Sociology 750 – Research Design and Practice in Sociology

Professor: Randy Stoecker
Office: Agricultural Hall 340d
Office Hours: W 1-3:00, and by appointment
Phone: 890-0764
E-mail: rstoecker@wisc.edu

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W 3:30-6:00
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Ingraham

This syllabus is available electronically at Learn@UW website for this course,
https://learnuw.wisc.edu/

Introduction

This course will focus on the major methodological approaches and tools used by sociologists. It will also look critically at each of those approaches and tools. Regardless of your methodological persuasion, my goals are for you to leave this course with both greater confidence in your methodological judgment and greater sensitivity to methodological diversity.

The course is designed, consequently, to not only offer you methodological breadth, but to also support you in beginning to develop your own methodological specialization if you wish. The main assignment for the course will encourage you to focus your methodological thinking on a research question that is important to you and a research approach that is comfortable for you.

Our class process is likely to produce updates in this syllabus as the course progresses. I will always inform you when new versions are available. No updates will be made without your consent.

About Me

You should know something of my own methodological biography and predilections. Ever since I was a graduate student (over 20 years ago now), when I got yelled at by a community activist for being just another exploitive academic, I have practiced various forms of what is now most often called community-based participatory research (CBPR). I sometimes joke that I haven’t chosen my own research question in 20 years. Some might also call me an applied researcher, which I gladly accept. I do not, however, accept the belief that the production of practical knowledge is incompatible with the production of academic knowledge. And while my personal competence certainly tends toward the qualitative skills such as depth interviewing, focus groups, and participant observation, I do not call myself a qualitative sociologist, and find the qualitative-quantitative distinction to be a distraction. I have worked on at least as many survey projects as I have interview projects (though admittedly the survey projects have been mostly limited to descriptive statistics).

I tell you this so that you can participate with a critical ear, challenge my perspectives (which I welcome) and develop your own positions on the issues in sociological methodology. It is thus important that you also understand my pedagogical approach. One of my favorite slogans comes from a community organization I work with called the Grassroots Leadership College. Their motto is “Everyone a Learner.
Everyone a Teacher. Everyone a Leader.” I believe that deeply. I will expect everyone in this course, including myself, to be a learner, teacher, and leader.

Course Structure

The first three weeks of the course will focus on perspectives regarding the research enterprise. We will begin by looking at the research enterprise from the perspective of the researched, in particular the experiences of indigenous people with outside researchers (though the perspective may well apply to all people researched by outsiders) by reading Linda Tuhíwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies*. We often do not step into the shoes of our “research subjects,” and even when we are research subjects ourselves we may not critically reflect on the experience. Just like physicians are increasingly trained by looking at their profession through the eyes of the patient, so too should researchers be trained by looking at our profession through the eyes of those from whom we obtain data and to whom we may apply findings. The next perspective we will explore is critical realism, using Andrew Sayer’s *Method in Social Science*, which provides us an opportunity to look at questions of knowledge construction in new ways. Most importantly, it will provide an opportunity to think in much more depth about the qualitative-quantitative split in sociology and, I believe, understand the roles of each in knowledge construction. For all of us who enter sociology defining ourselves by a methodological camp rather than a knowledge purpose, this perspective will allow us to put our purpose before our preferences.

The third perspective comes from Arthur Stinchcombe, who begins to set the stage for the diversity of methodological approaches, or *logics*, in sociology and emphasizes the importance of integrating theory and method.

A session on forming a research question will provide the transition to the next section of the course. Those three readings above, from the perspective of the researched, the British critical realist, and the American methodologist, provide the standpoints from which we will explore more deeply the main logics used by sociologists. For purposes of categorization, I will use Sayer’s distinction between extensive and intensive approaches. We will begin with extensive approaches—studies of large numbers of people—looking at sample studies, population studies, and network studies. We will then cover the major intensive approaches—studies of small numbers of cases—looking at case studies, ethnographies, and comparative/historical studies.

April 1 (no foolin’) will provide a temporary deviation from the course flow, as we look at Internet research—a reality that introduces a wide variety of complications into everyone’s methodological thinking. We will also conduct this class session using the Internet itself, to integrate experience and reflection.

