

Ethnography in social research: an introduction in theory and practice

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OBJECTIVES

This seminar aims at a research-oriented presentation of ethnography as a method, an approach and a way of writing in social sciences. The seminar blends theoretical contents and practical experiences, aiming to sensitize students to the bases of ethnography and to enhance their skills for further elaboration through their research careers.

The seminar consists of four sessions, based on a continuous movement between traditional style lecturing and more engaging forms of discussion and, hopefully, appropriation of the ethnographic way of doing social research. The presentation of the typical development of ethnographic fieldwork, and of its theoretical bases, will be instrumental to “embedding” an ethnographic sensitivity into the students’ own research concerns. Ethnography will be addressed both as a methodological tool – or a set of research techniques, alternative to or complementary with all others – and as a substantive issue, or a topic in itself.

The reading of a number of the texts below is recommended, as they are highly conducive to the students’ intellectual wellbeing. The last session will be specifically dedicated to the discussion of several journal articles on major topics for ethnography in a variety of areas (including an open one, corresponding to the students’ own interests). Students are asked to analyze *at least three* of the proposed articles as a requirement to participate in Session 4 – hence to retain some good recollection of ethnography over their future life course. With a view to achieving this, attendance of the whole course is necessary.

REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

No specific previous knowledge or expertise is required. Class attendance and reading assignments will be critical components of the course experience. Students’ performance will be assessed through their active involvement all over the course, including the focused improvisations in Sessions 2 and 3 and the presentation of selected readings in Session 4. Classes will take place in a blended format.

COURSE OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Session 1 – Theory: Thu 15 April 9-12

Ethnography: a conceptual and methodological overview

After a round of presentations with students, and of discussion of mutual expectations, this session provides a succinct overview of ethnography at an epistemological, methodological and substantive level. In a traditionally academic fashion, the session is split into two parts. The first deals with the key approaches to ethnography and their epistemological underpinnings, related to a diverse theoretical background in sociology and anthropology. The second part focuses on the stepwise development of ethnographic research – from theoretical work to the selection, negotiated access

and meaningful involvement into the field, up to the writing stage. At all levels, we discuss also the typical challenges, promises and pitfalls of doing ethnography.

Below are some of the best introductions to the field (i.e. monographs and a few key articles on the logic and development of ethnographic fieldwork).

Atkinson P. et al. (eds.) (2001), *Handbook of ethnography*, London: Sage.

Atkinson P. (2015), *For ethnography*, London: Sage.

Bryman A. (ed.) (2001), *Ethnography*, London: Sage.

Emerson R., Fretz R., Shaw L. (2011), *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes – 2nd Edition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Hammersley M., Atkinson P. (eds.) (2007), *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, London: Routledge.

Gay y Blasco P., Wardle H. (2007), *How to read ethnography*, London: Routledge.

Madden R. (2010), *Being ethnographic: a guide to the theory and practice of ethnography*, London: Sage.

Van Maanen J. (2011), *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography – 2nd Edition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Adler, P., & Adler, P. (2003). The promise and pitfalls of going into the field, *Contexts*, 2: 41–47.

Bucerius, S. (2013). Becoming a ‘Trusted Outsider’: Gender, ethnicity, and inequality in ethnographic research, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42, 690–721.

Desmond M. (2014), Relational ethnography, *Theory and Society*, 43(5): 547-59.

Fine, G. (1993), Ten lies of ethnography: Moral dilemmas of field research, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22(3): 267-294.

Fine G. (2017), Relational distance and epistemic generosity: the power of detachment in skeptical ethnography, *Sociological Methods and Research*, 1-22, online first.

Gold R. (1987), The ethnographic method in sociology, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(4): 388-402.

Ingold T. (2014), That’s enough about ethnography!, *HAU*, 4(1): 383-95.

Marcus GH (2007) Collaborative imaginaries, *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 5(1): 1–17.

