

Research Design

Winter 2018

1810 Chicago Ave Rm 320

Office Hours: Wed. 3-5PM—sign up online from my departmental webpage

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This course is organized around the following principles:

(1) We will be learning and practicing the “canonical” model of sociological research: using empirical evidence to test alternative hypotheses to explain a sociological phenomenon, for the purpose of generalizing about social structures and forces, and with the results written up in a standard format (intro/lit review/research design/methods/results/discussion/conclusion). At the same time, we will discuss the limitations of that model: canonical sociology may not be what drew many of us to this field, the canonical research design may not survive first contact with the field, and the scholarship on your topic may be nowhere near the point of being able to test alternative hypotheses. So you will spend this quarter drawing up a canonical research project, with the awareness that you may end up blowing up that research design and starting over.

Given the limitations, why focus on the canonical model at all? For two reasons. First, it’s a powerful rhetorical tool, particularly when you do not have the space to present the full explanation for why you want to do things differently. And since the contexts that determine success in an academic career are generally contexts where you do not have that space (grant applications, journal articles, job talks), this is a good skill to learn. Second, going through the canonical paces sensitizes you to the issue of what empirical findings can count as evidence for what kinds of theoretical claims. This is important to learn so that you can *recognize evidence when you come across it in the field*—even if it’s evidence for an entirely different claim from the one you designed your project around.

(2) This is a practical course aimed at helping students who are just starting out on a research project. This is not a course in the philosophy of research design. While we do discuss theoretical issues as they arise in the practice of designing research, the focus is on students’ projects. Thus, the course is aimed at students who are currently designing their second year papers (i.e. first year students) or their dissertations (i.e. third year students).

(3) This is not a course on research methods. Although we will discuss what methods are appropriate for what kinds of questions, there are other courses in the department that can initiate you into the specifics of how to conduct interviews, field research, comparative historical research, etc. The emphasis here is on four conceptual issues: how to turn a topic

into a research question, what methods are best for what kinds of questions, how to draw conclusions from empirical data, and how to recognize data when you find it in the field.

By the end of the course you will have gained: (1) exposure to the projects of several graduate students (including some graduate students who went on to become your professors), which should give you a sense of what is realistic and feasible for graduate student projects; (2) explicit discussion about the nuts and bolts issues behind the design of any empirical project, such as sampling and measurement; and (3) thorough feedback from me and from the class of the first draft of a research proposal for your second year paper or dissertation—first in its constituent parts, and then as a whole.

Required Books (ordered at Norris bookstore)

- King, Keohane, and Verba, Designing Social Inquiry
- Luker, Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences

Schedule of assignments

All assignments except the first are due on Canvas by 5 PM on the Sunday before the class meeting, and you are asked to read all other students’ assignments before each class meeting.

Topic	Date	Reading	Assignment (see separate assignments sheet)
Introduction	January 9		
From Topic to Research Question	January 16	KKV and Luker	Assignment 1: comments on KKV and Luker
	January 23	Rodríguez-Muñiz, Michael. “Intellectual Inheritances: Cultural Diagnostics and the State of Poverty Knowledge.” John Hagan, “Labelling and Deviance: A Case Study in the ‘Sociology of the Interesting’.”	Assignment 2: imaginary abstracts and nightmare abstracts; please bring to class one printed copy of all your abstracts, stapled together, with your name on it
	January 30	Read and be prepared to discuss	Assignment 3: literature review and alternative hypotheses

		each others' lit reviews	
From Research Question to Methods and Data Collection Strategies	February 6	Christine Percheski, "Opting Out?" Articles to be chosen by students	Assignment 4: varieties of methods
	February 13	Lincoln Quillian, "Prejudice as a Response to Group Threat" Articles to be chosen by students	Assignment 5: evidence base, sampling strategy, measurement; some important logical fallacies
From Data to Conclusion	February 20	Wendy Griswold, "American Character and the American Novel" Dissertations to be chosen by students	Assignment 6: what is evidence? Identifying observable implications
	February 27	Pattillo-McCoy, Mary "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community"	Assignment 7: how data lead to conclusions
From Data Backwards to Design	March 6	Interviews	Assignment 8: recognizing evidence when you see it
Final proposals	March 13	Read and be prepared to discuss each others' proposals	Assignment 9: research proposal

Only the final research proposal receives a substantive grade. The other assignments are graded only according to whether they were submitted on time. Class participation is also taken into account in determining final grades.