Ethnography and Theory, Ethnography as Theory

It is customary to associate sociological ethnography with sociological methodology. Most works of ethnography include methodological appendices (some quite famous in their own right), and ethnography itself typically is defined as a method of sociological inquiry. Yet ethnography is as much about theory as it is about methods. As far back as the Chicago School era, ethnographers were advancing important theoretical ideas and insights, and present-day commentators have argued that Chicago sociology’s very way of doing ethnography itself amounted to a significant theoretical contribution. Today it is more important than ever to ponder the relation of ethnography to theory, since we are witnessing in recent years, among the younger generation of American sociologists, a remarkable upsurge of interest in participant observation-style ethnographic research.

Overview

What this Course Covers

In this seminar, we explore the many linkages between ethnography and theory, surveying along the way a number of classic writings from the late nineteenth century; the Chicago School; later Chicago-influenced ethnographies; important mid-twentieth century works; more recent classics; and a selection of newly published works by up-and-coming ethnographers.

We not only read portions of these substantive works, but we also discuss in tandem with them a wide range of theoretical issues and challenges. Along the way, we explore practical questions as well, such as how theoretical reflection might be incorporated into substantive, data-rich ethnographic writing.

Theory can learn from ethnography and vice-versa. This seminar attempts to create a context in which that might happen. Along the way, it engages with such theoretical and ethnographic traditions as classical American pragmatism; ethnomethodology; symbolic interactionism; Marxism; and Bourdieuan sociology. It also examines ethnographies that incorporate into their analyses social network theory; conversation analysis; cultural sociology; intersectional analysis; and still other present-day approaches. A wide range of substantive fields of sociology is covered.

What this Course Does Not Cover

With only one or two exceptions, we do not venture into the closely related world of
anthropological ethnography. This is a serious omission, since the sociological tradition of ethnography has a great deal to learn from its older and (in many ways) more developed cousin. All I can say is that one cannot do everything in a single semester-long course, and difficult choices had to be made. By the same token, we do not emphasize sociological ethnography from outside the American context. Nor do we explore non-social science varieties of ethnographic writing.

**Important Traditions We Leave Out**

Sociological ethnography often is said (perhaps erroneously) to have begun with the Chicago School. Yet it is important to distinguish between the celebrated Chicago School tradition of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (and their many gifted students and colleagues), on the one hand, and the Chicago tradition represented by Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull-House, on the other. The divide that arose between these two alternative Chicago sociologies—and, in general, between the social survey tradition (as represented by Addams) and the social-science tradition (as represented by Park and Burgess)—came to have profound consequences for American sociology. In this course, we focus on the disciplinary tradition extending from Park and Burgess. Yet we also keep in mind the alternative road not taken—and consider how it has continued to be advocated right down to the present day, in ongoing debates regarding public sociology and participatory action research.

In more recent years, a different sort of divide has emerged within the disciplinary ethnographic tradition. This is a divide between predominantly interview-based and predominantly fieldwork-based ethnography. As my labels indicate, in the one case, research draws most heavily on interview material; in the other case, it is grounded in participant observation. In this course, we recognize that, to some extent, the very distinction between these two approaches is misleading and artificial, since interview-based researchers frequently rely on extensive fieldwork to contextualize and cross-check their material and even to determine whom to interview in the first place, while fieldwork-based researchers often—nearly always—rely heavily on interviews to supplement and enrich their participant observation-derived insights. These caveats notwithstanding, however, we direct our attention in this course to the fieldwork-based variant. Yet we also keep squarely in mind the question of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

One striking feature of the aforementioned divides is how deeply gendered they are. As has frequently been noted, the Hull-House vs. Chicago Sociology divide was gendered through and through. And, in fractal fashion, the gender divide now has been reproduced from within the ethnographic tradition, with women researchers at the center of interview-based work while male researchers dominate (or have until recent years, with only occasional but important exceptions) in the fieldwork side of the tradition. In this course, we consider why these gender divides might have occurred and keep occurring, and we ask what implications they might have for sociological ethnography more generally.

**How the Syllabus is Organized**

When putting together this syllabus, I had the choice of organizing our readings along either
logical or chronological lines. That is, I could have set up the syllabus in terms of theoretical issues, perhaps by conceptualizing ethnographic research as an arc of theory-building and then providing readings for each stage of the trajectory. Or else I could have presented the material in more historical fashion, beginning with ethnographic research in the late nineteenth century and working my way up to the present (or backwards, from the present to the past), highlighting each week a different set of classic studies while pairing them with various kinds of theoretical selections. In the end, I chose the latter variant. It struck me as cleaner and simpler. However, as a brief glance at the syllabus will indicate, I also inserted two weeks, one halfway through and the other at the end of the semester, on theory construction in sociological ethnography.

Course Organization and Grading Policy

Readings: The books are available at University Bookstore (see list on p. 6) and on reserve at the Social Science Reference Library (8th floor of Sewell Social Science Building). In addition, many selections are available as pdf files through Learn@UW.

