Sociological Research Design  
Sociology 205, Spring 2015  
Wednesdays 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.  
501 William James Hall

Instructor Information  
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Course Overview  
This course provides new graduate students in the Harvard Sociology program with the necessary fundamentals for designing, analyzing, and publishing high quality sociological research. Our focus is on the evaluation and construction of a “good” research design, more so than on the practicing of particular research methods (although I include examples of a wide range of methods through the assigned readings). We begin with a broad overview: What constitutes sociological research? What does the publication process entail? What is the role of research in a sociologist’s career? Next, we examine a series of topics that scholars should consider when designing any research project, including questions of theory building, theory testing, measurement, sampling, causality, and research ethics. We also discuss the comparative suitability of different kinds of research methods for different kinds of questions. Finally, we briefly review recent debates about research design and data collection in the discipline.

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Understand what makes for a good “sociological puzzle,” and how to put that puzzle in dialogue with the existing literature.
2. Have a sense of what are the various methods that sociologists generally use to address their sociological puzzles, and know how to determine which method or methods are best suited for answering a particular question.
3. Develop an idea of what kinds of puzzles you might like to answer during your own career, and start designing your first independent research project.
4. Understand the common denominator of what makes for “good” research across the various approaches.
5. Begin to know the work of the people in our department, and more broadly, the literatures in which you might want to situate your own research.

Course Requirements  
Students are expected to attend every class, read the assigned articles or book chapters prior to class, and participate intelligently in class discussions. Students are also strongly encouraged to attend all departmental colloquiums. In addition, students should complete the following assignments. Please note: All completed assignments should be submitted to me by e-mail attachment (ViternaStudents@gmail.com) as Word documents, and with the e-mail subject line “SOC 205 ASSIGNMENT.”

Ten Weekly Assignments: Each week, students are given an assignment that helps them gain a deeper understanding of the week’s topic. These assignments vary and are detailed in the course schedule (below). Students must complete ten of these twelve possible assignments by the end of the semester. Assignments are due the same day they are listed on the syllabus (e.g., assignment #1 is due on February
4th; assignment #2 is due on February 11th.) Completed assignments should be e-mailed to the instructor by the beginning of class time each week. Please Note: I do not accept late weekly assignments; if you cannot turn in a weekly assignment on its due date, you should use that week as your “free” skip.

A Research Proposal: Research proposals should be submitted no later than 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday, May 13th. Each paper should be 15-25 pages in length. The first 2-5 pages should propose a scholarly research question and make a strong argument for why it is important to answer that question. The next 8-10 pages should situate that question in a review of the existing literature. This review should be specific and selective, dovetailing neatly to a conclusion that clearly demonstrates how your research question extends the existing literature. The literature review should identify and discuss relevant themes in academic works relating to the research question, and then use examples and citations from the reviewed works to substantiate the existence and importance of these themes. The literature review should not consist of a series of miniature “book reviews.” Finally, in the remaining 5-10 pages or your proposal, review your plan for answering your research question. What kind of evidence will you use for your analysis? How will you collect those data? What problems do you expect to encounter “in the field?” You should also append first drafts of interview questionnaires, field site proposals, etc. (which do not count toward the 15-25 pages). I do not read drafts of the final research paper prior to their submission, but I will gladly discuss any questions or concerns you may have about the paper at any time throughout the semester.

Grading:
Final course grades are assigned according to the following criteria:

- Ten Weekly Assignments: 30%
- Final Paper/Research Proposal: 50%
- Class Participation: 20%

Optional Workshops
I will run 3-4 optional workshops throughout the semester on topics that may be helpful to you as a young sociologist. Topics may include how to apply for funding, using Zotero to create and maintain a sociological library, or coding qualitative data with Atlas.ti. You are welcome to suggest workshop topics. Workshops will always take place outside of regular class hours, and typically over lunch.

Readings
All readings are available through the course website. In addition, I recommend choosing several of these books for your shelf:


Rihoux, Benoit and Charles Ragin, eds. 2009. *Configurational Comparative Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and Related Techniques*.

Reid, Natalie. 2010. *Getting Published in International Journals: Writing Strategies for European Social Scientists*. NOVA (Helpful academic writing tips when English is not your native language).

