

Ethnography as Theory and Practice

SOC 617 • Spring 2022 • Tues 5:30-8:20 • Graham 203

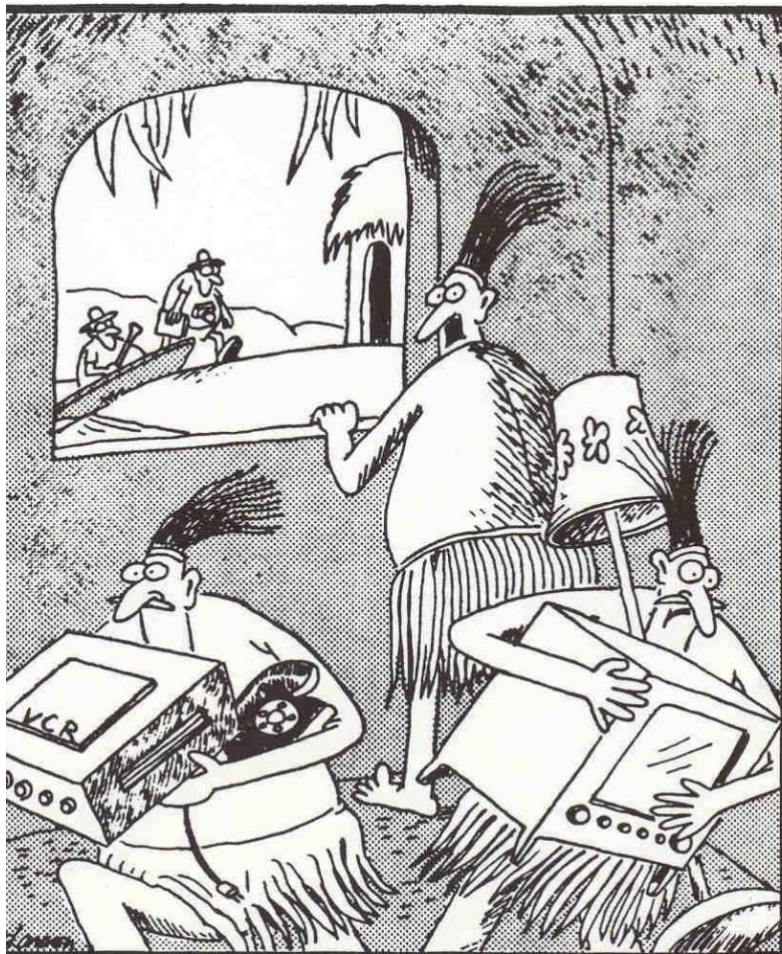
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Office hours Wed 12-2 via Zoom

(<https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt>)

“The subjective contains within itself the objective, which it denies and which it surpasses toward a new objectivity; and this new objectivity by virtue of *objectification* externalizes the internality of the project as an objectified subjectivity. This means *both* that the lived as such finds its place in the result and that the projected meaning of the action appears in the reality of the world that it may get its truth in the process of totalization.”

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*



“Ethnographers! Ethnographers!”

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography entails the direct observation of human practice. It is a method to be sure, but it is also an orientation to the social world. Encountering this world ethnographically means coming to know people's desires, motivations, and self-understandings – why they act as they do, what these actions mean to them, and how these actions and meanings are both informed by and contribute to real material contexts. Ethnographers don't just record these practices, for that would veer into the dodgy territory of empiricism. We're neither journalists nor novelists after all. To be clear, recording is absolutely central to ethnography, and in this class we will record, learning how to write fieldnotes. But what do we do with these recordings, these fieldnotes? What does it mean to claim that fieldnotes are *not* straightforwardly recordings but involve theory, interpretation, and analysis? Can we take them as representations of human actions, or are there traces of social structures to be found in our own notes? Bourdieu did refer to them as “structuring structures,” after all.

