

SOC 401Q: METHODS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

FALL, 2016

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OFFICE HOURS: Tuesday and Thursday: 11:30-1:30, and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The very mention of a course in research methods—especially a Q course—typically evokes either yawns of boredom or shrieks of fear from all but the most mathematically inclined of us. Visions of statistical formulas, percentage tables, and endless processions of meaningless numbers dance in our heads. If it weren't for the fact that methods courses are required for sociology majors in most universities, the classes would probably be empty.

This course, I hope, will be different. Instead of spending 15 weeks simply reading about other people's research, you will be conducting your own. I believe that a class in research methods is of little value unless one is able to actually use the skills that are being learned. Very simply, in this course you are going to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty designing, developing, and implementing a small-scale sociological research project of your own choosing. It is my strong belief that the only way to learn about research is by experiencing first hand what it requires. This means trying new things, weighing intellectual interests against practical limitations, making mistakes, trying other things, making more mistakes, and eventually (hopefully) learning from the mistakes and generating new knowledge.

This course will be a cooperative venture. That doesn't mean that you'll all be working together on the same project. In fact, each of you will be responsible for conducting your own research project throughout the term. What it does mean is that at frequent points during the semester you will pause to report to the class on your progress, breakthroughs, roadblocks, frustrations, etc. There will be a great deal of dialogue and discussion about your project with other class members and with me. Everyone will know what everyone else is doing. Hopefully during these discussions, problems will be solved and new, helpful ideas will be presented.

As a side benefit along the way, this course will also help you to be a knowledgeable and critical consumer of published research and statistical information. We are constantly being bombarded in our everyday lives with facts, figures and statistics concerning various facets of our world—from pain relievers and toothpaste (“four out of five dentists recommend...”) to divorce rates, unemployment rates, crime rates, and an endless array of public opinion polls. What do these numbers mean? How are they constructed? Are they true indicators of what is really going on or are they incorrect...or worse...misleading? Chances are you've never asked these sorts of questions. As we proceed through the semester you will find yourself becoming more aware of and sensitive to the manner in which these statistics are constructed and presented.

REQUIRED READINGS

- Russell Schutt, *Investigating the Social World*, 8th edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015
- Johnny Blair, Ronald Czaja & Johnny Blair, *Designing Surveys*, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013
- William Wagner, *Using IBM SPSS Statistics for Social Statistics and Research Methods*, 6th edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017

In addition, you will be reading extensively on the sociological topic around which your research project will be designed.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Since this course is more of an intense workshop that revolves around individual student projects than a straight lecture course, it doesn't make sense to give exams. Hence grades will be based exclusively on a series of 4 papers representing different stages of your own research project. Prior to turning in each paper, you will give a brief oral report to other members of the class.

Points will be assigned as follows:

Paper/Oral #1 60 points

Paper/Oral #2 80 points

Paper/Oral #3 40 points

Paper/Oral #4 100 points

Total 280 points

I use a non-competitive grade scale. This means that the grade you receive will depend entirely on how many points you earn out of the total, not on how well your performance compares to others in the class.

Let me remind you that this is a Q course, which means that your projects must have a quantitative component to them. ***You will earn your Q certification by successfully:***

- Designing an original quantitative research project based on an issue of sociological importance
- Collecting and organizing data
- Generating appropriate statistical tests for analysis
- Interpreting statistical results and drawing theoretical conclusions

In addition you will be required to attend two computer workshops to learn a statistical software package commonly used in quantitative sociological research called SPSS. We will meet twice during the semester with the university's technical training coordinator. Your participation in these workshops will not be graded but you ***must*** attend them in order to learn how to analyze the data you will be collecting for your research project. Hence the workshops are essential if you want to pass the course and/or earn Q certification—something I assume you all want to do. The purpose of the workshops is not to make you a statistical whiz but to provide you with some of the basic quantitative skills professional sociologists use when they organize and analyze data.

DISABILITY ACCOMODATIONS

It is the policy and practice of DePauw University to provide reasonable accommodations for students with properly documented disabilities. Written notification from Student Disability Services is required. If you are eligible to receive an accommodation and would like to request it for this course, please contact Student Disability Services. Allow one week advance notice to ensure enough time for reasonable accommodations to be made. Otherwise, it is not guaranteed that the accommodation can be provided on a timely basis. Accommodations are not retroactive. Students who have questions about Student Disability Services or who have, or think they may have, a disability (psychiatric, attentional, learning, vision, hearing, physical, medical, etc.) are invited to contact Student Disability Services for a confidential discussion in Union Building Suite 200 or by phone at 658-6267.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