**Course Schedule**

**WEEK 1—JANUARY 28—Course Overview; Overview of the Sociological Research Process**  
Sociological subfields, the publication process (articles, book chapters, book reviews, peer reviews, co-authorship, etc.), why it matters for your sociological career, and how to read during graduate school.

**IN-CLASS READING**


**WEEK 2—FEBRUARY 4—Writing Like a Sociologist; Learning a Literature**  
The nuts and bolts of writing a publishable article or book manuscript (or for starters, a passable QP); how to learn, and engage with, a particular literature within sociology; how to put various literatures in conversation with each other.

**REQUIRED READINGS**


**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**


**ASSIGNMENT #1:**

Find one well-cited article in your area of interest. First, make an outline of the key points in the author’s (authors’) introduction. How do(es) he/she/they structure their argument? Second, in one paragraph, write why you think this article has been influential. What is it about the question, the methods, and/or the sociological contribution that resulted in its publication and eventual citation by others?

**WEEK 3—FEBRUARY 11—Theory Building, Theory Testing, Sociological Questions, and “Significant” Answers**

What makes a good (aka, important and answerable) research question, and how to evaluate your answer.

**REQUIRED READINGS**


**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

ASSIGNMENT #2:

Read one of the following articles, as assigned in class. As a group, write a short synopsis of the article to share with the other groups. This synopsis should be at most 1-2 paragraphs long. Your synopsis should summarize (1) what is the key point the author is trying to make, (2) an analysis of how well he/she makes the argument (do you trust the data? the logic? the evidence?), and (3) an analysis of how the author’s conclusions might shape your approach to sociological research. Be prepared to present about your article in class (Informally! No power point needed!)


***Remember! Group #1 also needs to have next week’s readings selected and shared by class time today.***

WEEK 4—FEBRUARY 18—Theory in Action

REQUIRED READINGS:
Five articles to be selected by the following group as exemplars in theory building or theory testing:

Bo Yun Park
Kristina Brant
Zach Wehrwein
Robert Manduca
Nathan Robinson

ASSIGNMENT #3:

This assignment has four parts:

1. Choose one area of sociology that you think you might be relevant to your eventual research and find three highly cited (>1,000 citations) articles or books within that field. Copy the citation and the abstract information of each of these three documents into a word file.

2. Write a one-paragraph summary of one of the articles you found. The paragraph should include this information: (1) What is the author’s research question in this article/book? (2) What method is employed to answer the research question? (3) What does the author propose as the answer to this question? (4) How satisfied are you with his or her answer? Do you believe that the author used the best possible methods, data, and reasoning to come to his or her conclusion? What alternative conclusions might be warranted? (5) What future research might this book or article inspire?
3. Using one of the citation search engines introduced in class, find THREE articles that cite the article reviewed in part two. Copy the citation and abstract information of each of these three documents into your assignment.

4. Write a one-paragraph summary of one of the articles found in step three, using the same criteria listed in step two.

WEEK 5—FEBRUARY 25—Measurement

What variables/concepts are necessary to answer your question, and how might you best operationalize them?

REQUIRED READINGS:


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:


ASSIGNMENT #4

Write a 3-4 page summary of the research question that you plan to examine in your final paper. In it, you should introduce a potential research question for your qualifying paper and explain the significance of your question to the existing literature. Your paper must include relevant citations and a works cited list.

WEEK 6—MARCH 4—Measurement in Action

NEXT YEAR: MAKE PAIK AN IN-CLASS READING…surprise ending

REQUIRED READINGS


IN CLASS READING:


ASSIGNMENT #5:

Write 1-2 paragraphs about ONE of the following questions (or a similar one of your choosing): how Jason Beckfield measures “regional integration;” how Larry Bobo measures “racial threat” or “racial competition;” how Mary Brinton measures “social capital;” how Nicholas Christakis measures “social contagion;” how Frank Dobbin measures “efficacy” (in regard to employers’ diversity programs); how Michele Lamont measures either “boundaries” or “stigmatization;” how Orlando Patterson measures “freedom;” how Rob Sampson measures “collective efficacy;” how Mario Small measures “social networks;” how Mary Waters measures “assimilation;” how Bruce Western measures “social inequality,” how Marty Whyte measures “distributive justice;” how Bill Wilson measures “opportunity;” or how Chris Winship measures “legitimacy.”

