

## A Collective Ethnography of Digital Platform Work

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Sociology 190  
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### Seminar

Wednesdays, 4:10-6:00pm

### Office Hours

Thursdays 2:00-3:30pm – contact for more availability

## COURSE OVERVIEW AND AIMS

This course is probably different from others you've taken at Berkeley: it invites you to take a personal, intellectual journey. This journey doesn't just take place in your head; you will be actively engaging in real situations, grappling with choices and their consequences. This class is both a laboratory, and an artist studio.

The core of this course is learning, and practicing, ethnography. Becoming an ethnographer means several things. First, you will be both observing, and actively participating in, social situations. That is why many people call ethnography “participant-observation.” In this class, you will be trying to earn money online through a number of platforms. While you work, you will be observing patterns, relationships, and social structures.

The “graphy” in ethno-graphy literally mean to scribe, or write. You will be asked to write almost every week about your experiences. In the process of writing, you will have space to develop your own perspective, and reflect on your position in society and in situations. What motivates you to make the choices that you do? What frustrates or excites you in a situation? This act of critical reflection will serve you well in whatever you do after graduating.

Finally, you will be asked to connect your experiences to other scholarly work, sociological concepts and theories. Furthermore, you will be constantly talking about, reading about, and getting feedback on, the work of others in the class. This is the “collective” part of our ethnography: engaging, and supporting, each other in this process of discovery.

What will we be observing and participating in? Our journey will lead us to explore what some call “hidden” or “invisible” labor. We will be embedding ourselves in on a sub-set of digital platforms that are powering the digital economy: “remote labor platforms.” These platforms are marketplaces where individuals produce data in exchange for money. This data influences artificial intelligence (think ChatGPT), consumer brands, political polls, and the latest psychology research.

Each week you will spend at least 2 hours trying to earn money on one or more labor platforms. In weekly writing, you will examine and apply key concepts in the sociology of work and platform studies: control, dependence, inequality, identity, and work games. Each student will creatively transform their own ethnographic observations and analytic reading responses into a final paper that reflects the cumulative knowledge and experiences from the course.

**COURSE OUTLINE**

| <b>DATE</b>                 | <b>READINGS</b><br><u>Readings should be read several days before class in order to incorporate insights into your fieldnotes</u>                                                                               | <b>ASSIGNMENTS</b><br><u>Fieldnotes are due by 5pm on Tuesday before class</u><br><u>Peer feedback is due by beginning of class</u> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| January 22<br><i>Week 1</i> | Read the syllabus before class!<br>We will go over it together<br>Terkel, "Mike Lefevre"                                                                                                                        | [None]                                                                                                                              |
| Jan. 29<br><i>Week 2</i>    | Hammersley/ Blackwell Encyclopedia, "Ethnography"<br>Emerson, "Writing Ethnographic Field Notes", excerpts                                                                                                      | Reflection<br>Upload to BCourses -> Assignments                                                                                     |
| February 5<br><i>Week 3</i> | Pew Research, "State of the Gig 2021"<br>Pachirat, "Every Twelve Seconds," Chapter 4                                                                                                                            | Field note #1 due<br>Peer feedback #1 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Feb 5                                                  |
| Feb 12<br><i>Week 4</i>     | Gray and Suri, "Ghost Work," Introduction and Chapter 2<br><u>Podcast</u> : "Ghost Workers and the On-Demand Platform Economy: A Conversation with Mary L. Gray"                                                | Field note #2 due<br>Peer feedback #2 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Feb 12                                                 |
| Feb 19<br><i>Week 5</i>     | Schor, "After the Gig," Chapter 2<br><u>Video</u> : "Inequality and Precarity in the Platform Economy (Juliet Schor)"                                                                                           | Field note #3 due<br>Peer feedback #3 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Feb 19                                                 |
| Feb 26<br><i>Week 6</i>     | Griesbach et al., "Algorithmic control in platform food delivery work"                                                                                                                                          | Field note #4 due<br>Peer feedback #4 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Feb 26                                                 |
| March 5<br><i>Week 7</i>    | Sallaz, "Permanent pedagogy: How post-Fordist firms generate effort but not consent"                                                                                                                            | Field note #5 due<br>Peer feedback #5 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Mar 5                                                  |
| Mar 12<br><i>Week 8</i>     | Cameron, "'Making out' while driving: Relational and efficiency games in the gig economy"<br><u>Video</u> : The Future of Work: Is it Here Yet? (Lindsey Cameron)                                               | Field note #6 due<br>Peer feedback #6 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Mar 12                                                 |
| Mar 19<br><i>Week 9</i>     | Anicich, "Flexing and floundering in the on-demand economy: Narrative identity construction under algorithmic management"<br><u>Podcast</u> : Dehumanization Is a Feature of Gig Work, Not a Bug (Eric Anicich) | Field note #7 due<br>Peer feedback #7 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Mar 9                                                  |

