

Department of Sociology
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH METHODS: THE MODES AND LOGIC OF SOCIAL INQUIRY

Spring 2010

Course Information:

Course Number:	SOCI 407	Instructor:	Professor David Warner
Credits:	3 Hours	Office:	Mather Memorial 223C
Seminar Times:	T 11:30am -2:00pm	Phone:	216.368.2697
Seminar Room:	Mather Memorial 222	E-mail:	david[dot]warner[at]case[dot]edu
Prerequisites:	SOCI 406 & Instructor Permission (See Below)	Office Hours:	T 9:30–11:00 am & by appointment

“‘Method’ has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. ‘Theory’ has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release, rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination.”

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (2000 [1959]: 120)

“Statistical estimation methods should serve as the handmaiden to theory and research design, not the other way around. ... Those who worship at the altar of complex methods are prone to the error of thinking that technical sophistication can substitute for knowledge of the subject matter, careful theorizing, and appropriate research design.”

—Glenn Firebaugh, *Seven Rules for Social Research* (2008:207-208)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

As the above two quotes—written nearly a half century apart—make clear, social research is about analyzing social phenomena or “facts” and involves both rigorous techniques for examination (i.e., the modes) of *and* systematic reasoning (i.e., the logic) about the relationships between these facts. That is, research methods have primarily to do with thinking about how best to ask and answer questions. This course will accordingly survey major research designs and techniques used in contemporary empirical inquiry into social phenomena, including field and ethnographic designs, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, archival designs, and survey and observational designs. Given the diversity of research strategies used by sociologists, we will emphasize the general logic of social inquiry across modes rather than the mechanical aspects of any one approach. However, given their pervasiveness, significant attention will be devoted to understanding both the logic and procedures of survey and observational designs. Throughout the course, we will be concerned with the perennial issues of causality (so as to make inferences), sampling (so as to apply our inferences to the social world), and conceptualization (to be sure that we have appropriate representations of the social facts about which we wish to infer).

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The primary objective of this course is for students to develop an operational understanding of the major sociological research methods. To this end, students successfully completing this course will:

- Articulate the logic of social scientific inquiry;
- Describe the basic premises of common sociological research designs;
- Identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of these designs;
- Critically evaluate the methodological approach of sociological research studies;
- Understand the debates surrounding causality in sociological research;
- Design and write research proposals; and
- Appreciate the iterative process of social research (Hopefully!).

Although somewhat irregular for a statement of objectives, it is important to emphasize that this course is generalist in nature and is **not** designed to be the totality of one's methodological training. Expertise results from completion of more specialized courses and the repeated practical application of such specialized techniques, and therefore develops gradually across one's career. Consequently students will not be "experts" in social research methodology upon course completion. However, students who successfully complete the course will have the foundational skills necessary to pursue such expertise, able to *evaluate* social research and to *plan and conduct* their own research projects, but will in no way be experts in any one method.

PREREQUISITES:

Graduate standing and a course in statistics that provided extensive coverage of the linear regression model (SOCI 406 satisfies this requirement); an introductory undergraduate course in social research methods is recommended.

COURSE READINGS:

As required part of the Sociology Graduate Curriculum, this graduate level seminar is designed to provide you with the foundational training necessary to successfully complete independent research projects, including your doctoral dissertation. As such, you will be required make significant investments in the materials for this course and dedicate a substantial amount of time to preparation for each class session.

There are seven **required** books for this course:

- Becker, Howard S. 1986/2007. [*Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carmines, Edward G. and Richard A. Zeller. 1979. [*Reliability and Validity Assessment*](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Elder, Glen H., Jr., Eliza K. Pavalko, and Elizabeth C. Clipp. 1993. [*Working with Archival Data: Studying Lives*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

- Firebaugh, Glenn. 2008. [*Seven Rules for Social Research*](#). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kalton, Graham. 1983. [*Introduction to Survey Sampling*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Menard, Scott. 2002. [*Longitudinal Research \(Second Edition\)*](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spector, Paul E. 1992. [*Summated Rating Scale Construction: An Introduction*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

