

## **Poverty Ethnography: A Sociology of US Urban Poverty Through an Ethnographic Lens**

**Instructor: Chris Herring, Department of Sociology**

Email: [herringgsi@gmail.com](mailto:herringgsi@gmail.com)

Office Hours: Monday 4-6pm & by appointment

Seminar Meetings

Office Location: Barrows 449  
Haviland)

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### **Overview**

Since the turn of the millennium the polarization between rich and poor has widened, personal debt deepened, and job insecurity intensified to new heights across the US. At the same time, domestic policy has further shifted from public provisions of social welfare to privatized provisions of workfare and penalfare for the country's poorest citizens. How is this poverty being (re)produced, managed, resisted, and experienced? How does an ethnographic approach - studying through first hand observation and/or participation – produce sociological knowledge, theory, and representations? Over the semester students will simultaneously explore these sociological and methodological questions through close engagement with contemporary ethnographies of poverty in the US metropolis.

After a brief introduction to the ethnographic treatments of poverty in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the seminar will focus on one or two recently published ethnographic works each week. We will relate key strands of the sociology of poverty, including its production (low-wage, informal, and illegal labor), reproduction (health, housing, neighborhoods, and education), management (welfare and criminal justice), and resistance (individual and collective) with broader sociological topics of class, race, gender, work, urbanization, politics, and culture. In spanning and connecting these studies the course aim's to provide a "relational" understanding of poverty. An approach that attempts to both relate various single-site studies of particular sub-populations of the poor with broader sociological themes, and one that shifts thinking about "the poor" to thinking about relationships of power and privilege – treating poverty as a political,

economic, and ideological effect of capitalist processes and state activities and making sense of poor people's responses to it.

We will also survey the key schools and traditions of the ethnographic method, evaluate genres of ethnographic writing, and grapple with the ethics of doing participant observation in poor communities and the politics of representation. Keeping the particular ethnographic methods of each study continually in our reflexive scope will not only provide an advanced literacy in one of the discipline's core modes of research, but also reveal the warrants and limits of other quantitative, survey, and interviewing methods.

### **Design & Grading**

The course is designed to provide a relational understanding of poverty under late capitalism in the modern metropolis and an intermediate literacy in one of sociology's core but perhaps most varied and controversial methods. As a capstone seminar of the sociology department, the course is not only far more focused than a traditional lecture course, both topically and methodologically, it is also explicitly designed to cultivate a wider set of critical thinking skills including (a) reading analytically and critically, (b) generating novel questions, (c) relating and adjudicating between ideas and thinkers, (d) writing and discussing ideas clearly and constructively. We will workshop these skills through our weekly meetings, presentations, reading responses, and a final paper that you will develop throughout the course. At the conclusion of the seminar you should walk away with a firm enough grasp of the empirical realities, key concepts, and theoretical and policy debates of contemporary poverty in US cities to competently and reflexively participate in graduate-level academic, policy, community-based, and professional research and practices addressing urban poverty.

#### *Seminar Attendance, Participation, and Presentations (30%)*

Attendance (15%) + Participation (5%) + Two Presentations (10%)

Seminars meet once a week and we will continuously be building comparisons and contrasts across the works covered. Therefore attendance is absolutely crucial. You are allowed one unexcused, no-questions asked absences. *For each additional unexcused*

*absence, your attendance/participation grade will decrease by a full letter grade.* You must email me as far in advance as possible if you expect to miss a class and have a valid reason for doing so or a doctor's note. To get full credit for the course, you must contribute actively to section discussions.

Each student will be required to present twice: once as a proponent of a reading and once as a critic, each approximately 5 minutes. As aproponent, you should work to extract a central thesis from the text, presenting it succinctly and forcefully. After doing so, lay out the evidence the author provides to substantiate their argument. Provide as much textual evidence as you can to support your readings, but please don't simply read a series of block quotes. Then highlight what you find to be the primary merit of this work substantively and methodologically in how it extends, contributes, or corrects our understanding of urban poverty in comparison to earlier works. This should be *your* reading of the text.

As a critic, you should begin presenting an internal critique of the author's own argument. Does the author prove or substantiate her own argument? Does the author contradict himself within the text? After doing so move onto noting the works limits through external critiques of your own, or assumed critiques from the perspective of another scholar or school of thought. Does it include a particular dimension/cause that could be shaping the process or behavior under examination? Do the explanations and concepts work as well as those of others that we've read? What are the limits of the method or representations?

### *Weekly Writing Responses (30%)*

Each week you will receive a short assignment (250-500 words) **due by Friday 5pm** on BCourses. The purpose of these assignments is to guide your reading and prepare for our weekly discussion. We will engage collectively with these responses during our seminar and they will also serve as key resources for your final paper. I will provide feedback on alternating weeks. On weeks of presentations, please submit a written essay of your presentation (approx. 1000-2000 words) in place of the reading response by Sunday 5pm. You are allowed one skip week without penalty and one late submission, due Sunday 5pm without penalty.