|                           |                                                                                                              |                                                                                        |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mar 26                    | <i>Spring break – Rest!</i>                                                                                  | <i>Spring break – Rest!</i>                                                            |
| April 2<br><i>Week 11</i> | Noury et al., “In praise of boredom at work”<br>Meister and Skavskaya, “The Benefits of Being Bored at Work” | [None]                                                                                 |
| Apr 9<br><i>Week 12</i>   | Merton, “Social structure and anomie”                                                                        | Field note #8 due<br>Peer feedback #8 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Apr 9     |
| Apr 16<br><i>Week 13</i>  | Schor, “The Overworked American,” Chapters 1 and 4                                                           | Field note #9 due<br>Peer feedback #9 due<br>Upload to BCourses -> Groups -> Apr 16    |
| Apr 23<br><i>Week 14</i>  | Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method”                                                                          | Field note #10 due<br>Peer feedback #10 due<br>Upload: BCourses -> Groups -> Apr 23    |
| Apr 30                    | [None]                                                                                                       | Reflection [Writing your paper]                                                        |
| May 7                     | [None]                                                                                                       | Final presentations [Writing your paper]                                               |
| May 14                    | [None]                                                                                                       | Final presentations [Writing your paper]                                               |
| May 16                    | [None]                                                                                                       | Final paper is due, 5pm PST<br>Upload to BCourses <input type="checkbox"/> Assignments |

## Required Texts

All texts are in bCourses as “Files.” Texts are in multiple modalities to increase accessibility.

## Course Structure

The seminar will meet once a week for two hours. All students are expected to come to class having done the work for the week, including: writing a fieldnote, reading and giving feedback on classmates’ fieldnotes, and completing the required readings assigned for the week. Each class will consist of a wide array of activities, including but not limited to lectures, sharing written material, giving peer feedback, in-depth discussions, debates, and guest lectures.

## Note for those on Student Visas (International Students)

Student visas do not typically allow you to work for pay while in the United States. Luckily, there are a number of platforms where you will be able to work as a volunteer, and which will allow you to participate fully in the course.

## GRADING AND EVALUATION

Grades for the course are on the standard scale: 100-97 = A+ ; 96.9-93 = A; 92.9-90 = A-, etc.

Your final grade is broken down as such:

- Fieldnotes (30%)
- Peer feedback (20%)
- Class participation (20%)
- Final paper (30%)

### 1) Fieldnotes (30%)

Fieldnotes are written accounts of your time doing fieldwork, i.e. participating and observing on work platforms. Your fieldnotes will provide most of the material for your final paper.

We will discuss what makes a great fieldnote in more detail in the first weeks of the course.

Generally, field notes will be 2 to 5 pages single spaced and observe a detailed reportage of what you saw, did, felt, or thought while doing your two hours of work for the week. *Don't worry, you will get more specific instructions for each fieldnote that will help guide your writing.*

You are required to turn in ten fieldnotes over the course of the semester [see schedule below].

Every field note that you produce will receive feedback from one of the peers in your peer group.

- A) Consistency (10%) – You will receive 1% for each fieldnote that you turn in on time.
- B) Quality (20%) – I will grade five of your fieldnotes, as well as provided detailed feedback. You will not know which weeks I am grading... so try to keep quality high throughout! I will, however, drop your lowest grade. [5% for each of 4 graded fieldnote]

Due: the Tuesday before class at 5pm, on BCourses -> Groups -> Week #

### 2) Peer feedback (20%)

In addition to producing fieldnotes, you will be reading and providing specific feedback to your classmates. Towards the beginning of the semester, you will be placed in a group of 3 people.

This will be your “peer group” for the whole semester.

Each week, you will be asked to read the fieldnotes produced by your two peer mates. You will give written feedback to one of your peers each week (rotating so that everyone gets feedback from a peer each week), using a template that I will provide you. In class, your peer group will be expected to discuss the week's fieldwork.

