

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Sociology 220

Spring 2019

Tu/Th 1:15-2:35pm, Education 022

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Sign up at <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/exdpy>

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to methods of conducting sociological research. We will cover the topics of research design, measurement and sampling, as well as a range of research methods including experiments, surveys, interviews and fieldwork, and secondary data analysis. In the process, you will practice using these research methods yourselves, as well as learning to evaluate the evidence behind claims that others make.

Some of you may go on to conduct research of your own in honors theses, graduate school, or in your careers, and this course will give you a foundation for doing that. However, all of you will be exposed to social scientific research in the media and other contexts. We particularly want you to leave with the basic tools needed to evaluate the quality of such research, including the methods it uses and its research design. The world needs not just producers of research, but informed consumers as well—and soon this will be you.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify, describe, and begin to use major methodological approaches in sociology
- Use deductive and inductive reasoning to move from theory to evidence (and back)
- Use sociological theories to generate research questions or hypotheses and develop basic research designs appropriate to answer or test them
- Demonstrate an understanding of sampling, measurement and data collection
- Operationalize concepts into measurable variables
- Evaluate the precision, reliability, and validity of data sources
- Understand the difference between probability and non-probability samples
- Discuss the strengths and limitations of different research methods, either in general or as used in specific studies
- Evaluate the quality of social scientific claims made by others

REQUIRED BOOK

You will need to acquire the following textbook, at the campus bookstore or elsewhere. Either the first or second edition is acceptable. The list price is \$95, but as of this writing it is available new on Amazon for \$85, used on Amazon from \$40, or can be rented at the bookstore for \$40:

Dixon, Jeffrey C., Royce A. Singleton, Jr., and Bruce C. Straits. 2016 (first edition) or 2019 (second edition). *The Process of Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

All other readings will be posted to Blackboard (<https://blackboard.albany.edu/>).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Your grade for the class will be based on three main components:

- **Five assignments (55%).** These are exercises in evaluating, designing, and conducting research. They include:
 - Annotating an academic journal article (5%)
 - Evaluating how the U.S. government measures poverty (10%)
 - Writing and testing a short survey (10%)
 - Conducting a field observation and coding your field notes (15%)
 - Constructing cross-tabulations using data from gapminder.org

- **A midterm (15%) and final exam (15%).** These are relatively short exams including multiple choice and short answer questions. They focus on definitions and simple application of concepts that are not fully covered in the assignments. The final exam is cumulative.

- **Class participation (15% of total grade).** This includes attendance (you may have two unexcused absences without penalty) and active participation in discussion and class activities.

The grading scale is as follows:

A	92-100	C	72-77
A-	90-91	C-	70-71
B+	88-89	D+	68-69
B	82-87	D	62-67
B-	80-81	D-	60-61
C+	78-79	E	59 or below

CLASSROOM PROTOCOL

- Students are expected to arrive on time to class and to remain for the entire class. If you arrive late, but within the first ten minutes, you will receive half credit for the day's attendance; you must arrive within the first ten minutes to receive attendance credit.

- Use of cell phones, laptops, and tablet is not permitted without explicit permission, or when we are doing work that requires their use. Cell phones are a major distraction, and while laptops can obviously be used for legitimate academic purposes, they too offer many temptations. Research increasingly demonstrates that students learn less when they use laptops in class:
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/for-better-learning-in-college-lectures-lay-down-the-laptop-and-pick-up-a-pen/>

- Except with an excused absence, late work will lose one-third letter grade per day late (i.e., an A- will become a B+, or a C+ will become a C). “Excused absence” means either talking to us in advance about a planned absence or providing documentation of a major and unpredictable event or emergency (serious illness, death in the family, flat tire).
- Any student who engages in academic dishonesty (cheating on an exam, borrowing text from the internet, copying assignments from a friend, etc.) will automatically receive a failing grade on the assignment and will be referred to the University Judicial System, which can administer more serious punishment, including suspension or expulsion.
- If you are registered with the Disability Resource Center or an athlete in a spring sport, please tell us the first week of class so that we can discuss any accommodations you may need. Also feel free to tell us in advance any other circumstances it would be helpful for us to know about (e.g. you are a single parent, or employed nearly full time).
- If you are struggling for personal or academic reasons, please talk to us sooner rather than later! While everyone has to complete the work to pass the class, we are not totally inflexible with students who are communicating with us and making a serious effort. But we can’t do much if you come to talk to us during finals week about the reason you missed half the assignments.

