Sociological Research Design

Synopsis

This course covers the fundamentals of social science research design. Emphasis is placed on principles that are applicable in all kinds of research, from surveys to participant observation, from comparative historical study to demographic analysis. We begin with a bit of philosophy of science, and the course focuses on such practical matters as how to distinguish a theory from a political program or a philosophical assertion, how to derive a falsifiable hypothesis from a theory, how to design a research project to test an hypothesis, how to carry out research, and how to write up results. The course also delves into current methodological controversies in several arenas. I strive to avoid redundancy with other courses in the department, hence the course gives relatively little attention to specific qualitative and quantitative techniques of analysis.

Course Requirements

Students should come to class prepared to discuss the week's readings. Each week there will be a short assignment (1-3 pages) that will serve as the basis for an in-class exercise. While brief, most assignments will require a fair amount of thought and preparation. Please bring a copy of your work for each member of the class, unless instructed otherwise. By the end of the semester, students will complete a 10-15 page research proposal in the form of a grant application.

READINGS

Articles and chapters are available on the course website. In addition, four books are required. You can find them at used bookstores online.

Required Books


Recommended Book:


WEEK 1, August 31 (Wednesday this week, following Monday schedule)

**Metatheory, Theory, and Hypotheses**


Assignment:
Drawing on Stinchcombe's discussion of hypotheses, derive formal hypotheses from the Ridgeway article.

WEEK 2, September 12

**How to Prove Things**


Assignment: For the article by Wimmer and Min or the article by Sharkey and Elwert, derive formal hypotheses as you did in the first week. Then using Durkheim's principles for establishing sociological proofs, provide a brief outline of the evidence the authors present to test their hypotheses. Assess the paper in Durkheim's terms.

WEEK 3 September 19

Causality


Assignment: Assignment: Find an existing survey dataset appropriate to the question you would like to address. Based on the codebook, write a two-page memo outlining the characteristics of the dataset, including sample size, population sampled, and response rate. List the variables you would foresee using in the analysis, and all information about those variables that is shown in the codebook, such as univariate statistics. Detail several, preferably competing, hypotheses; review how you will operationalize causal factors and outcomes; propose analytic techniques.

WEEK 4 September 26

Research Design


Assignment:
For either the Castilla and Benard paper or the MacKenzie paper, outline the theory and hypotheses presented and propose a research design to test the same hypotheses using altogether different methods.

WEEK 5 October 3

The Unit of Analysis: Sampling


Assignment:
Draw a stratified random sample (N=40) using sources available in the library or online. You may sample hospitals, schools, architects, nation-states, or whatever you please. Please stratify the sample on two dimensions (e.g., size and location).

WEEK 6 October 17

Survey Design


Fumento, Tobey. “Issues in Questionnaire Design.”
http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/SPED/TRI/questionnaire.htm

Assignment:
Outline several hypotheses about the opinions of Harvard undergraduates. Draft a questionnaire that could be used to test these hypotheses. Bring copies of the questionnaire to class for discussion by the group.
WEEK 7 October 24

**Qualitative Designs**


**Assignment:**

You have been asked to review a paper by the American Sociological Review. I will distribute copies. Write a review of the paper (1-3 pages, single-spaced) and fill out the reviewer's evaluation form.

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WEEK 8 October 31

**Comparative Designs and the Problem of Small Numbers**

Alford, Robert. The Craft of Inquiry, Chapters 6 and 7.


**Assignment:**

Assess Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb’s methods from the perspective of one of the other readings for this week.
WEEK 9 November 7

**Historical Designs**


Assignment: Prepare a short (1-2 page) outline of the research question, and the methods you will use, for the research proposal you are planning. Bring copies of the outline to class to distribute to the other students for feedback.

WEEK 10 November 14

**Finding a Model**


Assignment: Choose an article from the American Journal of Sociology or the American Sociological Review that could serve as a model for your research project. Prepare a two-page précis of the paper that covers the question addressed, the theories covered, the data used, the methods employed, and the findings. What do you like about the paper? What are its weaknesses? Come to class prepared to discuss the paper you’ve chosen.
WEEK 11 November 21

Critiques of Normal Science


Assignment:
You have been asked to review a paper by the American Sociological Review. I will distribute copies of the paper. Write a review of the paper (1-3 pages, single-spaced) and fill out the reviewer's evaluation form.

WEEK 12 November 28

Writing Up Results


Assignment:
The first draft of your 10-15 page research proposal is due by 5 p.m. on Wednesday the 25th. Each student will give her draft to two other class members for feedback and discussion in class.

Final Paper Due at 5 p.m., December 16.