The third section of the course, beginning April 15, will look at specific tools used by sociologists across the different methodological approaches. We will cover surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observation. These class sessions will also integrate experiential training into the course process.

Course Website:
This course will be managed through the Learn@UW online course management system at https://learnuw.wisc.edu/. You will submit your assignments electronically through that website, as well as items for discussion (please see course process for more information).

Course Process:

While there are obviously many things that I want to tell you about research methods, The most important outcomes will not be so much what you learn from me but what you learn through your interaction with me, the course materials, and the other course participants. Consequently, this course will be built on your engagement. We will pursue the following routes toward that interactive learning environment.

Each week I will ask you to participate on the Learn@UW course website forum by posting short notes about passages in the readings that you would like us to discuss. If it becomes clear that particular passages are important to a number of people, we will pay special attention to those in our discussions.

Your participation in class is also important. The best participation, from my perspective, is somewhere between silence and dominating a discussion, promotes rather than stifles contributions from others, and challenges ideas rather than individuals. One of the things we will do during the first class is collectively develop guidelines to promote a supportive environment for participation.

I will not grade you on participation, though for people just below grade borderlines, positive participation may enhance your grade.

Requirements:

There are a number of short assignments to focus your attention and provide opportunities for reflection. These are all leading up to the end product of a completed research design that you can then use as the starting point for a grant or dissertation proposal. You will use Learn@UW to submit these materials. The elements (60 points total) will include:

1. A 500 word critique of one of the three books from the beginning of the course, due the beginning of class February 18 (10 points).
2. A one sentence (with a maximum of two other punctuation marks) research question, supported by a 500 word literature review (not counting references) justifying the importance of the question, due the beginning of class February 25 (10 points).
3. A 2500 word essay comparing at least two research designs covered between February 25 and April 8, arguing why one research design is more appropriate for your research question from assignment 2. The 2500 words does not include your reference list (think a minimum of 10 references). Due beginning of class week April 15 (20 points).
4. A 5000 word research proposal combining the assignments above, and including a referenced discussion of specific research tools that you will use, due at the beginning of the designated finals period (20 points).

** There will likely be a special opportunity for those of you interested in learning about how to do community-based research, which is a practice consistent with one of Michael Burawoy’s four types of public sociology. A statewide organization is looking for assistance with a major research project. The first step in the project will be to collaborate with them in writing a research plan (and will follow the four steps above and count as fulfilling them). Along with writing the research plan, there will be opportunities to participate in the actual research project through independent study and possibly seminar credit. If you are interested in this opportunity, you will need to meet outside of class probably three to four times during the semester, and read my book listed as optional in the reading list. That total workload, however, should be only slightly greater than it would be for the more traditional research proposal. There may be limited slots for this and preference will be given to students who are also interested in collaborating to carry out the research in the spring, summer, or fall.

There will also be a series of in-class activities that will require a small amount of work outside of class (5 points each):

1. Five survey questions, strictly adhering to the rules of good survey construction, and related to your research question, due beginning of class April 15. You will share with classmates and give and receive feedback in class.

2. Notes from in-depth interviews conducted in class April 22. You will interview each other. The research question will be “what strategies do sociology graduate students use to develop a research proposal? The interview questions will be “What strategies are you using to develop your research proposal for this course? What challenges are you experiencing in using those strategies?” You will take detailed written notes, and return those notes to the person interviewed, who will then give you feedback on their accuracy. You will also receive notes from the person who interviewed you, and will need to return your feedback by the beginning of class on April 29.

3. Notes from in class focus group sessions on April 29. The research question and interview questions will be the same as for the in-depth interviews, with the addition of the question “Have you changed your thinking about your strategy after going through the interview experience last week?” You will trade notes with one person in the class to give and receive feedback by May 6.

4. Notes from in class observations. Small groups will observe portions of the class on May 6 and take field notes. Each small group will trade their notes with another small group and give/receive feedback due by May 13.
Finally, everyone is expected to have completed the CITI research ethics training (http://www.grad.wisc.edu/hrpp/10223.htm) and have submitted their completion certificate by the beginning of the scheduled finals period. (20 points).

Late Policy:

Serious, documentable personal tragedy, crisis, and illness are eligible for a deadline extension. Normally a deadline extension will be a maximum of one week. Late assignments that do not have a serious documentable justification will lose 1/10 of their total possible points for each day late. No progress or incomplete grades will be given.

