

SOCIOLOGY 104: Field Research Methods

Fall 2024, UCSD

Prof. Tom Medvetz (my Zoom link: <https://ucsd.zoom.us/j/9388728606>)

Office hours (485 SSB): Wed, 9-10a, and by appointment (please email me)

Email: tmedvetz@ucsd.edu (please include the phrase "SOC 104" in the subject line of your email)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is the result of an ambitious, COVID-era overhaul of a field methods seminar that I taught regularly before the pandemic. In the earlier version of the class, students designed and carried out their own research projects, which served as the basis for various in-class presentations, group discussions, and written assignments. In this version, we will take a different approach: The goal is to explore sociological field research using a series of carefully chosen texts. The readings will allow us to discuss all aspects of field research—from the concrete, preliminary challenges of gaining access to an unfamiliar field site to the epistemology of research design. Along the way, I might take the opportunity to discuss some of the research projects conducted by students in past versions of the class.

A note about the topic: For our purposes, the term *field research methods* refers inclusively to two ways of gathering data for sociological purposes: ethnography and interviewing. In this class, I have decided to put the emphasis squarely on ethnography. That said, I'll talk occasionally about interviewing, and many of the principles we'll discuss apply to interviewing as well. (But if you're here specifically to learn about interview methods, this probably isn't the class for you.)

COURSE FORMAT

As this description suggests, this is a reading-based class. We'll focus on one book per week.¹ For each text, I've chosen about 100 'suggested pages' of reading as a guide. Think of these selections not as highlights, but as *essentials*: They map out the bare minimum that you need to read to keep up with the discussions and assignments. In each case, then, I hope you will read beyond the suggested pages.

To do well in this class, you must follow along with the readings (which are available, free of charge, on the class's Canvas page) and participate meaningfully in the discussions. Although the class is not lecture-based, I'll come prepared with lots to talk about—but *so should you*.

Matthew Desmond. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Justin Farrell. 2020. *Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kimberly Kay Hoang. 2015. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

¹ Ostensibly, this is a lot of reading, but the texts are interesting and, in many cases, as gripping as any novel you'll find. And I've specifically chosen well-written books. (Believe me: There were several ethnographies that I ultimately struck from the list after deciding that they were too poorly written.) In any case, please don't be intimidated by the amount of reading.

Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: New Press.

Alice Goffman. 2014. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ashley Mears. 2011. *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Richard E. Ocejo. 2017. *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Steve Viscelli. 2016. *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Loïc Wacquant. 2004. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Your grade in this class has three parts:

(1) The first part (50 percent total, or 10 percent each) is based on a series of five (5) analytic memos, each written about a single question associated with a specific day of the class (see below). You may choose to answer any five of the 17 questions listed below. Each memo is due one week after we finish talking about its associated reading. For instance, an analytic memo written in response to question #1 or 2, both of which pertain to the reading for October 1-3, is due on October 10. After October 10, I won't accept memos on those two questions. The due dates for each question are indicated on the list below. I'll keep track of who turns in memos for which days, of course, but it's up to you to decide which five questions to address. My advice: Try not to leave them all for the end of the quarter!

What does an "analytic memo" look like? The key word is *analytic*, meaning that it should go beyond a simple or straightforward recap of the text by speaking to "big-picture" concerns and attempting to lay bare the study's inner mechanics. You are encouraged to relate the readings to the ideas presented in the lectures; to give your opinions; and to agree or disagree with the authors, and with me. Above all, be sure to address the question being asked; to say something non-obvious; to and write clearly! (Also, please indicate plainly which question you are addressing.) Please try to limit your memos to 3-4 pages each—and please don't ask me about spacing, formatting, etc. (For the most part, it doesn't matter.) As I'll repeat below, you may not use outside or secondary sources—nothing from the internet, no published or unpublished writings, no ChatGPT, nothing—only the course readings, your class notes, and your own brilliant minds. Please submit your memos online through the Turnitin module on the course's Canvas page; in other words, please don't email them to me.