WEEK 7—MARCH 11—Sampling, Generalizability, and the Unnecessary Roughness of the Qual/Quant Divide

After determining the kind of data you need to measure your key concepts, how do you thoughtfully and carefully slice off a parcel of that potential data to efficiently and effectively answer your question?

READINGS


**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**


**ASSIGNMENT #6:**

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). Make clear how your “research question” is driving your sampling frame.

**WEEK 8—March 18—No class, Spring Break.**

Have fun and be safe!

**WEEK 9—March 25—Sampling in Action**

**REQUIRED READINGS**


Regnerus, Mark. 2012. “How Different are the Adult Children of Parents who have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study.” Social Science Research. 41:752-


ASSIGNMENT #7

Choose a partner, and find an existing dataset, preferably one that is interesting to you both. Based on the codebook, write a 1-2 page memo outlining the characteristics of the dataset, including sample size, population sampled, sampling method, and response rate. Post your memo to the I-Site to share with your cohort. Plan to give a short (2 minute) presentation about the data set you analyzed in class.

WEEK 10—April 1—Correlation, Causation, and those Ultra-Fashionable Mechanisms

REQUIRED READINGS


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:


ASSIGNMENT #8:

Take the research question you turned in during week 5 and formulate three different, theoretically informed hypotheses about its possible answers. Make clear whether and how you are making a causal argument, and what are your hypothesized mechanisms in the causal relationship. Next, make a list of variables that would be central for testing those hypotheses. For each variable, describe how you would operationalize it, and justify your operationalization decisions.

WEEK 11—APRIL 8—CAUSALITY/MECHANISMS, CONTINUED

REQUIRED READINGS:


Morgan, Stephen L and Christopher Winship. 2007. Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 1 only)


Ragin, Charles. 1987. The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Chapter 1 only)


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, "Two-Level Theories and Fuzzy-Set Analysis," Sociological Methods and Research 33:4 (May 2005), pp. 497-538


ASSIGNMENT #9

Write a first draft of the introduction to your final paper for this course (approximately 2-5 pages). The introduction should efficiently and articulately introduce your question, establish why the question is important, and make an argument regarding what are the best methods to answer that question. You are encouraged to leave a space where you would put your findings once your data collection is complete. Turn in your assignment to both your instructor and your assigned partner.

***Remember! Group #2 also needs to have next week’s readings selected and shared by class time today.***

WEEK 12—April 15—CAUSALITY IN ACTION

Four articles to be selected by the following group as exemplars of demonstrating causality or mechanisms:

Meghan Zacher
Laura Adler
Adam Travis
Roland Neil


ASSIGNMENT #10

Provide comments on your partner’s introduction. Use track changes and insert comments. Help your partner write clearly and with authority. Make sure that your partner asks a clear question, and establishes why the question is important to both the ‘real world’ and to sociology. Turn your comments in to both your partner and to me prior to the start of class.

Week 13—April 22—ASKING QUESTIONS; ANALYZING ANSWERS
REQUIRED READINGS


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

(***VERY*** Useful reading prior to designing a questionnaire!)


IQSS Webinar on Atlas.ti:
ASSIGNMENT #11

Write a first draft of the literature review for your final paper (approximately 8-10 pages). The literature review should be divided into topical sections. It should be crystal clear to your reader how each section helps you forward your research question. Each section should begin by reviewing very broadly the key themes in that sub-field, and then narrowing very quickly to an in-depth analysis of the aspect of that subfield that is relevant to your research project. Make clear how your research will extend or challenge this subfield. Append your literature review to your revised introduction, and turn your assignment into both your instructor and your assigned partner.

Week 14—April 29—Ethics in Sociological Research

REQUIRED READINGS

ASA Code of Ethics


Christopher Shea, 2000. “Don't Talk to the Humans: The Crackdown on Social Science Research” *Lingua Franca* 10 (6)


ASSIGNMENT #12

Provide comments on your partner’s introduction and literature review. Use track changes and insert comments. Help your partner write clearly and with authority. Make sure that your partner asks a clear question, and establishes why the question is important to both the ‘real world’ and to sociology. Make sure your partner makes clear how each aspect of the literature review is relevant to forwarding the overall argument. Suggest any relevant literature you think of. Turn your comments in to both your partner and to me prior to the start of class.

Wednesday, May 13th, 8:00 a.m.—Final Research Proposals Due via E-mail