Grading Format: Students’ grades for this course will be based on two different assessments, each of which will contribute 50% to the final grade. First, students will be evaluated on their final term paper. Second, they will be graded on class attendance and participation. More on each below.

Final Paper: One week after the final class meeting of the semester (at 5 p.m. that day), a final paper will be due. This paper can be either (1) a work of original empirical research; or (2) an empirical research proposal. Students must clear their topic with me in person by the end of Week 10. An unusual requirement: I ask that each student submit his or her paper to me in two formats simultaneously: electronic and hardcopy, the same paper in both formats. Upon receiving the paper, I shall go to MS Word and check that it is within the specified word count range. Papers must be between 5,750 and 6,250 words in length, according to MS Word’s word count function. Even one word less or more, and the paper will be returned to the student—with an Incomplete for the course. Please note that 5,750-6,250 words is around 10 single-spaced pages. Caring so much about the word count may be idiosyncratic, but working under such constraints will help to make students’ work more tightly focused and better edited. If there are going to be constraints, they might as well be clear and unequivocal. Here is yet another set of requirements for the paper: I ask that its format be the one I happen to prefer for reading papers (since I will be the one reading them): single spacing, normal margins, 12-point font, skipped lines between paragraphs. Students should be sure to follow these formatting requirements. I have been known to return improperly formatted proposals to students and to give them an Incomplete for the course. Extensive reviews of the secondary literature are discouraged for this assignment, since I am looking for ideas and research, not a demonstration of library skills. This is the case even for empirical research proposals, for which I want a “think piece” that specifies the empirical object of study and that indicates, in as much detail as possible, how the student would go about studying it, the kinds of sources s/he would use, the kinds of cases s/he would select, and, in general, how s/he would deploy ideas or methods covered in this course when addressing that empirical problem.
Class Attendance and Participation: The other 50% of the final grade for this seminar will be determined—subjectively, by me—on the basis of overall contributions to weekly class meetings. Regarding attendance: Attendance all the way through each class meeting is required. I do not like it when students get up and leave early. Missing more than two or three class meetings during the semester is okay exclusively in cases of extended, sustained, several-weeks-long illness or family emergency. No need to contact me about the occasional missed class. In some cases, I will make an exception, but the student needs to speak with me first. Regarding participation: I expect that each student will do extensive reading each and every week of the course (including for the first class meeting of the semester). Students will not be tested on that reading, but I do want to see evidence that they have read carefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly—and on a consistent basis—throughout the semester. This does not mean they must know and understand everything when they walk in the door to start the class meeting. It does not mean their judgments as to what is most important in the readings always must be the same as my judgments. What it does mean is that, if a student gives me a sense that s/he is not doing extensive and consistent reading for this course, that s/he is not putting in a serious effort, it will bode poorly for (this portion of) their final grade. I expect students to take part actively in class discussions. If I ask a student a question at a moment when he or she seems not to be paying attention, and the student answers, “Can you please repeat the question?” this will be taken into account. If a student’s comments do not reflect serious preparation for class discussion, this too will be noticed. And if a student takes the class discussion onto irrelevant tangents, raises issues of interest only to him or herself, deflects attention from the important issues raised by me in class or by the readings, this also will be taken into consideration. I do not ask for frequent interventions. Some students are talkative; others are quiet. All I ask for are a few—just a few—substantive, thoughtful, and well-informed contributions per class meeting. There is no court of higher appeal for this portion of the final grade. It is based entirely on my subjective evaluation of a student’s class performance (combined with class attendance).

Why Do I Insist on Attendance All the Way Through Class Meetings? I insist on this policy because I have found that, whenever I do not require it, students trickle out of the classroom one by one during the final several minutes, and they do so in a way that destroys our collective focus. I wish to discourage that as much as possible.

On the Use of Laptops in Class: Unless approved by me beforehand, laptops and other electronic devices may not be used during class discussions, no matter how much more convenient it may be for students to type notes directly into their computers. I am implementing this policy because, in the past, abuse of laptops by some students has proven extremely distracting to others in the classroom. It also has detracted from the overall quality of our class discussions. Notes always can be typed into one’s computer later.

Academic Misconduct (Cheating): Students who cheat or attempt to cheat in their final term paper automatically will receive an F for the course. In addition, the incident will be reported in writing to the Dean of Students Office for further disciplinary action. A clear definition of plagiarism as well as information about disciplinary sanctions for academic misconduct may be found at the Dean of Students Office website. Knowledge of these rules is each student’s
responsibility, and lack of familiarity with the rules does not excuse misconduct.

The Emirbayer Rules

(1) When you speak in class, please refer exclusively to authors and texts we happen to be reading that day (or read earlier in the semester). Do not attempt to show off your intellectuality by dropping names such as Wittgenstein, Althusser, or Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Let’s stay focused.

(2) Please try whenever possible to respond to the person who spoke right before you, rather than offering something entirely disconnected. Let’s have a genuine conversation. If you aren’t able to maintain this continuity, then temporarily cede your place in line; we’ll return to you a bit later.