There are four additional **recommended** books for this course. Although we will not read the entirety of these texts, several chapters from each are assigned and they are excellent additions to any sociologist's library:

- Allison, Paul D. 2002. [*Missing Data*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Becker, Howard S. 1998. [*Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Converse, Jean M. and Stanley Presser. 1986. [*Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lieberman, Stanley. 1985. [*Making It Count: The Improvement of Social Research and Theory*](#). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

I recognize that it is a significant financial investment for students to purchase all of these books. However, each of these texts will undoubtedly become staple reference materials throughout your graduate career (and beyond), so I strongly encourage you to obtain all of the texts. For students for whom purchasing all of these books would present a financial hardship, I have made copies available through the *KSL Course Reserves* under SOCI 407 (3-Hour in library use *only*).

Also required are select scientific articles and book chapters as specified in the accompanying Topic Plan. Almost all of these readings are (or will soon be) available in the Required Readings area of the Course Blackboard Site.

In addition to the required reading, for a number of topics I have included the citation for other sources recommended for further reading. You are not expected to be familiar with these readings for this course. However, these sources will undoubtedly be valuable as you pursue further graduate study, including in your preparation for your comprehensive examinations and the development of your dissertation proposal.

➤ *All required readings are denoted by a checkbox in the accompanying Topic Plan.* ⏪

COURSE FORMAT AND ATTENDANCE:

Class meetings will be substantially discussion based. However, this format is successful only in so far as participants take the opportunity to read assigned readings carefully and critically, and come prepared to discuss them along with their own ideas, reactions, and questions about those readings. I will lecture occasionally to explore the logic and details of the required readings in more detail or to raise relevant material from suggested readings and other sources.

Given that this course is a required part of the Sociology Graduate Curriculum and that it meets once a week, attendance at each class session is mandatory: **students who miss a class meeting will have their final grade penalized 10% (per absence)**. I may grant exceptions to this policy in the case of documented illness, death, or athletic/extra-curricular activities (e.g., attendance at a *national* conference), as well as for religious holidays. For an exception to be granted, you must notify me in advance of your absence for one of the aforementioned reasons and turn any assignment due beforehand. *Note that prior notification and early submission of an assignment in no way guarantees that your absence will be excused.*

Please note that students are **not** permitted to take notes using a laptop computer or other personal computing device in this course unless it is medically necessary and the student is registered with the Coordinator of Disability Services.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Students successfully completing this course will critically analyze the readings, carefully integrate the sometimes disparate course material, and apply this material in novel ways. Students are expected and will be required to do more than simply memorize the material. The following methods of evaluation will be used to measure careful analysis, integration and application of the course material.

1) Class Participation

Each class session has a set of readings matched to it. Students are expected to demonstrate their proficiency with the readings through regular and relevant class participation, as determined at the end of the course, consistent with the demands of a graduate level seminar. To facilitate the highest level of participation, please **complete the assigned readings no later than the afternoon before** we are scheduled to cover the material (as announced in class), as this timeframe will allow adequate rumination.

Please note that in the interest of maintaining classroom discussion and equitable “airtime” among participants, I will call on students in class. Students who fail to respond or otherwise demonstrate that they have not devoted sufficient time to preparing for class will be penalized.

Students will earn 10% of their final grade based on the quantity and quality of their Class Participation. Students who do not demonstrate regular and relevant participation will earn a grade no higher than a B in this course (and indeed may earn a lower grade).

2) Short Written Exercises

Students will complete five (5) short written exercises over the course of the semester (see *Schedule of Assignments* below). These exercises will ask each student *independently* to apply the concepts presented in the weekly assigned readings and lecture to a specific problem and allow you the opportunity to further develop of your methodological thinking. The details of each exercise will be distributed in class prior to the due date. All assignments must follow the *Writing Guidelines* listed below.

Students will earn a total 40% of their final grade based on these Short Written Exercises; please note that all exercises may not be of equal weight.

3) Research Proposal Using Secondary Data

Consistent with one of the primary objectives of this course, each student will develop an empirical research proposal on a topic of his or her choice (in consultation with the instructor) using secondary analysis of publically available survey data.