ASSIGNMENT AND EXAM DUE DATES

Assignment due dates are approximate and may be adjusted if necessary.

Th 2/7	Assignment 1—Annotating a research article
Th 2/21	Assignment 2—Evaluating the U.S. poverty measure
Th 3/14	Midterm
Tu 4/2	Assignment 3—Writing and testing a survey
Tu 4/16	Assignment 4—Observing social hierarchy in public space
Tu 4/30	Assignment 5—Constructing and analyzing data tables
Wed 5/15	Final exam (1:00pm)

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

In addition to the readings listed below, we may occasionally assign additional short readings, which will be posted to Blackboard. Readings should be completed before the class for which they are assigned.

<u>Week 1</u>	Introduction to the class
Th 1/24	
<u>Week 2</u>	What is social research?
Tu 1/29	Ch. 1—Introduction: Why Care about Research Methods?

Ch. 2—Science and Social Research: From Theory to Data and Back
(A copy of these chapters are on Blackboard)

Th 1/31 Ch. 3—The Ethics and Politics of Research: Doing What’s “Right”

Week 3 **Reading academic research and understanding research designs**

Tu 2/5 Tilcsik, András. 2011. “Pride and Prejudice: Employment Discrimination against Openly Gay Men in the United States.” *American Journal of Sociology* 117:586-626.

In-class lab: How to read an academic journal article for its research methods

Th 2/7 Ch. 4—Research Designs: It Depends on the Question

Turn in Assignment 1—Annotating a research article (based on Tilcsik 2011)

Week 4 **Research designs and concept measurement**

Tu 2/12 (Read today’s articles primarily to understand their research designs)

Broh, Beckett A. 2002. “Linking Extracurricular Programming to Academic Achievement: Who Benefits and Why?” *Sociology of Education* 75:69-95.

Calarco, Jessica McCrory. 2011. “ ‘I Need Help!’ Social Class and Children’s Help-Seeking in Elementary School.” *American Sociological Review* 76:862-882.

Th 2/14 Ch. 5—Measurement: Linking Theory to Research

Start working on poverty measurement assignment

Week 5 **Measurement**

Tu 2/19 Iceland, John. 2005. “Measuring Poverty: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations.” *Measurement* 3:199-235.

Continue working on poverty measurement assignment

Th 2/21 Turn in Assignment 2—Evaluating the poverty measure

Week 6 **Sampling**

Tu 2/26 Ch. 6—Sampling: Case Selection as a Basis for Inference

Th 2/28

Week 7 **Experiments**

Tu 3/5 Ch. 7—Experiments: What Causes What?

Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology* 108:937-975.

Th 3/7

Week 8 **Midterm week**

Tu 3/12 Midterm exam

Th 3/14 No class (Professor Berman out of town)

SPRING BREAK WEEK

Week 9 **Surveys**

Tu 3/26 Ch. 8—Surveys: Questioning and Sampling

Start working on survey assignment

Th 3/28 Continue working on survey assignment

Week 10 **Field research and interviews**

Tu 4/2 Ch. 9—Field Research and In-Depth Interviews: Systematic People Watching and Listening

Start preparing for field observation

Turn in Assignment 3—Survey construction

Th 4/4 Read short selections of close observation from several ethnographies

Continue preparing for field observation

Week 11 **Interpreting and coding qualitative data**

Tu 4/9 Ch. 13—Qualitative Data Analysis: Searching for Meaning

Bring field notes to class and discuss

Th 4/11 Work on coding field notes

Week 12 **Working with secondary data**

Tu 4/16 Ch. 10—Existing Data Analysis: Using Data from Secondhand Sources (pp. 295-309 only)

Turn in Assignment 4—Field observation and coding

Start using Gapminder

Th 4/18 Ch. 12—Using Statistics for Description and Inference (pp. 362-381 only)

Continue working with Gapminder

Week 13 **Quantitative data analysis**

Tu 4/23 Work on data tables assignment

Th 4/25 Work on data tables assignment

Weeks 14/15 **Flex days**

Catchup day(s), and/or one or more of the following topics: content analysis, comparative-historical methods, mixed methods, evaluating research claims in the media

Tu 4/30 Turn in Assignment 5—Constructing cross-tabulations

Th 5/2

Tu 5/7

Final Exam Wed 5/15 at 1:00pm