(2) Part two of your grade (35 percent total) is based on your participation in class discussions. Attendance counts positively toward “participation”—but actual participation counts most of all. So please come prepared with something to say or ask.

(3) The third and final component of your grade (15 percent total) is based on a short final exam. More details will follow.

All written assignments for this course should be handed in electronically through the Assignment module on the course’s Canvas page. You may not use outside sources or materials of any kind for any of the assignments, including the internet. If there is any indication that you’ve violated this rule, your assignment will be forwarded immediately to UCSD’s Academic Integrity Office, which is staffed by people who harbor burning, Tarantino-esque grudges against the world and want nothing more than to destroy your academic reputation. Once the assignment is in their hands, it’s out of my control. So, please do not cheat. In summary:

Analytic memos (5 @ 10 percent each) =	50 percent
Participation in class discussions =	35 percent
Final exam =	<u>15 percent</u>
	100

OTHER POLICIES & RESOURCES

Academic integrity

You may not misrepresent your work in any way or be party to another student’s failure to maintain academic integrity. I will refer any suspected cases of cheating, including plagiarism, to the Academic Integrity Office. For the UCSD Policy on Integrity of Scholarship, see <http://students.ucsd.edu/academics/academic-integrity/policy.html>. The minimum penalty for violations of academic integrity will be an F for the course.

Students with Disabilities

I am committed to creating a course that is inclusive, equitable, and accessible. If you require academic accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office for Students with Disabilities. You are also welcome to discuss your options with me privately.

Classroom conduct

Please refrain from being disruptive to your fellow students and your instructor. Disruptive behavior includes coming to class late, leaving early, text messaging, and not silencing your phone before class.

Writing

The ability to write clearly is very important, and not something that can be reliably distinguished from “good ideas” expressed poorly. In your papers, please pay special attention to grammar, mechanics, syntax, style, and organization. In the past, students have asked me for references on writing advice, and I often point them to these two: the classic *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White and *The St. Martin’s Handbook* (St. Martin’s Press, 6th edition).

Grievances

If you wish to contest a grade, you must first go to your reader and submit to him/her a one-page statement explaining why you think the grading is unfair. Only if you are still dissatisfied should you come to me. Please note that I will not change any grade without first discussing it with your reader. Also bear in mind that your grade may move upwards or downwards should I decide to re-grade the paper.

Laptops & Hotspots

<https://vcsa.ucsd.edu/news/covid-19/#Access-to-Computers,-Discounted>

Childcare Resources

<https://child.ucsd.edu/resources/home.html>

<https://child.ucsd.edu/resources/options.html>

<https://child.ucsd.edu/resources/ccampis.html> (Encourage to complete the FAFSA)

Student Health and Wellness:

<https://vcsa.ucsd.edu/student-success/student-well-being.html>

(includes Basic Needs: <https://basicneeds.ucsd.edu>)