Platt J. (1983), The development of the “participant observation” method in sociology: Origin myth and history, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 19(4): 379-93.

Shah A. (2017), Ethnography? Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis, *HAU*, 7(1): 45-59.

Small, M. (2009), “How many cases do I need?” On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography* 10(1): 5-38

Snow D. et al. (1986), Fieldwork roles and informational yield, *Urban Life*, 14(4): 377-408.

Van Maanen J. (2010), Ethnography as work: Some rules of engagement, *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(1): 218-34.

Watson T. (2010), Ethnography, reality, and truth: the vital need for studies of ‘how things work’ in organizations and management, *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(1): 202-17.

White W.F. (1979), On making the most of participant observation, *American Sociologist*, 14: 56-66.

Session 2 – Fieldwork: Wed 21 April 14-17

Putting ethnography into practice: focused improvisations - fieldwork

After a substantive wrapping-up from session 1, we try an early, exploratory but experientially meaningful approach to the “field” in an ethnographic perspective. The success of this session will depend on some in-depth reading of the literature recommended for session 1. It will also be conditional on the students’ active involvement there-and-then.

Session 3 – Designing: Thu 29 April 9-12

Putting ethnography into practice: focused improvisations – research design

After a short wrapping-up from session 2, we revisit the key research concerns and aims of each student in an ethnographic perspective, in a “quick and dirty” but experientially meaningful way. The success of this session will depend on some in-depth reading of the literature recommended for session 1. It will also be conditional on the students’ active involvement there-and-then.

Session 4 – Discussing: Fri 7 May 9-12

Presentation of selected readings, Discussion, Wrapping up

In the last session each student is expected to select at least three articles from one of the groupings below. Please divide them among you!

Each student should prepare an individual presentation 20 min. long, followed by a Q&A session (40-45 min. overall per student). As this selection tends to reflect my own research interests, feel free to pick up ethnographically based articles that are more consistent with your own research interests – just let me know in advance¹ – see sect. 6.

1. Ethnography of marginalized minorities and of forced and undocumented migrants

- Agier M. (2002), Between war and city: towards an urban anthropology of refugee camps, *Ethnography*, 3(3): 317-41.
- Anderson R. (2014), Hunter and prey: Patrolling clandestine migration in the Euro-African borderlands, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87(1): 19-50.
- Desmond M. (2015), Severe deprivation in America, *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 7(1): 1-11.
- Fontanari E. (2017), “It’s my life”. The temporalities of refugees and asylum seekers within the European border regime, *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 1: 25-54.
- Goffman A. (2009), On the run: Wanted men in a Philadelphia Ghetto, *American Sociological Review*, 74: 339-57.
- Holmes S. (2013), “Is it worth risking your life?”: Ethnography, risk and death on the US-Mexico border, *Social Science and Medicine*, 99: 153-61.
- Khosravi S. (2010), An ethnography of migrant “illegality in Sweden”: Included yet excepted?, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 6(1): 95-116.
- Schapendonk, J., & Steel, G. (2014). Following Migrant Trajectories: The Im/Mobility of Sub-Saharan Africans en Route to the European Union. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 104(2), 262–270.
- Tsianos V., Karakayali S. (2010), Transnational migration and the emergence of the European border regime: an ethnographic analysis, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13(3): 373-87.

2. Ethnography of urban diversities

- Becker E. (2015), Little of Italy? Assumed ethnicity in a New York City neighbourhood, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(1): 109-24.
- Berg M., Sigona N. (2013), Ethnography, diversity and urban space, *Identities*, 20(4): 347-60.
- Hall S. (2015), Super-diverse street: a trans-ethnography across migrant localities, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(1): 22-37.
- Padilla B. et al. (2015), Superdiversity and conviviality: exploring frameworks for doing ethnography in Southern European intercultural cities, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(4): 621-35.
- Wessendorf S. (2013), Commonplace diversity and the ‘ethos of mixing’: perceptions of difference in a London neighbourhood, *Identities*, 20(4): 407-22.
- Wise A. (2010), Sensuous multiculturalism: Emotional landscapes of inter-ethnic living in Australian suburbia, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(6): 917-37.