Students may select from among any number of nationally-representative probability samples, such as the General Social Survey (GSS), Americans' Changing Lives (ACL), the National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH), and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS). These and many other national probability samples are available through ICPSR (www.icpsr.umich.edu).

The specification that research proposals must employ secondary analyses of publically available data reflects the pervasiveness of such research in sociology (and hence our emphasis on the survey and observation designs in this course). Students should not view this limitation as a restriction on their sociological imaginations, but rather as an opportunity to apply a number of the methodological techniques to a concrete research problem and have a strong start on publishable research papers or (ideally) their doctoral dissertation proposals.

Although the content and organization will vary, Research Proposals should include the following substantive elements:

- **Specific Aims**—a clear statement introducing the reader to the research problem to be addressed and the importance of the problem;
- **Theoretical Background**—a literature review sufficient to indicate how this research problem relates to prior studies and the significant of the proposed project to the field, including the specific questions or hypotheses that follow from this literature;
- **Data and Methods**—an outline of the methods to be employed, i.e., the research design, sampling, measures (including reliability and validity) and data analysis strategy;
- **Expected Findings**—a summation of possible empirical outcomes on the key research questions.

Students will earn a total of 50% of their final grade based on their Research Proposal, which will be completed in three steps:

Students will submit a 2-3 page Topic Statement about their Research Proposal on **Tuesday, February 2nd**. The Topic Statement should describe the primary research questions, the importance of answering these questions, and a justification of the dataset proposed for the analysis to address these questions. The Topic Statement, if executed properly, will be incorporated into the Specific Aims section of the full proposal. Students should expect to attend office hours the following week to discuss their Topic Statement. Approval of the Topic Statement and attendance at Office Hours is worth 5% of the final grade.

Following approval of the Topic Statement, students should begin work in earnest on their proposal. A complete first—though not unedited (see *Writing Guidelines* below)—draft of the Research Proposal is due **Tuesday, April 6th**. Students must include their graded Topic Statement with their first drafts. These drafts will be evaluated and returned to the students by **Tuesday, April 19th**. The first draft is worth 10% of the final grade.

Students are expected to take seriously the comments on the first draft and revise their proposals accordingly. The final draft of the Research Proposal is due **Tuesday, May 4th** by 5 pm. Again, students must also include their commented first draft with their submission and comments made on first draft that are unaddressed in the final draft will be substantially penalized. The final Research Proposal is worth 35% of the final grade.

I will *not* accept any submission to which the assignment from the prior step is not attached.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS:

Assignment	Due Date
Research Proposal Topic Statement	Th 2/2
Exercise #1: Quasi-Experimental Design	T 2/16
Exercise #2: Elaboration	T 3/2
Exercise #3: Sampling	T 3/16
Exercise #4: Measurement	T 3/30
Research Proposal First Draft	Th 4/6
Exercise#5: Article Critique	Th 4/20
Research Proposal Final Draft	T 5/4

GRADING SCHEMA:

All assignments in this course will be evaluated using a letter based grading-schema. These letter grades and their corresponding percentages are as follows: A=95%; B=85%; C=75%; D=65%; and F=50%. Plus/minus designations will also be used. A designation of + adds 3.5 percentage points to the above and a designation of – subtracts 3.5 percentage points. For example, a score of B+ corresponds to 88.5%, while a score of B- corresponds to 81.5%. Truly exceptional assignments, those that demonstrate a depth of knowledge and integration of material at the highest level and otherwise free from error, may be awarded a grade of A++ and scored at 100%. Other letter grade combinations may also be used and will correspond to the percentage midway between the constituent letter grades (e.g., A-/B+ is equivalent to 90%).

Students will earn their final grade in this course based on their total weighted performance on each of the course requirements described above. Final grades in this course will be assigned as straight letter grades, the system used at Case Western Reserve University, as follows:

To earn a(n)	A	students need a total weighted performance of at least	90%
	B		80%
	C		70%
	D		65%

These percentage cut-offs are absolute. Students must earn the minimum percentage listed for each grade; I will not “round-up” final grades. A student who accumulates 89.99% of the highest point total has earned a B. *No Exceptions.*

Please note that I **DO NOT** utilize the Gradebook tool in Blackboard during the semester. It each student’s responsibility to save their graded assignments and monitor their progress based on the Course Requirements and Grading Schema outlined above. I will not respond to inquiries about a student’s progress. Final grades will be uploaded to Blackboard prior to submission to the Registrar at the end of the course.