Academic honesty policy:

Please make sure you are familiar with UW’s academic misconduct policy at http://www.wisc.edu/students/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html. Please also understand that I encourage students to collaborate as much as you wish on assignments in this class. If you do so, please note your collaboration through joint authorship. If you include information, or make changes, in your writing that is based on the input of others, please acknowledge their contributions in your writing. Understand the rules governing fair use of quoted material and appropriate referencing.

Learning needs:

Please inform me if you have learning needs that require adjustment of the course process or methods.

Things you should already know:

My goal is to delve deeply into various research design practices in sociology. Consequently, there are some things you should already have learned about through a previous research methods course. Among the ideas you should already understand are:

- Experimental/Quasi-experimental design
- Hypothesis (including null hypothesis)
- Validity (including the types of validity)
- Reliability (including the types and their relationship to validity)
- Ecological Fallacy
- Sample (including types of sampling)
- Unit of analysis compared to level of analysis
- Concept compared to variable

If you do not know these things, you should review a basic sociology research methods text.
Course Readings

All books will be available at the Rainbow Bookstore cooperative at 426 W Gilman St, Madison, WI - (608) 257-6050. All readings will be available online.

Required books:


Recommended book:


Articles and chapters:

All of the required articles listed below will be available electronically. (you should be able to access them from off-campus using ez-proxy--
http://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=+/location.href). All weblinks should be configured to use this automatically.

Note: my goal is for these readings to offer a diversity of perspectives on the various methodological issues in sociology, around a diversity of substantive foci. I tried to choose some readings from beyond North America, and on occasion from people other than sociologists, and even from graduate students where they were relevant. I have also tried to provide at least one article that provides an overview of a method or a tool, while the others delve into issues associated with that tool. And I have tried to find readings showing research methods in applied contexts. I am not sure that I have achieved my goals and welcome your contributions to this reading list.

Course Calendar (readings are due at the beginning of class each day)

Jan. 21 Discussion of class process; scavenger hunt review, final collective revisions of syllabus

Jan. 28 Research from the Perspective of the Researched--Smith

Read: Smith (Introduction, Chs. 1-3, 5-8, 10)

Feb. 4 Philosophy of knowledge--Sayer
Read: Sayer (Introduction, Chs 1, 3, 5, 6-7, 9)

Feb. 11 Research Logics (quantitative, historical, ethnographic, experimental)--Stinchcombe

Read: Stinchcombe (Ch. 1, 2, pp. 36-43, 55-70, 77-93, 97-104, 108-116, 117-120, 128-130, 149-157, 239-255, 260-293)

Feb 18 -- Forming a research question:

Due: 500 word book critique.

Read:


Herr, Kathryn, and Gary L. Anderson. 2005. The Action Research Dissertation Ch. 5. Designing the Plane While Flying it. sage. (**pdf available through interlibrary loan online)


Feb 25 -- Extensive designs: sample designs

Due: one sentence research problem statement with 500 word literature-based justification.

Read:


http://www.pophealthmetrics.com/content/6/1/2


Mar. 4 -- Extensive designs: network research
Read:


Mar 18 --spring break

Mar. 25 -- Intensive designs: ethnographies

Read:

http://qix.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi/reprint/6/1/65

http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/4957_Madison_I_Proof_Chapter_1.pdf

Plus two of the following:

http://qix.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi/reprint/7/1/69


http://qix.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/cgi/reprint/5/1/24

Apr 1 (**gone) -- Research Methods and the Internet

Read:


http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU49.html


Apr 8 – Intensive designs: comparative/historical

Due: 2500 word research design essay.
Read:


Apr 15 -- Data Collection Methods: surveys

Due: 5 survey questions

Read:


Special Issue: Nonresponse Bias in Household Surveys. Public Opinion Quarterly 2006 70(5) http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/vol70/issue5/index.dtl

Apr 22 -- Data Collection Methods: interviews

Due: interview notes

Read:


Plus two of the following:


Apr 29 -- Data Collection Methods: focus groups

Due: focus group notes

Read:


May 6 -- Data Collection Methods: observation
Due: observation notes

Read:


Finals class period – TBD

Due: 5000 word research proposal