

Week 9, March 3—**Reading:** Pattillo-McCoy. Doing ethnographic work on a neighborhood; access to public and private settings; telling the story of a community. **Written work:** fieldnotes plus memo. Discussions of writing up: 5 minutes from everyone on most important finding from field setting.

Week 10, March 10—**Reading:** Culyba et al., DeVault, Fine (article), Glaeser. Compare articles by Fine with Fine book, articles by Heimer and Staffen (and Stevens) with book, articles by Pattillo with book. General discussion of turning fieldwork into professional products; publication of fieldwork.

Final paper due in my mailbox 5 PM, Thursday, March 17 (remember that the department doors get locked at 5 PM).