Introduction

This course introduces graduate students to basic research issues in the applied social sciences, and develops practical skills for conducting research. The goal is to provide solid grounding in the logic of research design, not to achieve proficiency in any one methodology. As an introductory course, you need not have any prior background in research methods. The course is, nonetheless, rigorous. By the end of the semester, you will be able to (1) recognize the types of methods appropriate for addressing particular research questions; (2) design your own research project in a dissertation prospectus or grant proposal; and (3) identify methodological strengths and weaknesses in published research in your field.

Readings

Required book (available at the University Book Store):


Optional textbook (available at the University Book Store):

Neuman, W. Lawrence. 2006. Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 6th Edition. Allyn and Bacon. (You can save money by purchasing an earlier edition, but the chapters may not align with the syllabus.)

Optional on-line textbook:


All other readings will be linked on the course web site. There will be no course packet.
Grades

Grade Distribution

Participation: 40% (due weekly)
Three essays: 10% each (due dates below)
Grant proposal or dissertation prospectus: 30% (due Dec 14, noon)

Grading Policy

Seminar time will be devoted to discussing the assigned readings. Lectures will be brief and rare. Therefore, weekly participation will be crucial for the seminar to be effective. To receive an “A” on the participation portion of your grade, you must attend class each week and demonstrate through discussion that you have carefully considered the assigned readings. Weekly readings will include descriptions and justifications of specific methods, along with examples of their application. The optional readings (from textbooks) will provide a baseline understanding for the required readings. We will not discuss the optional readings in class, but you should understand what’s in them. Class discussion will focus on how each method can and should be used to address particular research questions, and whether scholars have applied the methods appropriately in published research. If you have to miss a class meeting for any reason, you must submit typed answers to that week’s discussion questions, or your participation grade will be lowered.

The remaining portion (60%) of your grade is based on your development of a research project, and is divided into two components. The first component includes three short essays (30% of your grade), in which you will apply the assigned readings by designing your own research project, step-by-step, throughout the semester. (See the essay topics below.) The second component, which will build on your essays, is a grant proposal or dissertation prospectus (30% of your grade). Grant proposals must be submitted on the actual forms required by a private foundation, public agency, or other granting organization, and in the format they specify. You may submit a dissertation prospectus in lieu of a grant proposal, provided that your prospectus clearly specifies (1) your research design, (2) potential funding sources, and (3) a detailed budget and timeline. If you have difficulties writing the proposal or prospectus, you should review Howard Becker, Writing for Social Scientists; and Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, Proposals That Work.

Essay assignments

You must submit all three essay assignments below. Your essays should be no more than 5 pages long, double-spaced. Due dates are noted on the weekly calendar at the end of the syllabus. Late essays will receive a .3 grade penalty for each week they are late. In grading these assignments, I will evaluate your use of the assigned readings, not your knowledge of the fields in which you are specializing. So devote most of your essays to analyzing topics in your field in light of the assigned readings, not to reviewing the literature in your field. Your literature review should never exceed one page in these
essays.

Essay 1 – Concepts Formation

In the introductory paragraph, specify a research question that interests you and describe how it fits in your primary area of interest. (It must be a question – with a question mark – not a topic.) Choose one concept in the question, and provide two definitions of that concept from the relevant literature in your field. Then use the assigned readings on concept formation to analyze how the authors have defined this concept, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of their concept formation. The latter is the heart of the assignment, so devote your time to analyzing the concept and definitions using the frameworks in the assigned readings.

Essay 2 – Measurement

Specify and discuss two alternative ways to measure a concept of interest to you. The first paragraph should either restate the research question and concept you introduced in Essay #1 or introduce a different research question and concept. You may develop your own measures or rely on previously published measures. Think carefully about measurement issues, such as scaling, coding, unit of analysis, and threats to reliability and validity. Make sure you understand the distinction between a “measure” and the “systematized concept” for which it serves as an indicator (per Adcock and Collier).

Essay 3 – Selecting and Comparing Cases

Describe two alternative sampling strategies for selecting one or more cases for which you would conduct case studies. Discuss the relative merits of these sampling strategies within the context of your research question and theoretical approach, and in light of the assigned readings on single case studies and comparative case studies. The first paragraph of your essay should either restate the research question and concept you introduced in Essay #1 or #2, or briefly introduce a different research question. Be sure to specify what you mean by a “case study,” and identify the population from which your case(s) will be selected.

Weekly Topics and Readings

The assigned readings for each week below typically begin with an overview piece (usually chapters from Neuman’s textbook), followed by different methodological approaches to each topic, and concluding with an example of how these methods have been used in practice. If you fall behind during some weeks, you should strive to familiarize yourself with each of the readings, rather than read a smaller number of them in great depth.
Week 1  THEORY, METHOD, AND RESEARCH  
(Oct 5)  
Required:  Gerring, Chs. 1, 2, and 10 (skim “Preface” and “Postcript”).  
Trochim. “Foundations.”  

Week 2  CONCEPTS  
(Oct 12)  
Gerring, Chs. 3-4.  
Week 3  
(Oct 19)  
RESEARCH QUESTIONS, LIT REVIEWS, AND ADVISORS

Due: Essay #1 on Concept Formation (2 copies)

Required:  

Gerring, Chs. 5-7.


Review links to Community of Science and Grants.gov.

Optional:  
(Humor)

(Humor)

Neuman. Ch. 5.

Trochim. “Problem Formulation.”  
http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/probform.php

Week 4  
(Oct 26)  
MEASUREMENT

Due: Calls for proposals, with explanatory cover memo

Required:  
Trochim. “Measurement.”  
http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/measure.php


Week 5
(Nov 2)

CAUSAL INFEERENCE (I): SINGLE CASE STUDIES

Due: Essay #2 on Measurement (2 copies)


Week 6
(Nov 9)

CAUSAL INFEERENCE (II): COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

Guest: Travis Reynolds, Evans School doctoral candidate.

Gerring, Chs. 8-10 and “Postscript”.


Week 7
(Nov 16)

CAUSAL INFERENCE (III): STATISTICAL METHODS

Due: Essay #3 on Selecting and Comparing Cases (2 copies)


Optional: Neuman. Chs. 6 & 12, and Appendices C & D.

Trochim. “Analysis.”
http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/analysis.php

Week 8
(Nov 23)

CAUSAL INFERENCE (IV): EXPERIMENTAL METHODS


Optional: Neuman. Ch. 9.


Week 9 (Nov 30)  FIELD RESEARCH (I): ACCESS, OBSERVATION, AND CONTENT


Review UW Human Subjects Division web site (http://www.washington.edu/research/hsd)


Optional: Neuman. Chs. 11, 13

Week 10 (Dec 7)  FIELD RESEARCH (II): ASKING QUESTIONS


Optional: Neuman. Ch. 8, 12

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Dec 14 Grant proposal or dissertation prospectus due at noon
(in my box in the Dean’s Suite)