If you are going to miss class, it is your responsibility to let me know **in advance** and your responsibility to get the information we covered. Acceptable reasons for an excused absence include family emergency, serious illness, religious holiday, and participation in college athletic competitions and are typically documented. According to DePauw's *Academic Handbook*, "There are no 'allowed cuts' or 'free' absences from class sessions. Faculty members may drop students from their classes or other appropriate action may be taken if absences are too frequent." Hence, if you have more than four absences during the semester, you may not be eligible to continue in the course whether these absences are excused or unexcused.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF WEEKLY TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF COURSE AND INTRODCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

- Science and human inquiry
- Goals of scientific research
- Relationship between theory and research

* Schutt, chapter 1

WEEK 2: VALUES, ETHICS, AND POLITICS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

- neutrality
- deception
- safeguards
- ethics in the use of human subjects

* Schutt, chapters 2 & 3; Appendix A and Appendix B.

Thursday, September 1, Workshop on doing a literature review, Roy O. West Library. Make sure you bring your laptops to the workshop

WEEK 3: THE STRUCTURE OF INQUIRY

- Definition of research problem-choices and constraints (WHAT)
- The research objectives and motivation (WHY)
- Units of analysis (WHO)
- Research setting (WHERE)
- Time dimension (WHEN)
- Nature of causation

* Schutt, chapter 6

WEEK 4: ORAL PRESENTATION #1

Tuesday, September 13 and Thursday, September 15

WEEKS 5 & 6: THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY

- hypothesis construction
- conceptualization and measurement
- variables
- operationalization
- reliability and validity

- Schutt, chapter 4

* *PAPER #1 Due Tuesday, September 20*

WEEK 7: RESEARCH DESIGNS (PART I)

- survey research:
 - * Schutt, chapter 8
 - * Blair, Czaja, & Blair, chapters 1, 2, 3, 8, 9
- content analysis and historical analysis:
 - * Schutt, chapters 13

WEEK 8: RESEARCH DESIGNS (PART II)

- experimental research:
 - * Schutt, chapter 7
- qualitative research:
 - * Schutt, chapters 10 & 15

WEEK 9: FALL BREAK!!!!!! (NO CLASSES OCTOBER 18 AND OCTOBER 20)

WEEK 10: ORAL PRESENTATION #2

Tuesday, October 25 and Thursday, October 27

WEEK 11: SAMPLING DESIGN AND TECHNIQUES

- logic of sampling
- types of sampling designs
- biases and errors in sampling

* Schutt, chapter 5

* Blair, Czaja, & Blair, chapters 5 through 7

* *1st SPSS Computer Workshop, (Location to be announced), Tuesday, November 1*

* *PAPER #2 Due Tuesday, November 1*

WEEK 12: ORAL PRESENTATION #3

Tuesday, November 8 and Thursday, November 10

* *Submit IRB forms no later than Thursday, November 10*

WEEKS 13 AND 14: DATA ANALYSIS

- quantifying data
 - elementary analysis
 - measures of central tendency
- Schutt, Chapter 9
 - Wagner, *Using IBM SPSS Statistics* (entire book)

* *2nd SPSS Computer Workshop, (Location to be announced), Tuesday, November 15*

* *PAPER #3 Due Tuesday, November 15*

*****NOTE: WE WILL MEET FOR CLASS THIS WEEK ON MONDAY EVENING (NOVEMBER 21) FROM 7:00-8:30...WE WILL NOT HAVE CLASS ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 22*****

*****NOTE: THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24 IS THANKSGIVING. DON'T COME TO CLASS THAT DAY...NO ONE ELSE WILL BE THERE!!*****

WEEK 15: INTERPRETATION, EXPLANATION, AND REPORTING RESEARCH

* Schutt, chapter 16

WEEK 16: ORAL PRESENTATION #4

Tuesday, December 6 and Thursday, December 8

* *PAPER #4 Due Thursday, December 15 (during Finals Week)*

Paper Assignments
For
Research Methods Project
Fall, 2016

PAPER #1: LITERATURE REVIEW AND IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCH QUESTION (60 points)

This paper will determine the substantive focus of your research project and will therefore influence the nature of subsequent papers in this series. Hence it is extremely important for your semester-long project.

You must first identify a sociologically relevant topic that is of interest to you. Your choice may be based on something you've learned in a previous sociology class or simply on your own perception of the sociological importance of a particular topic. It can be from any area of sociology -- family, deviance, race and ethnicity, gender, criminology, stratification, culture & technology, social movements, etc. The only requirements are that it be something that interests you and that it be derived from some aspect of social theory and sociological research.

