

Sociology 201
Sociological Research Design
Harvard University
Fall 2005

Instructors:

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Class meeting time: Wednesday, 12-2 p.m., 601 William James Hall

Overview

Sociology 201 is the first seminar in a two-semester sequence designed to guide graduate students through the process of producing a research paper of publishable quality. The paper due at the end of the spring semester will be a full draft of the qualifying paper required of all sociology PhD students for their M.A. degree. Sociology 201 and 202 will be co-taught by Mary Brinton, Frank Dobbin, and Nicholas Christakis, with Dobbin and Christakis dividing their participation between the fall and spring semesters respectively, and with Brinton acting as the seminar leader throughout the year.

The two-semester sequence will guide students through the research process, from the identification of a problem to be explored, through the location of an appropriate secondary data set or the collection of primary data, to analysis of the data, and finally to the completion of a polished paper. The readings will cover issues ranging from the nature of causal inquiry to the range of research methodologies available to sociologists. You must carefully do all of the reading prior to each Wednesday meeting.

Details

The seminar is run as a research practicum. Students will learn from observing the evolution of others' papers as well as from writing their own papers. In providing feedback to classmates, students will develop their analytical skills. In receiving feedback, students will sharpen their own analyses. In most weeks, students will prepare short written assignments to be brought to our Wednesday meeting. In the early part of the semester these assignments will consist of exercises tied to the readings for the week. Then we will quickly move on to writing assignments that are closely tied to your own research project. In some weeks you will be asked to distribute these assignments to other class members in advance of the class meeting. In some weeks students will also prepare written comments on the work of others in the class.

During the first semester students will develop a research design and a map for how to proceed with the analysis during the spring semester. This will involve identifying a research

problem, identifying possible research approaches and the data set to be used, developing a review of the literature, and sketching a plan for data analysis. The final product of the first semester will be a fifteen-page research proposal.

The text required for the course is Robert R. Alford, The Craft of Inquiry (Oxford University Press, 1998). Used or new copies are available through various outlets, including Amazon.com. The other readings for the course include a number of articles and book chapters. For those indicated below with a “+”, there are four copies available in the library on the first floor of William James Hall. You may either read them there or copy them for your own use; you may want to organize the copying together with fellow students in the course. All other required readings are available through JSTOR or through other Harvard University Library electronic resources.

Weekly Assignments

Week 1 September 21 **COURSE INTRODUCTION**

Robert Merton. 1967. “On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range.” Pp. 39-72 in On Theoretical Sociology. New York: Free Press. +

Week 2 September 28 **THEORY AND CAUSAL INFERENCE**

Émile Durkheim. 1966 [1938]. The Rules of Sociological Method. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press. Chapter 6, “Rules Relative to Establishing Sociological Proofs.” +

Arthur L. Stinchcombe. 1968. Constructing Social Theories. New York: Harcourt. Pages 1-56. +

Neil Fligstein. Neil. 1996. “Markets as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institutions.” American Sociological Review, 61: 656-674.

Assignment: Drawing on Stinchcombe's discussion of hypotheses, derive formal hypotheses from the Fligstein article. Bring copies to class for everyone.

Week 3 October 5 **CAUSAL INFERENCE AND THEORETICAL MECHANISMS**

Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg. 1998. “Social Mechanisms: An Introductory Essay.” Pp. 1-31 in Social Mechanisms, edited by Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge: Oxford University Press. +

Aage Sorensen. 1998. "Theoretical Mechanisms and the Empirical Study of Social Processes." Pp. 238-266 in Social Mechanisms, edited by Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge: Oxford University Press. +

Assignment: Find an article in ASR or AJS using cross-sectional regression. Evaluate whether the writers have established the causal relations, mechanisms at work, and direction of causality.

Week 4 October 12

IDENTIFYING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Robert R. Alford. 1998. The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence. New York: Oxford University Press. Introduction and Chapters 1-5.

Assignment: Prepare a two-page statement of your research problem. What do you want to explain? Why? What theories are relevant? Prepare copies for distribution.

Week 5 October 19

SAMPLING AND SURVEY RESEARCH METHODS

Russell K. Schutt. 2001. Investigating the Social World. Third Edition. Pine Forge: Thousand Oaks, CA. Chapters 4 and 7. +

D. Lauderdale, S. E. Furner, T. P. Miles, and J. Goldberg. 1993. "Epidemiological Uses of Medicare Data." *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 15:319-327.

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.

Week 6 October 26

HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE METHODS

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

Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers. 1980. "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry." Comparative Studies in Society and History 22: 174-197.

Jack Goldstone. 2003. "Comparative Historical Analysis and Knowledge Accumulation in the Study of Revolutions." Pp. 41-90 in Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences, edited by James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. +

Assignment: Fashion a short proposal around your research question, in which you sketch three different approaches based on Alford's three paradigmatic research designs (historical, multivariate, interpretive). Discuss whether and how the unit of analysis might vary across the designs.

Week 7 November 2

EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Schutt. Investigating the Social World, Chapter 6. +

N. A. Christakis and D. A. Asch. 1993. "Biases in How Physicians Choose to Withdraw Life Support." *The Lancet*, 324:642-646.

K. A. Schulman et al. 1999. "The Effect of Race and Sex on Physicians' Recommendations for Cardiac Catheterization." *New England Journal of Medicine* 340:618-26 and commentaries.

[Additional reading to be specified in advance]

Assignment: Design your own social experiment using the vignette method, including specification of the population to be sampled, the construction of one vignette and however many 'treatments' are desired, and the specification of the hypothesis to be tested. Comment on the nature of the hypothesis and its testability, the extent to which the vignette maps to this hypothesis, ways the vignette can be perfected, and why a vignette experiment rather than more direct methods might be particularly suitable.

Week 8 November 9

EXEMPLARY ARTICLES

Assignment: Choose an article from the American Journal of Sociology or the American Sociological Review. 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 9 November 16

REFINING RESEARCH METHODS

Stanley Lieberson. 1985. Making it Count: The Improvement of Social Research and Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 171-235. +

Andrew Abbott. 1988. "Transcending General Linear Reality." *Sociological Theory* 6: 169-186.

Assignment: Prepare a two-page outline of the methods to be used in your qualifying paper. Use as a model the methods sections you find in published papers. Justify your decisions vis-à-vis the methodological decisions found in other papers that address the same or a similar research question.

Week 10 November 23

THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Assignment: Outline a literature review in two pages. See previous studies of the same or a similar problem to identify theories that are relevant.

Week 11 November 30

DRAFT OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Assignment: Write a full draft of the literature review section, covering how your hypotheses fit into the existing literature, how your hypotheses build on and differ from previous hypotheses, and how you will handle other hypotheses. Consult published articles for examples. This paper should be five to seven pages.

Weeks 12 and 13 December 7 and 14

DRAFT RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Assignment: During the last two weeks of the semester we will review the research proposals. These should be no more than 15 pages. Each should contain a concise statement of the research question, a literature review, a description of the data to be used, and a discussion of methods.