

SOC G256
Urban Poverty: The Ethnographic Perspective

Fall 2007

Mondays 4:30-6:30pm

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Office hours: Tuesdays 11-2, Wednesdays 10:30-12, or by appointment

Overview

This seminar explores the complex topic of urban poverty through the lens of ethnography. Each week we will read a selected ethnographic text and consider together its contributions – both theoretical and methodological – to the ongoing dialogue within the field of sociology concerning the causes, consequences, and individual experiences of poverty in America’s inner cities. While the course is arranged thematically, our discussions will necessarily be iterative, as we will continually revisit issues introduced at different points throughout the syllabus. It is, for example, impossible to analyze the influence of employment opportunities on individual economic outcomes without thinking about family structure, and vice versa. Thus, the selected themes are not mutually exclusive. Nor are they exhaustive; there is certainly far more to be said about the topic of urban poverty than what is covered in this syllabus. It is my hope that our weekly conversations will bring to light additional areas of interest to you.

While this is not intended to be a methods course, one of our objectives will be to think critically about the choice of methodology and research design in each of the texts we study. We will discuss how that choice influences both the author’s substantive claims, as well as the reader’s understanding of those claims.

Course Requirements

- **Participation (25% of final grade):** The main emphasis in this seminar is on classroom discussion. Therefore, it is essential that you read the assigned text each week and come to class prepared to engage in a thoughtful discussion of the material.
- **Weekly reaction papers (15% of final grade):** Each week, you will be asked to write a brief (approx. 600-800 words) response to the assigned reading. This should not be merely a reiteration of the book’s findings, but rather a commentary on the researcher’s assumptions, conclusions, methodological approach, etc. – whatever strikes you as important. You may choose to highlight some questions that you would like the class to discuss. You do not need to write a reaction paper the week that you are responsible for the in-class presentation (see below). You may also choose to skip

one additional week's response paper without penalty. Reaction papers should be emailed to me by 8:00 pm on the Sunday prior to that week's class.

- **Individual presentation (10% of final grade):** Each of you will be responsible for giving one oral presentation to the class. The exact structure of the presentation is flexible, but it is expected that you present for roughly 15-20 minutes at the start of your assigned class. The presentation should not be a summary of the book, but rather a critical analysis of the key themes and their implications. You should plan to raise a few important questions to launch the discussion for that class.
- **Final paper (50% of final grade):** The major writing assignment for this seminar will be a 20-25 page final paper on a topic of your choice. You should select a theme that allows you to think critically about a minimum of three books drawn from the course. You may bring in outside readings to supplement the course materials as well. You are encouraged to discuss your selected topic with me in advance, though you are not required to do so. I am more than happy to review and/or discuss full or partial drafts, provided they are given to be before Monday, Dec. 3rd. Papers will be due in my mailbox by 5:00pm on Monday, Dec. 10th. Late papers will be dropped one full letter grade for every day that they are overdue, and will not be accepted after Wednesday, Dec. 12th.

Required Reading

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

DeParle, Jason. 2004. *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*. New York: Penguin Books.

Edin, Kathryn & Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Liebow, Elliot. 1993. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Penguin Books.

MacLeod, Jay. 1995. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Newman, Katherine. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Russell Sage.

Small, Mario Luis. 2004. *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Stack, Carol. 1974. *All Our Kin*. New York: Basic Books.

Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. 2006. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Optional / Supplemental Reading

Anderson, Elijah. 1990. *Streetwise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourgois, Philippe. 2003. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Newman, Katherine. 2006. *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market*. New York: Russell Sage.

Newman, Katherine. 2003. *A Different Shade of Gray: Mid-Life and Beyond in the Inner City*. New York: The New Press.

Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. 2000. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Course Outline

Week	Date	Topic	Reading Due
1	Sept. 10	Course Introduction	None
2	Sept. 17	Work I: The Low-Wage Labor Market	Newman: <i>No Shame in My Game</i>
3	Sept. 24	Work II: The Underground Economy	Venkatesh: <i>Off the Books</i>
4	Oct. 1	Family I: Single Parenthood	Edin & Kefalas: <i>Promises I Can Keep</i>
5	Oct. 8	NO CLASS *	
6	Oct. 15	Family II: Kinship Networks	Stack: <i>All Our Kin</i>
7	Oct. 22	Violence & Social Control	Anderson: <i>Code of the Street</i>
8	Oct. 29	Culture & Aspirations	MacLeod: <i>Ain't No Makin' It</i>
9	Nov. 5	Social Capital	Small: <i>Villa Victoria</i>
10	Nov. 12	NO CLASS *	
11	Nov. 19	Homelessness	Liebow: <i>Tell Them Who I Am</i>
12	Nov. 26	Social Policy	DeParle: <i>American Dream</i>
13	Dec. 3	Conclusion	None

* The seminar participants will collectively decide whether to make up either or both of these classes on a mutually agreed-upon date.