*Final Paper: Critical Book Review Essay (40%)*

Abstract/Outline **due Nov. 21** + 15 minute meeting (10%) **by Dec 2** + Final Paper **due Dec. 14** (30%)

Students will produce a 12-15 page Critical Book Review Essay. Unlike a traditional book review that summarizes a work and notes its merits and limits, a joint critical book review presents the critic's own argument about a given topic or its representation in ethnographic work, by drawing comparisons and contrasts across two or more works. The essay must draw on two to four books covered in the course, and may also (though not required) to engage with other scholarship beyond the course. The essay should focus on a specific topic of poverty (i.e. illegal/informal work, housing/homelessness, criminalization, welfare, etc.) a sociological theme (race, gender, culture, the state, exploitation, social control, etc.), or a methodological or representational issue (ethics of research, insider vs. outsider ethnography, immersive vs. observational, character vs. institutional ethnography, politics of representation, etc.).

**Required Texts:** All course materials will be available as downloadable PDFs on bCourses (bcourses.berkeley.edu).

**Part I: Concepts and History**

**Week 1. August 29: Course Introduction**

Ananya Roy. "In Defense of Poverty." *Items*. SSRC. 2016

**Week 2. September 5: Poverty Knowledge and Contours of the New Poverty**

\*No Class Meeting, Labor Day, still READ!

Alice O'Connor. 2001. *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century US History*. Introduction. pp3-22.

Judith G. Goode and Jeff Maskovsky. 2001. *New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics, and Impoverished People in the United States*. Introduction. pp1-15.

### **Week 3. September 12: US Origins of Poverty Ethnography: the Atlanta and Chicago Schools**

W.E.B DuBois. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro*. Ch. 1, "The Scope of this Study" (pp1-4), Ch. 2 "The Negro Problem" (5-9) and a passage on Method (62-63), Ch. 9 "The Occupation of Negroes" (97-141). Ch. 15 sec. 44 "The Environment of the Negro: Houses and Rent" (283-299) + Preceding Passage on "The Causes of Crime and Poverty, Ch. 16, "The Contact of the Races: Color Prejudice" (322-355). Chapter XVIII "A Final Word" (385-397).

Harvey Zorbaugh. 1929. *The Gold Coast and the Slum*. Ch 7, "The Slum" (pp127-159).

Presenters: Kara and Alaia

### **Week 4. September 18: Culture Wars and "The Negro Family"**

Elliot Liebow. 1967. *Tally's Corner*. Introduction by William Julius Wilson. Ch. 1, "Introduction" (1- 17). Ch. 2 "Men and Jobs" (19-47). Ch. 4 "Husbands and Wives" (67-89). Ch 7. "Conclusion" and Methodological Appendix (135-166).

Presenter: Angie

## **Part II: Producing Poverty: Working on the Margins**

### **Week 5. September 26: Precarious Low-Wage Work in the Inner City**

Katherine S. Newman. 1999. *No Shame in My Game*. Ch. 1 – 4 (3 -122) "Working Lives," "The Invisible Poor," "Getting a Job in the Inner City," "No Shame in this Game."

Presenter: Alexandra G.

### **Week 6. October 3: Underground Work**

Phillipe Bourgois. 1996. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. "Introduction" selections (11-18); Chpt. 2 "A Street History of El Barrio" (48-76); Chpt. 4 "'Goin' Legit': Disrespect and Resistance at Work" (114 – 173); "Conclusion" (318 – 327).

Proponent: Jelitza

Critic: Scott

### **Week 7. October 10: Informal Work**

Teresa Gowan. 2010. *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. Ch. 1 "Urban Ethnography (1-25); Chpt 4-5 (104-177) "Word on the Street," "The New Hobos."

Proponent: Emily

Critic: Eric C

### **Part III: Reproducing Poverty**

### **Week 8. October 17: Housing Precarity**

Mathew Desmond. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Nixon

Critic: Juan

### **Week 9. October 24: Poor Neighborhoods**

Martin Sanchez-Jankowski. 2008. *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods*. Chapters TBD.

Elijah Anderson. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. Chapter TBD.

Proponent: Cheyenne

Critic: Meriah

### **Week 10. October 31: Youth and Violence**

Nikki Jones. 2010. *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence*. Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Monica

Critic: Lauren

**Week 11. November 7: Health and Addiction**

Kelly Ray Knight. 2015. *Addicted. Pregnant. Poor.* Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Monica

Critic: Lauren

**Part IV: Managing Poverty**

**Week 12. November 14: Welfare / Workfare**

Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work.* Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Kasey Stetter

Critic: Nancy Murillo

**Week 13. November 21: Policing / Penalfare**

Alice Goffman. 2014. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City.* Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Shalita

Critic: Ali

**Week 14. November 28: Policing / Organized Resistance**

**FINAL CLASS**

Forrest Stuart. 2016. *Down Out & Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row.* Chapters TBD.

Proponent: Janet

Critic: Michael