LOGICS OF SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY
SC 710

Office: McGuinn 409
Office hours: Thursdays 2-4 or
by appointment

Sociology is famously obsessed with “methods”: exactly what is the correct way to conduct an interview, write a questionnaire, select a random sample? Yet there is a prior set of epistemological and conceptual issues these questions leave untouched. What is the aim of sociology? Are we trying to describe, to explain? What does it mean to “explain” something anyway? How are we to understand our relationship to the world we study? Do we strive to understand society from “the outside” or grasp it through clarifying our own location within it? How can one make claims about “society” from necessarily partial information? What is the logic through which we make sociological claims? What are the ethical and political problems and possibilities inherent in research? It is to these questions that we turn this term.

We will explore these most fundamental research issues through two parallel processes: theoretical reading and discussion and ongoing exploration in writing of the implications of these ideas for your individual empirical projects. This requires that you have individual empirical projects... At this stage, I suspect some of you already have a specific research idea, while others have more generally formulated interests. For the purposes of the class, you’ll need, at a minimum, to choose a set of questions you are interested in engaging with throughout the term and writing a research proposal about at term’s end. You do not have to actually do this project! However you do need to be interested enough in the question to carry its exploration through the term.

Course requirements:

1. Complete, close reading of assigned texts.
2. Consistent attendance and active, aware participation in class discussion. 20% grade.
3. Fourteen, 400-600 word thought pieces in response to weekly prompts. These should be posted on the course Blackboard site no later than 9 pm on the Tuesday before class. 40% grade.
4. Completion of a formal research proposal. Specifics TBA. 40% grade.

All readings are on physical and/or e-reserve at O’Neill. The books below are on sale at the BC bookstore and on reserve at O’Neill. They are also available, generally more cheaply, through online sources. You could manage without buying all of them, as whenever possible I’ve put separate chapters on e-reserve (see syllabus for how much is required). Nonetheless, these are all books I think you’d find well-worth owning, in which case you might as well get them now.
Objectivity by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (Zone Books, 2007).
Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences by Kristin Luker (Harvard University Press, 2008).
Tricks of the Trade by Howard Becker (University of Chicago Press, 1998).
Ethnography Unbound by Michael Burawoy et al (University of California Press, 1991)
Death without Weeping by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (University of California Press, 1993)
Tales of the Field by John Van Maanen (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

January 20- January 27: Disciplining knowledge

January 20:
Introduction

January 27: Sociology as an institution


Weekly writing:
Find and read an article in the Annual Review of Sociology in the general area of your research interest. Write a brief discussion of the implications of this week’s readings for how one might think about this area.

January 3: “References”


Weekly writing:
Complete the “daisy” described by Luker in the end of Chapter 5. Write a brief discussion of how one might think about this exercise in light of the week’s readings.
February 10- February 17: Epistemology

February 10: A history of “objectivity”

**Weekly writing:**
Write a brief discussion of the implications of Daston and Galison for how you might visualize (or otherwise describe) your object of study.

February 17: Situating the researching self


**Weekly writing:**
Write a brief discussion of the implications of this set of readings for how you might approach your project.

February 24: Sociology for what?

February 24: Explanation, interpretation, description


Weekly writing:
How do you envision your overall project? What sort of “account” might you be interested in creating? Write a brief discussion of how you are thinking of the goals of your project using some of the frameworks provided in this week’s readings.

March 10-March 17: The status of “data”

March 10: Casing

Weekly writing:
How might you study your project as a “case”? If you already have a case, what is your case a case of? Write a brief discussion of this process with reference to the week’s readings.

March 17: Sampling

Weekly writing:
What might you “sample” in order to investigate the issues that concern you? Concretely, how might you go about doing this sampling? Write a brief discussion with reference to the week’s readings.
March 24-April 7: Robust claims from partial views, making sociological accounts

March 24: Empirical and theoretical “generalization”

Weekly writing:
How might you “generalize” from the data you plan to collect for your project? That is, how might you conceive of your data as theoretically typical or empirically representative of something beyond itself? Discuss these issues with reference to the week’s readings.

March 31: The project of interpretation
Luker Chapter 6 on operationalization

Weekly writing:
How might you interpret the data you plan to collect for your project? Could you read it as a microcosm of the social world around it? Discuss these issues with reference to the week’s readings.

April 7: Theoretical and empirical extensions
Weekly writing:
How might you extrapolate – either theoretically, empirically or both – from your data? Discuss this with reference to the week’s readings.

April 14-April 28: Relating to “the field”

April 14: The researching self – contaminant or instrument?

Weekly writing:
How do you see yourself as a researcher in this project, as problematic contaminant, useful measurement instrument, or both? Discuss these issues with reference to the week’s readings.

April 21: Ethics through the lens of “liability” (NO CLASS – PRIVATE MEETINGS APRIL 15)
“Don’t Talk to the Humans: The Crackdown on Social Science Research” by Christopher Shea, *Lingua Franca* 10:6 (September 2000).

Weekly writing:
Complete a version of the BC IRB’s human subject protocol for your research project. Do not submit this to the IRB. Post it on the class Blackboard site as usual.

April 28: Ethics, politics and unintended consequences
“I Wish This Were a Poem of Practices of Participatory Research” by Budd Hall in *The Handbook of Action Research*, edited by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Sage, 2001). Pages 171-178.


**Weekly writing:**
Does your project have ethical and/or political goals beyond the production of knowledge? If so, how would you characterize them? If not, what are the problems with thinking of sociology in these terms? Discuss these issues with reference to the week’s readings.

**May 5: The politics of narrative**

**May 5: Writing**


**Weekly writing:**
Work on your proposal! Depending on how you write, post either your introduction or outline on Blackboard.

**Formal research proposals due, in hard copy, on Monday May 17 by noon in McGuinn 409.**