CLASS SCHEDULE

	<u>Week</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Text</u>	<u>Essential pages</u>
MAKING SOCIOLOGY ACCESSIBLE	1	Tue, 1 Oct Thu, 3 Oct	Desmond, <i>Evicted</i>	p. 1-107 (prologue + chs. 1-8) p. 315-36 (“About This Project”)
ACCESS AND POWER	2	Tue, 8 Oct Thu, 10 Oct	Farrell, <i>Billionaire Wilderness</i>	p. 1-28 (intro) p. 31-48 (ch. 1) p. 81-98 (ch. 3) p. 120-65 (chs. 5-6)
ETHNOGRAPHIC COMPLEMENTARITY	3	Tue, 15 Oct Thu, 17 Oct	Viscelli, <i>The Big Rig</i>	p. 1-104 (intro, chs. 1-2) p. 209-221 (appendix [excerpt])
“SEGMENTED ETHNOGRAPHY”	4	Tue, 22 Oct Thu, 24 Oct	Ocejo, <i>Masters of Craft</i>	p. xi-xxi (prologue) p. 1-21 (intro) p. 50-75 (ch. 2) p. 159-89 (ch. 6) p. 267-83 (appendix)
THEORY BUILDING	5	Tue, 29 Oct Thu, 31 Oct	Mears, <i>Pricing Beauty</i>	p. 1-45 (ch. 1 + ch. 2 [excerpt]) p. 121-37 (ch. 4 [excerpt]) p. 263-66 (appendix)
VERSTEHEN	6	Tue, 5 Nov Thu, 7 Nov	Hochschild, <i>Strangers in Their Own Land</i>	p. ix-xii (preface) p. 3-37 (chs. 1-3) p. 85-99 (ch. 6) p. 135-91 (chs. 9-12) p. 207-20 (ch. 14)
THAT WHICH CAN'T BE SAID	7	Tue, 12 Nov Thu, 14 Nov	Wacquant, <i>Body & Soul</i>	p. vii-xii (Preface & prologue) p. 3-127 (“The Street & the Ring”)
ETHICS & TRUTH	8	Tue, 19 Nov Thu, 21 Nov	Goffman, <i>On the Run</i> + packet	p. ix-xvi (prologue + preface) p. 1-90 (chs. 1-3) p. 213-63 (appendix) packet (25 pages)
ETHICS & TRUTH, CONT.	9	Tue, 26 Nov Thu, 28 Nov	Watch: “TED TALK: Alice Goffman” THANKSGIVING	[see Canvas for link]
~\(\ツ)/~	10	Tue, 3 Dec Thu, 5 Dec	Hoang, <i>Dealing in Desire</i>	[TBA]

ANALYTIC MEMO QUESTIONS (answer any FIVE)

1. October 1-3: Matthew Desmond, *Evicted*

One of the most troubling points to emerge from Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* is that being poor can actually—paradoxically—*cost more money* than being financially solvent. Many of the subjects profiled in the book find themselves caught in a series of intractable downward financial spirals. Describe some of the vicious circles whereby poverty effectively leads to more poverty. [DUE OCT 10]

2. October 1-3: Matthew Desmond, *Evicted*

To conduct the research for *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond moved into a trailer park and then a rooming house in two poor neighborhoods in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For more than a year, he observed several families up close, getting to know his subjects and taking notes on what he saw and experienced. What are some specific ways his study would have been different if Desmond had approached the same topic—eviction—using a different empirical method? Discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of ethnography and interviews in this context. [DUE OCT 10]

3. October 8-10: Justin Farrell, *Billionaire Wilderness*

Sociologists have long argued that dramatic inequalities of wealth and power have harmful social consequences *in and of themselves* (i.e. even when no one is poor or deprived in absolute terms). Yet this is a controversial view, and one that flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that the problem is poverty as such. Using Justin Farrell's *Billionaire Wilderness* as the basis of your discussion, make a case one way or the other: Are dramatic wealth disparities harmful (even when no one is poor)? If so, how come? If not, why aren't you convinced by Farrell's view? [DUE OCT 17]

4. October 8-10: Justin Farrell, *Billionaire Wilderness*

Farrell's study highlights a dilemma faced by many field researchers: namely, that their *dependence* on research subjects for access and information can make it difficult to write about them with any critical distance. (Posed as a dilemma, the issue is that whereas writing critically about one's subjects feels like a betrayal, *not* writing critically about them feels like a dereliction of one's sociology duty.) How does Farrell deal with this dilemma? More importantly, do you think he does a good job? [DUE OCT 17]

5. October 15-17: Steve Viscelli, *The Big Rig*

Steve Viscelli's *The Big Rig* provides a great example of how ethnographic data may be used to complement other kinds of data, including statistical evidence. Discuss the mutually supportive relationship between the ethnographic and non-ethnographic data presented in Viscelli's study. What does each kind of data contribute to the larger whole, and how do the different sorts of evidence work together to tell a bigger story? [DUE OCT 24]

