

Fall 2021
Professor Arlene Stein
Monday 1-4

Sociology 491/615 (01:920:491:01/615)
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Office hours: Monday 11-12:30 and by appointment

QUALITATIVE METHODS: STUDYING LIVES

A life story is the story a person tells about the life they have lived. In social science, life stories are described variously as life histories, life narratives, self stories, oral histories, personal testaments, life documents, and other terms. While having different emphases and meanings, each focuses on the first-person accounting of a life. Life story research has had a long history in the social sciences. There is currently growing interest in this approach, driven in part by popular interest in biography, memoir, and life writing. The study of lives can offer unique insights into the relationship between subjectivities and social structures. This course will examine the theories, methods, and ethics of life histories. We will learn how to conduct sociological interviews which focus on lives and think about how societies organize and shape different kinds of lives.

This course is geared toward graduate students in the social sciences who want to incorporate in-depth life history interviews into their methodological toolbox. But it is open to anyone who is interested in how the study of lives might further our understanding of different social worlds. We'll closely consider a number of studies that employ life history methods, including single case studies as well as group stories, critically engaging them. We will learn how to ask questions and think about open-ended versus more highly structured kinds of interviews. We'll learn how to analyze interviews and use them to generate sociological research. As we learn how to do life history interviews, we will be thinking about interviewing as an interaction that necessarily entails differences of power, and which elicits emotional as well as cognitive responses.

We begin with the assumption that stories can be told in different ways at different times. In other words, they do not simply tell the tale of a life; they are "composed" or constructed. They usually involve a storyteller (the narrator of the story) and an interviewer (who acts as a guide in this process), as well as a narrative text that is assembled. The producer and the teller together construct the story in specific social circumstances.

The course will consist of in-person lectures and discussion. Depending upon circumstances, we may need to meet via Zoom periodically. We will very likely have some guest speakers. Participation will be key, and students will be responsible for helping to lead class discussions, with one or two people co-facilitating each session with me. Students will be assessed on the basis of written work and participation in class discussions.

Learning goals: Students will acquire broad understanding of life history analysis; they will learn how to conduct in-depth interviews which focus on life histories.

REQUIRED BOOKS

Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2* (2001), available online through Rutgers University Library

Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing* (2011), available online through Rutgers University Library

**Additional readings listed on the syllabus will be available on Canvas.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are expected to attend class regularly, complete assigned readings, write often and actively participate in the seminar. There may be online meetings if circumstances, such as inclement weather, make meeting in person difficult.

Attendance. Mandatory and expected unless there is an emergency, in which case, please email to let me know you won't be attending.

Seminar Leader. Each student (or, pairs of students, depending on how many enroll) will take a turn leading the seminar. On these days, the student leader(s) will be responsible for offering a brief summary of the reading (10-12 minutes), setting out some questions for discussion, and facilitating conversation among the group. Post on Canvas by Monday at 10am.

Writing. Each week, everyone will write a short (500-750 words) reaction paper to that week's readings. These should be written for an intelligent, but non-specialist, audience. You are exempt from this assignment the week(s) you are leading class. Upload to Canvas the day before class (Sunday) by 6pm.

Interview Project. Transcribed and theme-coded interview, with analytical summary and critical reflections. Submit annotated transcript and analytical summary of interview. Due November 15.

Analytic Essay. A 12-15-page paper on a topic related to this course. It might be an analytic review of book which uses life history method, a critical analysis of a social scientist's auto/biography, or a research proposal for a future project. Due December 17.

The two writing projects (Interview project, Analytic Essay) will comprise approximately 60% of your grade.

Note: This syllabus is subject to change.

The Rutgers Sociology Department strives to create an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all manifestations, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age,

social class, disability status, region/country of origin, and political orientation. We also celebrate diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seek to create an atmosphere of respect and mutual dialogue. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles and have instituted clear and respectful procedures for responding to such grievances.

September 8. Introduction

C. Wright Mills, "The Promise," *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

M. J. Maynes, J. Pierce, and B. Laslett, Introduction, p. 1-12 in *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (2008).

September 13. What is a Life? Why Study Lives?

K. Plummer, *Documents of Life*, ch. 2

I, Rigoberto Menchu (1984), excerpt.

A. Stein, "Becoming Lesbian," *Sex and Sensibility* (1997).

Michael Apted, "56 Up" video, excerpt.

*Next class, come with a preliminary idea of who/why/how you will interview for your project. Who might you interview? Why? What sociological questions will you seek to address?

September 20. Life history as Social Science Research Method

Mary Romero, *The Maid's Daughter*, excerpt.

Robert Blauner, *Black Lives, White Lives*, excerpt.

RW Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 87-114

September 27. Asking Questions

K. Plummer, *Documents of Life*, ch. 6

Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, pages 2-15; 60-70; 152-182; 184-90

A. Stein, "Appendix: Methodological Notes," *Sex and Sensibility*

*In class we will discuss and practice qualitative interviews. We will highlight different types of issues that can arise during the course of an in-depth interview. Come to class ready to take a life history of your peers, with questions and equipment for taking notes.

*Next week: bring interview questions

October 4. Power, Intersubjectivity and Emotions

Susan Krieger, "Beyond 'Subjectivity': The Use of the Self in Social Science." *Qualitative Sociology* 8 (1985):309–24.

Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, pages 191-206.

Tey Meadow, Ch. 1, "Studying Each Other," in *Trans Kids* (2018).

Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach*, 2013, pages TBA

*You are expected to conduct your interview by October 11.

October 11. Progress Reports

No readings this week. Bring your interviews in and be prepared to play excerpts for the class, discussing main challenges (methodological, conceptual, ethical and practical) you have encountered.

October 18. Myths, Memories, and Difficult Pasts

Sarah Polley, "Stories We Tell" (2012), video available via Kanopy.

Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, Ch. 9

Carol Smart, "Families, Secrets and Memories," *Sociology* (2011).

Sandra Gill, "Recalling a Difficult Past: Whites' Memories of Birmingham," *Sociological Inquiry* (2012).

*Interview transcription due.

October 25. Analyzing Data

Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, ch. 7

Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, pages TBA.

November 1. Writing Up: Representing Interviews

Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, ch. 8

Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (1993), excerpt.

A. Stein and J. Daniels, "Books for General Audiences," *Going Public* (2017).

A. Stein, *Unbound*, excerpt.

*Circulate draft of your Interview Project.

November 8. Writing Up: Representing Interviews--continued

*Read drafts of peers' interview projects. Be prepared to discuss in class.

November 15. Truth, Deception, Ethics

Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, ch. 10, 11

"Rigoberta Menchu and the Oral History of a Repressed People," *Harvard Political Review* (2012).

<https://harvardpolitics.com/rigoberta-menchu-and-the-oral-history-of-a-repressed-people/>

Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1996), excerpt.

"Fragments of a Fraud," *Guardian* (1999).

<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/oct/15/features11.g24>

*Interview Project due.

November 22. Auto-ethnography and the Sociological Memoir

Grace Cho, *Tastes Like War*, excerpt

Sherry Turkle, *Empathy Diaries*, excerpt

Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing*, excerpt

<https://www.amazon.com/Crossing-Memoir-Deirdre-N-McCloskey/dp/0226556689?asin=0226556689&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1>

Patricia Roos, "Surviving Alex: A Mother's Story of Love, Loss and Addiction," selections from work-in-progress

November 29. Auto-ethnography and the Sociological Memoir—cont'd

Reading TBA

December 6. TBA

December 13. Conclusion. TBA

**Analytic essay due December 17.