

SOCIOLOGY 104: Field Research Methods

Spring 2026, UCSD

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

Office hours (485 SSB): by appointment (please email me)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is the result of an ambitious, COVID-era overhaul of a field methods seminar that I taught regularly before the pandemic. In the older version of the course, students designed and conducted their own field research projects, which served as the basis for in-class presentations, group discussions, and written assignments. In this version, we will explore the topic of field research through a series of carefully chosen texts. [For our purposes, the term *field research* refers inclusively to two ways of gathering data for sociological purposes: ethnography and interviewing. In this class, the emphasis is squarely on ethnography, but we will talk occasionally about interviewing too (see esp. week 7)—and many of the principles we'll discuss apply equally to interviewing.] The readings will allow us to consider all aspects of field research, from the concrete, preliminary challenges of gaining access to an unfamiliar site to the epistemology of research design.

COURSE FORMAT

This class is reading intensive and will follow a seminar-style format, in that our meetings will center on group discussions rather than lectures. This choice of format has some important implications for you. Above all, if you cannot carve out time for the readings, can't attend class, or can't participate meaningfully in the discussions (for any reason), then this is probably not the class for you.

How to do the readings

We will focus on one book per week. (All texts are available, free of charge, on the class's Canvas page.) Ostensibly, there's a lot of reading, but the texts are interesting and, in most cases, as gripping as any novel you will find.¹ But how much of the texts should you read? The answer is: as much as possible. Do your best. On the schedule below, I've highlighted some "essential chapters and pages" for each text. These are meant to indicate the bare minimum of what's needed to keep up with our discussions and assignments. In each case, your goal should be to read beyond these pages. To do well in the class, you will need to follow along with the readings and participate in the discussions. Although the class is not lecture-based, I will come prepared with plenty to talk about. *But so should you!*

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Your grade in this class has three parts:

¹ And I've specifically chosen well-written books. (Believe me: There were several ethnographies that I 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.

(1) The first part (45 percent total) consists of a series of three (3) analytical memos (15 percent each) -OR- an in-class presentation about one of the books on the “secondary texts” list below.

If you choose the memos option, your memos should be written in response to three of the questions from the list below. You may write on any three of these 16 questions. Each memo is due on the Friday of the week after we’ve finish discussing the book in question. (For instance, an analytical memo written in response to question #1 or 2, both of which pertain to the reading for week 2, is due on April 17.) The due dates for each question are indicated on the list below. My advice: Try not to leave them all for the end of the quarter!²

If you choose the presentation option, then you may skip the memos in favor of a single in-class presentation. In this case, you will be responsible for leading a 30-minute discussion about a book from the “secondary texts” list below. I will give you some pointers beforehand, and I’ll take part in the discussion—but your job will be to describe the text to your classmates and link it to relevant themes from the class. There are only four presentation slots during the quarter (see below), so if you’re interested in this option, please reach out to me about it. (Reaching out to express interest doesn’t lock you into doing a presentation.)

(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 (20 percent) is based on a short final exam. More details will follow later.

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 generative AI. If there is any indication that you’ve violated this rule, your assignment will be forwarded immediately to UCSD’s Academic Integrity Office. Once the assignment is in their hands, it’s out of my control. So, please do not cheat. In summary:

Analytical memos (3 @ 15 percent each) -or-		
presentation =	45 percent	
Participation (+ attendance) =	35 percent	
Final exam =	<u>20 percent</u>	= 100

² What does an “analytical memo” look like? The key word is *analytical*, meaning that you should go beyond a simple or straightforward recap of the text by speaking to “big picture” concerns. 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; be sure to say something non-obvious; 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 (or other generative AI), nothing—only the course readings, your class notes, and your own brilliant minds. Please submit your memos online through the Assignment module on the course’s Canvas page.

PRIMARY TEXTS

- [1] Matthew Desmond. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- [3] Justin Farrell. 2020. *Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [8] Alice Goffman. 2014. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: New Press.
- [4] Ashley Mears. 2011. *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- [5] Jeff Sallaz. 2009. *The Labor of Luck: Casino Capitalism in the United States and South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [2] Steve Viscelli. 2016. *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- [12] Loïc Wacquant. 2004. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Iza Kavedžija. 2019. *Making Meaningful Lives: Tales from an Aging Japan*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

SECONDARY TEXTS

- [13] David Grazian. 2015. *American Zoo: A Sociological Safari*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [14] David Grazian. 2003. *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- [15] 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.
- [16] Richard E. Ocejo. 2017. *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

CLASS SCHEDULE (** indicates presentation slot)

