“‘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, 1959

OFFICIAL COURSE DESCRIPTION (date of composition unknown) Application of scientific methods to the analysis of social phenomena; methodological orientations in sociology; types of research procedure; nature of sociological variables; lectures and lab. [“lab” in this case means your own self-organized study groups which are strongly recommended although not required]

OVERVIEW
This course provides an overview of major research designs and research techniques that provide the core of contemporary empirical inquiry into social phenomena. The “methods” of the course title are practices of offering descriptions and drawing inferences about human life from observations of it, and much of the course will therefore involve practicing as well as discussing these designs and techniques. The structure of the course moves basically from the issues involved in (1) asking “good” (revealing and answerable) questions, (2) to measuring the concepts about which one wants to generalize, (3) finding an appropriate sample of some population to which one wants to generalize, (4) and drawing inferences about causality in any relationships one might find.

The research strategies used by sociologists are extraordinarily diverse—which is fitting given the extraordinary diversity of the research questions sociologists pursue—and the course will also attempt to provide some appreciation of this diversity. Among the specific methodologies to be considered at least briefly are experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys, analysis of archival materials, meta-analysis, ethnographies, in-depth interviews, historical methods, and the analysis of texts. I am not an expert in most of these, nor is it my goal to make you expert in any one of them — there are many courses taught here that can do that for any particular method that you actually expect to use. Importantly: This course is most emphatically not intended as a substitute for the more specialized methodological training that successful dissertations demand.

However, to be a discerning scholar implies being able to learn from work that you have not done and would not yourself do, to recognize quality answers to substantive questions outside of your own niche of specialization, and to discuss intelligently the implications of new discoveries for the field as a whole. Most of you will also teach sociology, often to students who do not share your methodological preferences, and to whom you should be able to convey the scope and richness of sociological investigation. Therefore the focus of this course is on developing your insights into the implications of methodological choices, your constructively critical thinking about diverse methodologies, and your confidence in your ability to evaluate and learn from work of many types. This course cannot and will not try to “teach you all you need to know” about methods, but aims instead to increase your ability to continually practice (and so develop) informed judgment about methodology.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Grades for the course will be based on student performances on written exercises (30%), a final project (20%), article evaluations (30%), and class participation/web participation/homework preparation/manifested conscientiousness (20%). I will aim to have the final overall distribution of student grades resemble that of other required graduate courses. But successful completion of the course demands that you be able to evaluate other people’s work in their own terms, make choices about methods to reflect your own theoretical preferences and draw sound conclusions based on consideration of the range of evidence empirically available across multiple methods.

Exercises, homework preparation, and article evaluations

There will be both “homework” assignments and written “exercises” over the course of the semester that provide opportunities for you to develop your thinking about methodological questions, including some pertaining to the research you personally plan to pursue.

Homeworks are NOT turned in or graded, but are part of the preparation you BRING to class and facilitate your participation IN class. However, I reserve the right to ask everyone to turn in their homework notes at the end of class and to penalize anyone who comes to class unprepared.

By contrast, written exercises will be turned in electronically AFTER the class where they are listed (NO LATER than noon on SUNDAY of the week they are due). These are openly posted for others in the class to read (as well as for me to grade) before class the following Monday. The acceptable range of word-count for a written exercise is 750-1200 words.

In addition to written exercises, you are also required to post a minimum of THREE evaluations of articles that we will read as exemplars of methodology (not that they are the best advertisements for a method but they present relevant methodological issues). Whether or not you are writing an evaluation of a particular exemplar article, you are expected to have read it and thought sufficiently about it to engage in discussion of it in class (discussion of each exemplar will be led by a student – you may volunteer, alone or in a pair, in the message to which your exemplar is attached, but I reserve the right of selection). As I think it unlikely that you are “expert” in three different methodologies, this requirement implies writing carefully and critically about methodologies with which you are only marginally familiar. I encourage you to pick articles that will help improve your ability to work through an article in an unfamiliar substantive field or method.

Focus your attention on the specific methodological issues in the paper (how reliability, validity, generalizability, causal inference, etc. are dealt with, well or poorly, in the particular design the author chose, and how that design could be improved on to meet the author’s goals). The key question you want to answer is how much sociologists should trust the results, and the evaluation should be specific and constructive (aimed at producing more trust-worthy answers), rather than an attack on the author’s choice of problem or epistemology. NO research is perfect; ALL papers could be improved without thereby being “bad” (but some may be). Asking “good questions” about the paper is the goal and thus the criterion on which you will be graded. The three written evaluations of “exemplar articles” are due no later than 3 pm SUNDAY before the seminar in which that article will be discussed. (MAXIMUM WORD COUNT for evaluations: 750 words).