- A) Consistency (10%): You will receive 1% for each feedback form that you turn in on time.
- B) Quality (10%): I will periodically review your peer feedback forms to ensure that you are adequately supporting your peers

Due: by class time, on BCourses -> Groups -> Week #

### 3) Class participation (20%)

Some students will already feel comfortable speaking in class. For others, it will require courage. I will provide a range of ways for you to participate, including small groups and short in-class assignments. Coming to speak with me in office hours counts as participation, too. It won't be possible for you to actively participate if you aren't in class. Your first unexcused absences will not impact your grade. For any subsequent unexcused absence, your final participation grade will decrease by 10 percent. In order for an absence to be considered excused, I require notification of your absence and a clear explanation as to why you are/were not able to attend class.

#### **4) Final paper (30%)**

The final paper (15-20 pages double spaced, with references) will bring your fieldnotes into conversation with each other. In the paper, you will be asked to analyze the significance of your observations for a key research question, and elaborate the connections between your work and one or more sociological concepts from the readings and class discussions. You will also reflect on your journey, both personally and in the methods.

- A) Final presentation (5%): This is a chance for you to reflect on your semester. Show up with whatever you want to say, and will you receive full credit!
- B) Final paper (25%): More instructions and a rubric to follow

Final presentations: you will present on either May 7 [in person] or May 14 [online]

Final paper is due: May 16, 5pm PST on BCourses, Assignments

## **RESOURCES**

### **Course Accessibility**

This course is intended for all UC Berkeley students, including those with mental, emotional, physical, or cognitive disabilities, illnesses, injuries, impairments, or any other condition that can negatively impact equal access to education. If, at any point in the semester, you find yourself not able to fully access the space, content, and experience of this course, you are welcome (but not required) to contact me by email or during office hours to discuss your specific needs. I also encourage you to contact the [Disabled Students' Program](#). If you have a diagnosis, DSP can help you document your needs and create an accommodation plan. By making a plan through DSP, you can ensure appropriate accommodations without disclosing your condition or diagnosis to course instructors.

### **Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Services**

To learn more about these issues, how to support survivors, or how to file a report and receive support services, start here: [Survivor Support](#). **Please note that I am not a confidential advocate; I am a mandated reporter.** You can speak to a [Confidential Care Advocate](#) at the Path to Care Center.

### **Economic, Food, and Housing Support**

If you are in need of economic, food, or housing support, you can find help at [the Basic Needs Center](#). You may be eligible for money to buy groceries via [CalFresh](#). If you are in need of food

immediately, please contact the UC Berkeley [Food Pantry](#). More information on resources can be found [here](#).

### **Mental Health Resources**

All students — regardless of background or identity — may experience a range of issues that can become barriers to learning like strained relationships, anxiety, depression, alcohol and other drug problems, difficulties with concentration, sleep, and eating, and/ or lack of motivation. UC Berkeley offers many services like [Recalibrate](#) and [Student Mental Health](#) that could help.

### **Writing Resources**

The UC Berkeley Department of Sociology has published a writing guide to promote sociologically informed college writing. It includes useful tips for composing strong and effective analytic papers and for improving your general writing skills. A free online version is available at:

[http://sociology.berkeley.edu/documents/student\\_services/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf](http://sociology.berkeley.edu/documents/student_services/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf).

### **Use of AI**

Many uses of generative AI software or Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude, fall under the umbrella of **academic misconduct** as it involves an “action or attempted action that may result in creating an unfair academic advantage” and is not a representation of your own thoughts, critical thinking, and work. Academic integrity is a critical component of being a member of the university community and our ability to evaluate your work. We are evaluating your ability to synthesize and apply sociological concepts, not how well AI does this.

The use of generative AI tools is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Brainstorming and finding information on your topic
- Drafting an outline to organize your thoughts
- Checking grammar and style

**The use of generative AI tools is not permitted in this course for the following activities:**

- Writing a draft of an assignment
- Writing entire sentences, paragraphs, or papers to complete class assignments (for instance, you may not simply enter the essay prompt, hit generate, and turn in the work, in whole or in part, as your own)
- Generating or modifying content to evade plagiarism detection

Do not assume the information or analysis you receive via AI is accurate, unbiased, sufficient for the assignment, or meets the standards of the course, even if you only incorporate it partially and after substantial paraphrasing, modification and/or editing. AI-generated content may **not** provide appropriate or clear attribution to the author(s) of the original sources.

Failure to acknowledge your use of AI text-generation tools is a violation of UC Berkeley’s honor code. When in doubt about permitted usage, please ask for clarification.