Unless there has been a demonstrable error in recording a grade, all final grades are non-negotiable. Students should have put in the necessary work during the semester to earn their desired grade in this course.

WRITING GUIDELINES:

On all written assignments for this course you should use a scholarly writing style: coherent and well-reasoned, integrative, and with a minimum of spelling and grammatical errors. All work submitted for evaluation should be a polished demonstration of your writing ability, not an unedited draft (see Becker 1986/2007: “Chapter 4: Editing By Ear.”).

Formatting: Please format all written assignments according to the following specifications:

- Double-space with 1” margins on all sides;
- Use a 12 point *Times New Roman*, Calibri, or similar font (No Arial or Courier New);
- There should be no additional spacing before and after paragraphs (i.e., format settings should be set to 0 pt);
- Number the bottom right-hand corner of each page;
- Staple the pages together in the upper left-hand corner;
- Print on a single-side of the page;
- A title page is not necessary for Short Written Exercises—simply list your name, exercise number and title, and due date on separate *single*-spaced lines at the top of the first page (and the first page only);
- Use a title page for your Research Proposal.

Citations: Please use in-text citations to reference the source for everything that is not an original idea. As a professional sociologist in-training you should use ASA format. A copy of the *ASA Style Guide* (3rd Edition) is available through the *KSL Course Reserves* under SOCI 407 (3-Hour in library use *only*) or you can purchase a copy of your own from the ASA website (www.asanet.org).

For the Short Written Exercises, you will not be penalized for drawing on outside or recommended readings, but must exhibit sufficient familiarity with **all** of the relevant required readings. As the semester progresses, you are expected to demonstrate successful integration of the course material by citing relevant readings previously assigned in the course. For cited materials not listed on this syllabus please provide a full reference at the end of your exercise.

For the Research Proposal, material from outside of this course will obviously be cited and you must include a proper full reference section for all sources cited at the end of your Proposal.

Submission: Each assignment must be turned in at the beginning of the class session in which it is due, except for the final draft of the Research Proposal as noted above. Students that do not submit an assignment when it is due will receive a score of **ZERO** (0) on that assignment. *Late papers will NOT be accepted under any circumstances.* Electronic submissions will **NOT** be accepted. This policy applies to all written work in this course and no exceptions will be granted.

Although some (or much) of the preceding may seem arbitrary to you, consistency across papers facilitates grading and greatly improves the odds that I can evaluate the content of your arguments without distraction. Written assignments that fail to follow these guidelines, including improperly formatted citations, will be penalized 10% for the first offense, 25% for the second offense, and 50% thereafter.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

“The University's mission rests on the premise of intellectual honesty: in the classroom, the laboratory, the office, and the solitary examination desk. Without a prevailing ethic of honor and integrity not only in scientific pursuits but also in all scholarly activity, the very search for knowledge is impaired.... [E]ach of us must therefore accept individual responsibility for our behavior and our work, and refrain from taking credit for the work of others.” (from the *CWRU Statement on Ethics*, <http://studentaffairs.case.edu/office/judicial/policies/ethics.html>).

I strongly encourage students to familiarize themselves with the entirety of the University's Academic Integrity Policy, including what constitutes an academic integrity violation (<http://studentaffairs.case.edu/office/judicial/policies/integrity.html>). It is my policy that any student found committing acts of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Dean of Graduate Studies and at minimum will receive a failing grade in this course. There are no exceptions to this policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The development of this syllabus and content of this course greatly benefited from the examination of Graduate Methods and Research Design syllabi by Al DeMaris, Jeremy Freese, Douglas Hartmann and Scott R. Eliason, and Marylee Taylor, as well as ongoing discussions with Dale Dannefer and Jessica Kelley-Moore.

TOPIC PLAN & ASSIGNED READINGS (Distributed in-Class)