3. Ethnography of “home” and domesticity

- Cieraad I. (2010), Homes from home: Memories and projections, *Home Cultures*, 7(1): 85-102.
- Gielis R. (2011), The value of single-site ethnography in the global era: Studying transnational experiences in the migrant house, *Area*, 43(3): 25-63.
- Giorgi S., Fasulo A. (2013), Transformative homes: Squatting and furnishing as sociocultural projects, *Home Cultures*, 10(2): 111-34.
- Gurney C.M. (1997), “... Half of me was satisfied”: Making sense of home through episodic ethnographies, *Women’s International Forum*, 20(3): 373-86.
- Levin, I., and R. Fincher. 2010. Tangible transnational links in the houses of Italian immigrants in Melbourne, *Global Networks* 10(3): 401–423.
- Rosales, M. V. 2010. The domestic work of consumption: Materiality, migration and home-making, *Etnográfica* 14(3): 507–525.
- Sandu A. (2013), Transnational homemaking practices: Identity, belonging and informal learning, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 21(4): 496-512.

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Walsh K. (2006), British expatriate belongings: Mobile homes and transnational homing, *Home Cultures*, 3(2): 119-40.

4. *Ethnography of migrants' family life and kinship*

Aguilar F. (2013), Brother's keeper? Siblingship, overseas migration, and centripetal ethnography in a Philippine village, *Ethnography*, 14(3): 346-68.

Akesson L. et al. (2010), Mobility, moralities and motherhood: Navigating the contingencies of Cape Verdean lives, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(2): 237-60.

Dreby J. (2006), Honor and virtue. Mexican Parenting in the Transnational Context, *Gender and Society*, 20(1): 32-59.

Fog-Olwig K. (2002), A wedding in the family: Home making in a global kin network, *Global Networks*, 2(3): 205-28.

Mazzucato V, Schans D (2011) Transnational families and the wellbeing of children, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 73(4): 704–712.

Punch S. (2012), Studying transnational children: a multi-sited, longitudinal, ethnographic approach, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(6): 1007-23.

Wolf D. (1997), Family secrets: Transnational struggles among children of Filipino migrants, *Sociological Perspectives*, 40(3): 457-82.

5. *Multi-sited ethnography*

Amit-Talai, V. (1997), In precarious motion: From territorial to transnational cultures, *CRSA/RCSA*, 34, 319–332.

Boccagni P. (2016), From the multi-sited to the in-between: ethnography as a way of delving into migrants' transnational relationships, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(1): 1-16.

Boccagni P. (2019), Multi-sited ethnography. In *SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods*, <http://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/multi-sited-ethnography>

Falzon, M. A. (2009), Multi-sited ethnography: Theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research. In M.A. Falzon (Ed.), *Multi-sited ethnography* (pp. 1–24). Oxford: Ashgate.

Gille, Z., & O'Riain, S. (2002), Global ethnography, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 271–295.

Hage, G. (2005), A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community, *Anthropological Theory*, 5, 463-475.

Hannerz, U. (2006), Being there ... and there ... and there!, *Ethnography*, 4, 201–216

Madianou M. (2016), Ambient co-presence: Transnational family practices in polymedia environments, *Global Networks*, 16(2): 183-201.

Marcus, G. (1995), Ethnography in/of the world system, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 95–117.

Shinozaki K. (2012), Transnational dynamics in researching migrants: Self-reflexivity and boundary drawing in fieldwork, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35(10): 1810-27.

6... *Uses and relevance of ethnography in your own primary research field*

You can pick up, read and discuss three articles based on ethnographic case studies on a core topic for your research interests (to be negotiated and fixed in advance)