(3) Please be relatively succinct and to-the-point in your remarks. Let’s be dialogic. It’s okay to be confused when confronting such challenging material, but I’ve found that confusion can most effectively be addressed when your comments are kept fairly brief, so that others can respond.

One further comment: Sometimes a student has a point to make that’s so urgent, so necessary, so compelling, that he or she can’t bear to wait in line. If and when this happens, raise both your hands at once, and I’ll (probably) call on you. Don’t overuse this privilege. Let’s limit it to (at most) one time per student per class meeting. (By the way, I say I’ll “probably” call on you because sometimes, in the interest solely of moving the discussion along, or else of bringing into the discussion someone who hasn’t spoken yet, I’ll ignore upraised hands—it’s nothing personal!)

Books at University Bookstore

Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*
Paul Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall*
St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis*
Matthew Desmond, *Evicted*
Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk*
Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner*
Douglas Maynard, *Bad News, Good News*
William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society*
Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*
Course Syllabus

Please Read in the Exact Order Indicated Below

1 — Ethnography and its Warrants

Learn@UW: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*: Introduction by Samuel McCune Lindsay (this introductory selection is recommended only), Chs. I-II, V, XV (pp. 309-21), XVI, XVIII.
Learn@UW: Residents of Hull-House, *Hull-House Maps and Papers*: Introduction, Maps, Ch. II.

2 — Social Space and Social Time

Learn@UW: Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *The City*: Chs. I-III.

3 — Social Worlds and Institutions

Learn@UW: Everett Hughes, “Going Concerns.”
Learn@UW: Terry Williams, *Crackhouse*: Introduction, Chs. 3, 10
Learn@UW: Chelsea Schelly, *Crafting Collectivity*: TBA.

4 — Social and Personal Organization, Disorganization, Reorganization

Learn@UW: W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, “Social Disorganization and Reorganization.”
Learn@UW: E. Franklin Frazier, “Problems and Needs of Negro Children and Youth Resulting from Family Disorganization.”
Learn@UW: Mitchell Duneier, *Ghetto*: Ch. 2.
5 — Caste, Class, and Symbolic Boundaries

Bookstore: St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis*: Introduction by Richard Wright (this introductory selection is recommended only), Introduction, Chs. 6, 8, 10, 14, 18, 20, “A Methodological Note” by W. Lloyd Warner.

6 — Careers and Negotiations

Careers:

Learn@UW: Everett Hughes, “Careers.”
Learn@UW: Howard Becker, *Outsiders*: Ch. 3
Learn@UW: Charles Tilly, “The Trouble with Stories.”

Negotiations:

Learn@UW: Anselm Strauss, et al., “The Hospital and its Negotiated Order.”
Learn@UW: Elijah Anderson, *A Place on the Corner*: Preface, Ch. Two.
Learn@UW: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*: Ch. 4.

7 — Theory Construction in Social-Science Ethnography (1)

Learn@UW: Pierre Bourdieu, “Thinking about Limits.”
Learn@UW: Ann Mische, *Partisan Publics*: Prologue, Ch. 2.
Learn@UW: Javier Auyero, TBA.

8 — Social Relations, Talk, and Accounts

Bookstore: Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner*: Chs. 1-4, 5 (p. 94, middle paragraph), Conclusion, Appendix.
Recommended: Carol Stack, *All Our Kin*: Chs. 2-5, 8.


9 — Ethnographers and their Subjects

Learn@UW: Pierre Bourdieu, “Algerian Landing.”
Learn@UW: Pierre Bourdieu, “The Peasant and his Body.”
Learn@UW: Loic Wacquant, “Following Pierre Bourdieu into the Field.”
Learn@UW: Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*: Preface, Ch. One.
(Recommended: Chs. Two, Four.)


10 — Marginality and Morality


11 — Techniques of the Body, Dispositions, and Habitus

Online: Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body.” (Some of the PDFs available online are better than others.)
Learn@UW: Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Ch. 4.
Learn@UW: Loic Wacquant, *Body and Soul*, excerpt.


Learn@UW: Shamus Khan, *Privilege*: Ch. 3.
Learn@UW: Bowen Paulle, *Toxic Schools*: Ch. 3.

12 — Lyrical Ethnography

13 — Intersectionality and Ethnomethodology

Intersectionality:

Learn@UW: Kimberly Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*: Chs. 2-3.

Ethnomethodology (Rules, Improvisation, and Action):

Recommended: Harold Garfinkel, “What is Ethnomethodology?”
Learn@UW: Don Zimmerman, “The Practicalities of Rule Use.”
Learn@UW: Melvin Pollner and Robert Emerson, “Ethnomethodology and Ethnography.”
Learn@UW: D. Lawrence Wieder, *Language and Social Reality*: Part Two. (This selection is recommended only—not required.)

14 — Theory Construction in Social-Science Ethnography (2)

Learn@UW: Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*: Ch. I.
Learn@UW: Howard Becker, *Tricks of the Trade*: Ch. 5 (pp. 194-212).
Learn@UW: Michael Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method.” (In connection with this, you may also wish to read ahead to Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk*, pp. 344-45.)