While all methods are inherently subjective (insofar as methodological instruments embody the subjectivity of those who devise them), ethnography is among the most self-reflexive, meaning that its practitioners are constantly aware of their own subjectivity. No method is more subjective than ethnography. Ethnographers' “data” – and many of us are rightly uncomfortable with that word – are their direct observations of human practice, doubly subjective: fieldnotes are frequently subjective representations of subjectivities. Given this apparent limitation, how does ethnographic knowledge help us make sense of the dynamics of our social world? How can we make use of this purely subjective knowledge to understand this world objectively? And in what sense can ethnography cast light on otherwise invisible objective processes? As Sartre reminds us in the epigraph above, the objective is nothing more than objectified subjectivities. So how do we know which subjective practices “become” objectified? What, in other words, is worth recording?

The social world is an absolute mess of structures, practices, institutions, and the like, a dense web of seemingly infinite possibilities of what we as ethnographers can record as potentially relevant. So where to start? Our task as ethnographers is to figure out how we should make this determination: what is potentially relevant? And to what? Some ethnographers conceive of the social world as existing objectively, as if sociologists simply need to extract “data” from its context, almost like freeing a diamond from a clump of minerals. But in this class, we will reject this empiricist approach, instead learning how to remain reflexive throughout the process of fieldwork and analysis. We see the social world through cognitive schemes which *allow* us to see some material as “data” and other material as extraneous. But remember:

this distinction isn't objectively there; it's the product of our own theoretical frameworks, of which we need to remain conscious. What frameworks are we bringing to bear and why? How do these affect what we see as relevant "data"? Would we be better served with alternative frameworks, or is our set of concepts adequate to the task at hand? This is why this class is all about the theory and practice of ethnography: without proper theoretical orientation, our practice is nothing. In this class, we will learn to unite them: theory and practice into an enterprise called ethnography.

COURSE RULES

First and foremost, attendance and participation in this class are not optional. This is a graduate seminar, meaning that we will be discussing readings in depth – and we will be discussing. I will not be lecturing in this course. This means that you must come to class prepared to discuss, which means completing all readings and assignments before coming to class. Reading is itself a skill that must be developed. These are not texts to be skimmed on your phone just before class. I expect that you will take notes on and annotate your readings, showing up to class with interpretations, questions, and critiques. And it goes without saying that if there aren't attendees, there won't be much of a discussion. Therefore, attendance is mandatory. If you wish to pass the class, you can only miss two meetings. Three or more absences will automatically lead to a failing grade.

Please come to class on time and be respectful of your classmates. Undoubtedly discussions will get heated at times, as is perfectly normal. But I do ask that you engage your classmates respectfully. This also means being present: no phones, no side conversations, no going on social media on your laptop. I'm quite serious about this.

Plagiarism will, of course, not be tolerated in this class. If you have a question as to what constitutes plagiarism, please don't hesitate to reach out. I'm happy to explain, and to do so without judgment. But if I do catch you plagiarizing on any assignment for this class, you will automatically fail the entire course, no questions asked.

Finally, UNCG seeks to comply fully with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Students requesting accommodations based on a disability must be registered with the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS) in 215 Elliott University Center (336-334-5440, oars.uncg.edu).

COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

As we return for spring 2022, all students, faculty, and staff are required to uphold UNCG's culture of care by actively engaging in behaviors that limit the spread of COVID-19. These actions include, but are not limited to:

- Following face-covering guidelines
- Engaging in proper hand-washing hygiene
- Self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19
- Staying home when ill
- Complying with directions from health care providers or public health officials to quarantine or isolate if ill or exposed to someone who is ill
- Completing a self-report when experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, testing positive for COVID-19, or being identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive
- Staying informed about the University's policies and announcements via the COVID-19 website

Instructors will have seating charts for their classes. These are important for facilitating contact tracing should there be a confirmed case of COVID-19. Students must sit in their assigned seats at every class meeting. Students may move their chairs in class to facilitate group work, as long as instructors keep seating chart records. Students should not eat or drink during class time.

A limited number of disposable masks will be available in classrooms for students who have forgotten theirs. Face coverings are also available for purchase in the UNCG Campus Bookstore. Students who do not follow masking requirements will be asked to put on a face covering or leave the classroom to retrieve one and only return when they follow the basic standards of safety and care for the UNCG community. Once students have a face covering, they are permitted to re-enter a class already in progress. Repeated issues may result in conduct action. The course policies regarding attendance and academics remain in effect for partial or full absence from class due to lack of adherence with face covering and other requirements.