The overall goal of this paper is to identify the question or questions that your research project will be designed to answer. To do this you must first selectively review the pertinent research and theoretical literature that provides the foundation for formulating your question. In other words, you will be making a case for the importance of your research question by showing how this question fits within the theoretical and research literature that already exists. I call this a "selective" literature review because there is no way you will be able to review all the books and articles on your topic. The aim of this literature review should be a coherent weaving together of ideas and empirical findings relevant to the main issue you're addressing rather than a long list and summary of loosely connected references. What have others written about this topic? Is there agreement or conflict among these authors? What conclusions can be drawn from research that has been done on questions related to the one you're interested in? Where are the holes in the existing literature that your research question(s) can plug? In other words, what important component of this issue has *not* been adequately researched yet?

This paper should consist of more than simply describing a general topic in broad detail. *It should logically culminate in a specific question or issue that your research project is designed to address.* It should also make the case for the *sociological importance* of the research question(s) to be examined. Why does this topic need to be studied? What theoretical perspectives can be applied to this topic? What will your study contribute to the overall sociological understanding of the topic? What social group or groups would be interested in or benefit from research in this area? What is the potential applied, political, or social significance of research in this area?

You must also identify the aims of your study. Are you interested in testing a sociological theory you find interesting (e.g., labeling, deterrence, social exchange/equity, feminist theory, structural-functionalism) or is your motivation more practical and applied (e.g., identifying the sources of sexual or racial discrimination)?

We will be spending significant class time discussing the goal and appropriate style of literature reviews. In the meantime, I *strongly encourage you* to go to the library and browse through some of the major sociological journals to see how professional sociologists structure their literature reviews. This will give you an opportunity to a) see how research papers are organized and b) get some ideas about a topic for your own project. Here are a few journals that may be helpful:

American Sociological Review
American Journal of Sociology
Contexts
Social Forces
Social Problems
Social Psychology Quarterly
Sex Roles
Journal of Marriage and Family
Sociology of Education

PAPER #1 IS DUE TUESDAY, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

PAPER #2: PRESENTATION OF TESTABLE RESEARCH HYPOTHESES, DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS, AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES (80 points)

In paper #1 you reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature pertinent to your topic and identified a specific problem or question that needs to be addressed. In paper #2 you will provide a bridge between the research question you have identified and the more detailed research procedures you will employ to answer this question. What is your basic research plan going to be? What is the predicted relationship between important concepts? How do you intend to measure the concepts you're interested in? At this point you must get rid of any abstraction or ambiguity in your thinking. *Specificity and precision are required in this paper.*

Your first task is to take the guiding theoretical questions identified in Paper #1 and express them as **testable research hypotheses**—a set of carefully worded predictions about how you think particular variables will affect one another. Does variable A “cause” changes in variable B or vice versa? For example, do prejudicial attitudes influence our contacts with members of other racial groups, or do these contacts influence our attitudes? Perhaps variable A has an impact on B but only if another variable, C, is present. What other variables must be “controlled” in order to adequately assess the relationship between the variables you're interested in? It is frequently helpful to represent one's basic reasoning with a diagram linking variables with causal arrows. For each hypothesis you must provide the compelling rationale for why you think things will turn out the way you predict.

In presenting your hypotheses you must identify all the important **independent** and **dependent variables** involved as well as any other outside variables you think may influence the variables you are interested in examining. Here you will be addressing the key methodological issues, **conceptualization** and **operationalization**. For instance, you may be interested in the factors that cause racial prejudice, but what exactly is prejudice? You must go beyond a common sense definition to one that provides the reader with the precise meaning of your important concepts. For instance, if you're examining racial bias in hiring practices you might really be interested in discrimination (behavior) and not prejudice (beliefs). What sorts of actions would be indicators of such underlying bias? For instance, would it be a particular answer to a survey question about attitudes toward Muslim Americans, some kind of behavior that you could observe, like avoiding Asian-Americans in public places, membership in a particular organization like the Ku Klux Klan, or something else entirely? In short, how could you recognize and measure this concept in the “real world?” This step in your research project is absolutely crucial because it provides the link between abstract, theoretical ideas and concrete ways of observing these ideas.

How do you intend to go about collecting quantitative data on the variables you've identified? Will you conduct a controlled experiment? Will you conduct systematic observations of the behavior of others? Will you ask people questions either through online surveys or through face-to-face interviews? Will you use existing records or analyze the content of documents like magazine ads or song lyrics? Will you use a mixed methods approach (e.g., surveys plus a handful of focused interviews)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the method(s) you've chosen? The key word for purposes of designing a study that you can actually carry out is: **SIMPLICITY**. Don't design a research project that is so unmanageable and complex that it will be impossible to do during the course of the semester.

Whatever technique you choose to collect data (survey, experiment, observation, content analysis), you will then discuss the **validity** and **reliability** of your proposed indicators. Are they adequate measures of the concepts you're interested in or can they be interpreted as measuring something completely different? Can you think of more reliable and more valid indicators (that weren't practical because of the limitations under which you've had to design your study)?