<u>Week</u>	<u>Text</u>	<u>Essential pages</u>	<u>Theme(s)</u>	<u>Dates</u>
1	N/A	N/A	#PRELIMINARIES #OVERVIEW	Tue, 3/31 Thu, 4/2
2	[1] Desmond, <i>Evicted</i>	prologue + chapters 1-8 "About This Project"	#ECONOMIC PRECARITY #DEVIANCE & SOCIAL MARGINALITY #MAKING SOCIOLOGY ACCESSIBLE	Tue, 4/7 Thu, 4/9
3	[2] Viscelli, <i>The Big Rig</i>	chapters 1-3 appendix	#ECONOMIC PRECARITY #EMPIRICAL COMPLEMENTARITY #ACCESS	Tue, 4/14 Thu, 4/16
4	[3] Farrell, <i>Billionaire Wilderness</i>	Introduction chapters 1, 3, 5-6	#"STUDYING UP" #ACCESS	Tue, 4/21 Thu, 4/23**
5	[4] Mears, <i>Pricing Beauty</i>	chapters 1, 2, 4 appendix	#THEORY-BUILDING #THE MARKET OF SYMBOLIC GOODS	Tue, 4/28 Thu, 4/30
6	[5] Sallaz, <i>The Labor of Luck</i>	introduction chapters 2-4, 8 appendix	#THEORY-BUILDING #COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY #ACCESS #EMPIRICAL COMPLEMENTARITY	Tue, 5/5 Thu, 5/7**
7	[6] Hochschild, <i>Strangers in Their Own Land</i>	preface chapters 1-3, 6, 9-12, 14	#THEORY-(NON?)BUILDING # VERSTEHEN #ACCESS #MAKING SOCIOLOGY ACCESSIBLE	Tue, 5/12 Thu, 5/14
8	[7] Kavedžija, <i>Making Meaningful Lives</i>	chapters 1-3, 5-6	# VERSTEHEN #INTERVIEWING	Tue, 5/19 Thu, 5/21**
9	[8] Goffman, <i>On the Run</i> (+ articles packet ³)	prologue, preface chapters 1-3 appendix	#ETHICS & TRUTH #ACCESS #DEVIANCE & SOCIAL MARGINALITY #MAKING SOCIOLOGY ACCESSIBLE	Tue, 5/26 Thu, 5/28
10	[12] Wacquant, <i>Body & Soul</i>	preface, prologue part I	#WHAT CAN'T BE SAID #ECONOMIC PRECARITY #DEVIANCE & SOCIAL MARGINALITY #ACCESS	Tue, 6/2 Thu, 6/4**

³ The articles in this packet are: [9] Steven Lubet, "Ethics on The Run"; [10] Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Trials of Alice Goffman"; [11] Marc Parry, "Alice Goffman's First Book Made Her a Star. It Wasn't Enough to Get Her Tenure".

ANALYTICAL MEMO QUESTIONS (answer any three)

1. 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 APR 17]

2. 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 APR 17]

3. 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 APR 24]

4. Steve Viscelli, *The Big Rig*

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

5. 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 MAY 1]

6. 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 MAY 1]

7. 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," not vice versa. Or, put differently, "the right 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. Now describe, as best you can, the broad outlines of this process. [DUE MAY 8]

8. 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 MAY 8]

9. Jeff Sallaz, *The Labor of Luck*

To write *The Labor of Luck*, Jeff Sallaz became a casino dealer in the United States and South Africa. But as the book makes clear, Sallaz’s interest in the subject does not lie solely with the experiences of the dealer. Instead, it extends to: (i) the (meso-level) managerial relationships in which dealers are embedded, and (ii) the (macro-level) legislative and regulatory environments in which casinos operate. Discuss the methodological challenge of linking these different levels of analysis through ethnographic observation. How does Sallaz contend with this challenge? [DUE MAY 15]

10. 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 MAY 22]

11. Iza Kavedžija, *Making Meaningful Lives*

In *Making Meaningful Lives*, Iza Kavedžija uses a mixture of ethnographic and interviewing methods to shed light on the complex issue of how people find fulfillment and purpose in life. Focusing on the elderly visitors to community salons in Osaka, Japan, and the members of a discussion group in Kyoto, Kavedžija thematizes the importance of care and creativity to a well-lived life. Based on your reading, what are the key methodological strategies Kavedžija uses to draw meaningful data from her subjects? How, in particular, does she manage to avoid banalities, clichés, generalities, truisms, and other vapid or shallow observations? [DUE MAY 29]

12. 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 JUN 5]

13. 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 JUN 5]

14. 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 scholarly community. Briefly, what were the core controversies surrounding the author’s research? In your opinion, was the backlash too harsh or entirely fair? [DUE JUN 5]

15. 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 JUN 9]**

16. 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 JUN 9]**