For instances where the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS) has granted accommodations regarding wearing face coverings, students should contact their instructors to develop appropriate alternatives to class participation and/or activities as needed. Instructors or the student may also contact OARS (336.334.5440) who, in consultation with Student Health services, will review requests for accommodations.

ASSIGNMENTS

As a methods seminar, this course is slightly different from a standard graduate seminar. Think of it as a practicum: this is a course that involves both reading *about* ethnography and *doing* ethnography, and you will have a series of assignments involving both aspects. No late assignments will be accepted.

- **Selecting a field site (10 %):** On February 1, everyone will give an in-class presentation (5–10 minutes) on their field site. This means that you will need a field site easily accessible over the course of the semester. If your MA thesis or PhD dissertation involves research somewhere far from Greensboro, you should choose another site for the semester that is easily accessible. I will approve of your project on the spot – and you can only begin your fieldwork once you receive my approval. You do not need IRB approval if you are only doing fieldwork for this course. But if you plan to use your ethnographic data in your thesis, dissertation, or published work, you will need to secure IRB approval. You should have some idea as to what kind of field site you might find useful and interesting. If not, please sign up immediately to discuss this with me in office hours.
- **Field notes (25 % + 5 %):** Once you have a field site, I expect you to spend time there at least once weekly, and preferably even more often. At a minimum, you should carry out 2–3 hours of fieldwork per week. Every single visit, you will be writing up your field notes. On the final day of class, you will submit (via Canvas) a selection from these notes. I ask that you select between 10 and 15 pages (double-spaced). The length is less important than the quality: these should represent your very best work. This will count for 25 percent of your grade. These should include both thick description and analysis, but the balance of the two is up to you.
 - The other 5 % will come from your in-class field note exchanges on the February 22. These will be graded P/F – if you do it, you get full credit. But you need to bring at least 3 pages of field notes to class on that day. Please bring 5 printed copies: 1 for me, 3 for your other group members, and 1 for yourself.
 - Anyone you interview must have given their explicit consent, meaning that they either need to give explicit verbal consent or else sign a consent form. In the case of the latter, you should make your own, though you should use the UNCG template to get you started, which is available at <https://integrity.uncg.edu/>

institutional-review-board/ – scroll down to “IRB Consent Form Templates.”

- **Reading memos (39 %):** Starting the third week of class (January 26), you will submit reading memos every week, each worth 3 percent of your grade. There are 13, which means that in total they constitute the bulk of your grade for this class: 39 percent. Each memo should be roughly 500 words, or roughly 3/4 of a single-spaced page. If you want to write more, that’s fine, but please don’t exceed a page. These should not be summaries of the reading. Instead, they should be *reflections* on the reading.
- **Participation (21 %):** Participation is crucial in any seminar, and it therefore comprises a substantial portion of your grade. While I won’t sit there with a checklist to make sure each of you speaks every seminar, I do expect every single one of you to engage in class discussion on a regular basis. If you participate, you should consider these 21 points to be a given.

REQUIRED READINGS

Most of the readings will be available on Canvas, with the exception of five books:

- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)
- Josh Seim, *Bandage, Sort, and Hustle: Ambulance Crews on the Front Lines of Urban Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020)
- Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police-Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)
- Heba Gowayed, *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022)
- Zachary Levenson, *Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Post-Apartheid City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

All of these are widely available for purchase online. Please be sure to order them early. Some of them may be available through the library as eBooks. Note that the Gowayed and Levenson books don’t come out until April, though you can preorder both. Since we are reading the Gowayed book on the day it comes out, I will circulate a PDF version of the first half of her book, which the author has graciously provided. In the case that my book is delayed for whatever reason, I will do the same.

PART I. INTRODUCING ETHNOGRAPHY

January 11: What is ethnography?

- Sarah Daynes and Terry Williams, “The Mission,” Pp. XX-XX in *On Ethnography* (London: Polity, 2018).
- Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, “Manifesto for *Ethnography*,” *Ethnography* 1(1): pp. 5–16 (2000).
- Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, T. L. Taylor, “Ten Myths about Ethnography,” Pp. 29–51 in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

January 18: What do ethnographers do?

- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): pp. 1–88.
- D. Soyini Madison, “Methods: ‘Do I Really Need A Method?’ A Method...or Deep Hanging Out?” Pp. 27–60 in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, Performance*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2020).
 - Guest speaker: Dr. Sarah Daynes

PART II. EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

January 24: Social theory and ethnography/social theory as ethnography

*NOTE THIS WEEK WE MEET ON MON. RATHER THAN TUES.

- Michael Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method: Race and Class in Postcolonial Africa,” Pp. 19–72 in *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
- Kathy Charmaz, “An Invitation to Grounded Theory,” Pp. 1–21 in *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2014).
- Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, “Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis,” *Sociological Theory* 30(3): pp. 167–86 (2012).

February 1: Problematizing the ethnographic gaze

IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS: FIELD SITES

- Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “Research Through Imperial Eyes,” Pp. 49–66 in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Zed, 2021).
- Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein, “Reflections on Fieldwork in New Jersey,” Pp. 59–77 in *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
- Alford A. Young, Jr., “White Ethnographers on the Experiences of African American Men: Then and Now,” Pp. 179–199 in *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology*, edited by Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008).
- Christina Sharpe, “Black Life, Annotated,” *New Inquiry* (August 8, 2014), available online (<https://thenewinquiry.com/black-life-annotated/>).

February 8: Being-in-the-field

- Michael Burawoy, “Living Sociology: On Being in the World One Studies,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 47: pp. 17–40 (2021).
- Julia Chuang, “Appendix,” Pp. 191–200 in *Beneath the China Boom: Labor, Citizenship, and the Making of a Rural Land Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).
- Kimberly Kay Hoang, “Gendering Carnal Ethnography: A Queer Reception,” Pp. 230–46 in *Other, Please Specify: Queer Methods in Sociology*, edited by D’Lane Compton, Tey Meadow, and Kristen Schilt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).
- Josh Seim, “Participant Observation, Observant Participation, and Hybrid Ethnography,” *Sociological Methods & Research* (2021), advance online publication (doi: 10.1177/0049124120986209).

PART III. FROM FIELDNOTES TO ANALYSIS

February 15: What do you do with fieldnotes?

- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, “Processing Fieldnotes: Coding and Memoing,” Pp. 171–200 in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- Lynda Mannik and Karen McGarry, “After Fieldwork – Analyzing Data,” Pp. 105–22 in *Practicing Ethnography: A Student Guide to Method and Methodology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

- Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, T. L. Taylor, “Data Analysis,” Pp. 159–81 in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

February 22: Writing ethnography

IN-CLASS WORKSHOP: EXCHANGING FIELD NOTES

- D. Soyini Madison, “It’s Time to Write: Writing as Performance” Pp. 179–204 in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, Performance*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2020).
- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, “Writing an Ethnography,” Pp. 201–42 in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- Lynda Mannik and Karen McGarry, “Writing Up and the Politics of Representation,” Pp. 123–39 in *Practicing Ethnography: A Student Guide to Method and Methodology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

PART IV. READING ETHNOGRAPHY

March 1: *Bandage, Sort, and Hustle*, Pt. 1

- Josh Seim, *Bandage, Sort, and Hustle: Ambulance Crews on the Front Lines of Urban Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020): pp. ix–xvi, 1–81.

[Spring Break]

March 15: *Bandage, Sort, and Hustle*, Pt. 2

- Josh Seim, *Bandage, Sort, and Hustle: Ambulance Crews on the Front Lines of Urban Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020): pp. 83–196.

March 22: *The Ambivalent State*, Pt. 1

- Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police-Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): pp. vii–ix, 1–88.

March 29: *The Ambivalent State*, Pt. 2

- Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police-Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): pp. 89–182.

April 5: *Refuge*, Pt. 1

- Heba Gowayed, *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022): pp. TBD.

April 12: *Refuge*, Pt. 2

- Heba Gowayed, *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022): pp. TBD.

April 19: *Delivery as Dispossession*, Pt. 1

- Zachary Levenson, *Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Post-Apartheid City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): pp. TBD.

April 26: *Delivery as Dispossession*, Pt. 2

- Zachary Levenson, *Delivery as Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Post-Apartheid City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): pp. TBD.