6. October 15-17: Steve Viscelli, *The Big Rig*

Why is it called "The Big Rig"? Be very analytical. [DUE OCT 24]

7. October 22-24: Richard E. Ocejo, *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*

Richard Ocejo's study of craft-based occupations is meant to illuminate the changing nature of the twenty-first century urban economy in the US. What are some of the larger patterns—either about the class structure and the economy; about the relationship between education and financial earnings; or about the changing nature of American cities—that this study points to? [DUE OCT 31]

8. October 22-24: Richard E. Ocejo, *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*

How do the barbers, butchers, distillers, and bartenders in Ocejo’s study work to make their formerly low-status jobs “cool”? You may draw examples from each of the specific occupations, but your focus should be on the commonalities among them. In other words, what are some general recipes for earning status in the “new urban economy”? [DUE OCT 31]

9. October 29-31: Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty*

What determines a fashion model’s value? A commonsense answer would be that it is the model’s appearance that holds the key to her value. And yet, in *Pricing Beauty*, Ashley Mears suggests something like the opposite—i.e. that it is a model’s value that leads people to say she has the right “look.” Put differently, “look” is an idea that people in the fashion world apply retrospectively to a more complex, value-determining process involving agents, photographers, designers, magazine editors, and clients. Describe, as best you can, the broad outlines of this process. [DUE NOV 7]

10. October 29-31: Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty*

What are some of the dilemmas—ethical, scientific, and personal—with which Ashley Mears had to grapple while conducting the research for *Pricing Beauty*? Do you think she managed these challenges successfully? Why or why not? [DUE NOV 7]

11. November 5-7: Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*

Hochschild’s express purpose in *Strangers in Their Own Land* is to traverse what she calls the “empathy wall” separating her and other progressives from conservatives in the United States. More specifically, she hopes to gain an understanding of her research subjects by recounting the “deep story” they use to make sense of the world. But is this enough? Does Hochschild’s book truly facilitate a sociological understanding of 21st-century rural conservatism? If not, what more could Hochschild have done? [DUE NOV 14]

12. November 12-14: Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul*

In the prologue to *Body & Soul*, Loïc Wacquant says that one aspect of the “triple challenge” of this study was the theoretical challenge of representing a fundamentally *bodily* practice—namely, boxing—in writing. Elaborate on the problem Wacquant is describing here and discuss how he confronts it. How does Wacquant impart knowledge about a practice that operates largely beneath the level of language? [DUE NOV 21]

13. November 12-14: Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul*

In the prologue to *Body & Soul*, Loïc Wacquant says that a second aspect of his “triple challenge” was the analytic challenge of figuring out what the boxing gym reveals about the ghetto in which it’s located. Why is this a problem and what is Wacquant’s argument about the relationship between the two? [DUE NOV 21]

14. November 19-26: Alice Goffman, *On the Run*

Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* is, at one level, a study of the far-reaching effects of the criminal justice system on people who are not currently in prison. Describe how the past criminal entanglements of the young men in this study prevent them from leading “normal,” productive lives. [DUE DEC 3]

15. November 19-26: Alice Goffman, *On the Run*

One of the main questions Alice Goffman must address is how a highly educated, 20-something white woman came to gather so much observational data about a group of black men in Philadelphia. What are

some of the techniques she describes for gaining access to, and trust from, her research subjects in her “Methodological Note”? [DUE DEC 3]

16. November 19-26: Alice Goffman, *On the Run*

Having first earned tremendous acclaim, Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* soon became a focus of intense scrutiny, both within and beyond the academic community. Briefly, what were the core controversies surrounding the author’s research? In your opinion, was the backlash too harsh or entirely fair? [DUE DEC 3]

17. December 3-5: Kimberly Kaye Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*

[TBA] [DUE DEC 9]