[Note: All the important elements of this paper—hypotheses; independent and dependent variables; conceptualization and operationalization; reliability and validity will be defined and discussed at length during class]

PAPER #2 IS DUE TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1

PAPER #3: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT AND SAMPLING (40 points)

The first part of this paper requires the presentation of your data collection instrument. There's a good chance that you will be doing a project that requires you to ask people questions or to observe them doing something. If so, you must include your survey questionnaire or interview script. If you will be observing people or using existing documents you must include a very specific description of what you will be looking for and how you will recognize it when you see it (that is, a "code sheet"). There are many things to consider when designing this part of a research project (e.g., wording and ordering of questions, your role as interviewer/observer, how to quantify observations, etc.). These issues will be discussed at length in class, and the textbook has several important chapters that cover them. However I also suggest that you meet with me outside of class time to lay out a plan of attack.

If you plan to utilize a mixed-methods approach and conduct a series of focused interviews (to add depth and explanatory information to the quantitative data you will be collecting), you will need to provide a brief explanation of how you intend to conduct those interviews.

In the second part of this paper you will discuss your sampling strategy. Who will be your units of analysis? Parents? Parents of student-athletes? All students on campus? Sophomores? Female sophomores? Female sophomores who come from a different state? Kids at a school playground? National Enquirer articles from the past 7 years? Why have you chosen this group and not others? How will your subjects be selected? Will you be able to use some form of systematic sampling procedure to select them? If not, why not? There may be some theoretical justification for the selection procedure or it may simply be the result of practical constraints. Your selection plan should be tailor-made to the requirements of the problem, the setting of the study, the resources available and the feasibility of access to the necessary data (e.g., you might be interested in how perpetual violence in the Middle East affects Israeli and Palestinian families, but you'd have quite a bit of difficulty gaining access to the necessary subjects).

SO REMEMBER TO BE PRACTICAL!!

PAPER #3 IS DUE TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15

PAPER #4: RESULTS, DATA ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION, AND SELF CRITIQUE (100 points)

Paper #4 will summarize the statistical analysis of the data you have collected. What did you find? Are the results consistent with your original hypotheses? If not, why not? Did you find anything unexpected? Can you explain these results? What conclusions can you draw, based on your data, about the problem you initially identified? Do your results raise any interesting new questions that could be addressed by someone else in the future?

Your plan for analyzing the data should bear directly on the questions, issues or hypotheses specified in the first 2 papers of the series. Although you will be using the program, SPSS, to analyze your data, I do not expect you to conduct any complex and elaborate statistical tests that would require extensive computer use. This would be beyond the scope of this course. Instead, I want you to use SPSS to help you organize your data and present them in a simple comprehensible way. At a minimum, you *must* be able to look at the statistics, compare scores between groups (men versus women, religious versus non-religious people, first year students versus seniors, etc.) and see if the trends are consistent with your predictions (hypotheses).

This paper requires you not only to present your results in a clear and organized way but to interpret them as well. It is not enough to simply turn in a computer print out of tables and graphs. **You must discuss, in detail, what the numbers mean.** Contrary to popular belief, statistics *never* “speak for themselves.” What conclusions can you draw from your results about the nature of social life? What are the larger social and policy implications of your findings? What kinds of contributions could a study like this make to the existing body of sociological knowledge?

This paper requires you to do more than just generate a bunch of numbers; it requires you to think. You must be prepared to explain why the statistics came out the way they did. For instance, if you predicted that people with college degrees would be less prejudiced than people who never went to college, and your results showed the opposite, you have to figure out why. Is there some logical sociological explanation for the unexpected finding, was it something in the way you worded your questions, or was there something peculiar about the subjects in your study that made them different from people in the general population?

Given your results, what could you have done differently that would have made this a “better” study? For instance, could you have asked different questions or used a different method to study the problem? Would you have obtained different results with a different sample of subjects, or with a larger sample of subjects? If so, why do you think these things would have made a difference? In other words, what aspects of the research design limited the credibility of the data you collected and the conclusions you've drawn from them? What data—that you didn't or couldn't get—would have been helpful in drawing more solid conclusions? For this last section of the paper, it might be helpful to imagine yourself in the position of a journal reviewer who is assessing the merits of this study in trying to determine if it is publishable.

NOTE: When critiquing your study void using “generic” criticisms. Everyone's study is limited by characteristics of the sample or by the intrusion of extraneous variables. If the sample of subjects truly limited the applicability of your results you *must* explain why. It is *not* enough to say, “My results are flawed and not applicable to the larger population because I used DePauw students as my sample.” Anybody can say that. You *must* explain how your results might have been different if a different sample of subjects was used? If you think a survey would have given you better results than face-to-face interviews, you *must* explain why.

PAPER #4 IS DUE THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15