All exercises that you have not done well can be re-done in the following two weeks, and will be re-graded accordingly: only your best three article evaluations will count for a grade. Both exercises and evaluations will be graded HIGH PASS (A+, and rare), pass (A), marginal (B), and no pass (C).

The final project (MAXIMUM length 3000 words, DUE 5 pm May 16, in electronic form) will be a more substantial exercise in which you are asked to describe a research project of your own (thesis, dissertation or other) and reflect on its methodology at length. This is the place to consider the relation between theory, epistemology, methodology and specific choices of method, as well as to work through specific issues you are finding tricky (ethics, samples, generalizations, causation, etc.). It will be graded separately on a six point (A+, A, AB, B, BC, Fail) scale.

Class participation is crucial. This is a big class for meaningful discussion, and I do want to hog a certain amount of airtime to present issues myself. Not all participation is necessarily oral, in the seminar meeting itself. Comments POSTED -- thoughts in reaction to other students’ postings, queries that come
from your reading for the week and are aimed at directing the in-class discussion to certain issues, afterthoughts formed after the seminar session is over, suggestions of other articles that raise similar issues, etc. -- are all effective forms of class participation that complement (but do not wholly replace) speaking up in class. I would generally expect all students to **POST some comments on Learn@UW at least six times through the semester**, either initiating on-line discussion or responding to others forays, but the point is not a mechanical count of postings. **Engaged and thoughtful consideration of what others have to say, both in and outside the seminar room and the website, is the goal.** It is courteous to excuse yourself (by email) in advance if you discover you will be unable to attend a particular seminar meeting. Posting comments that you were prepared to make but regrettably unable to deliver in person is an appropriate way to “make up” some absences, but excessive absence (3 or more classes) will be penalized unless there is a compelling reason for which I agree to make an exception. On-line postings as well as homework preparation, evaluation discussion leadership, and in-class participation all contribute to your participation grade.

Written exercises, article evaluations and your final project ALL have a specified word count to which you must adhere; **I will truncate documents and not read anything beyond the specified maximum word limit.** You might think this overly constraining and you are right—but since much of your subsequent writing will be constrained by strict word counts this is good training for your professional career. Late work not cleared with me in advance will either be penalized or not accepted, and I will not accept any but the most serious of reasons for lateness. Absence of forethought on your part does not constitute a serious reason.

**Turning exercises/evaluations in.** Written exercises and article evaluations will be posted in the appropriate location on the LEARN@UW website for this course. I will not hunt for “lost” postings. If you are posting an attachment, be sure to put your name ON the attached document, not just on the file and/or posting itself (I print then and return them to you with written comments). All attachments must be in Microsoft Word regular (.doc) or rich text format (.rtf), with a filename that includes your surname (e.g., smith_ex3.doc; filenames like 750_ex3.doc or ferr_e3 or exercise3.doc are spectacularly unhelpful).

**Overall exercise and evaluation grades.** Exercises and article evaluations will graded high pass, pass, marginal pass, no pass. “High pass” is a relatively rare grade, and “no pass” should be taken as a serious signal of a deficiency that should be remedied if you intend to pass the course; both pass and marginal pass reflect more or less adequate work.

For evaluations, you should assume I have read the article you are evaluating, and should provide a very brief – one paragraph – summary of what you believe the authors were attempting to do in the paper before going on to consider some aspects of the way they did it in more detail. You should attempt to prioritize your comments to focus on what you believe to be the most significant aspects of the authors’ methodological choices. These may include, in various mixes: (1) things you found praiseworthy about what the researchers did; (2) things you thought the researchers might/should have done differently or additionally; (3) things you thought the authors were mistaken about; (4) things about how the research was conducted that you believe they should have said more about; (5) things that enhance or detract from authors’ or others’ ability to replicate or extend their research; (6) the degree of confidence you have in the conclusions that the authors draw or the conclusions that you think they should have drawn but didn’t.

Article evaluations will be graded on how well they engage central issues but they cannot be comprehensive, so PRIORITIZE. Evaluations need to be clearly written and fundamentally grammatical but they are not intended to represent your most polished prose.

You are encouraged to POST any week (not as a part of the evaluation of the exemplar) issues you would like to see considered (in class or on-line) including any comments you have about (1) how the research discussed in the non-exemplar readings relates to things discussed in class/other readings; (2) specific connections between the research discussed in the exemplar and other studies you know about
from this or other courses or your own research; (3) questions the exemplar or the assigned articles raised for you about how research is conducted more generally and how this broad type of research is done more specifically; (4) considerations about why the exemplar authors chose this research strategy but might have pursued a different methodological approach entirely; (5) ways the exemplar did or did not exemplify things you see as strengths and weaknesses of its kind of research; (6) specific points of clarification about the non-exemplar articles and the guidelines they present. Such reflections cumulatively contribute to your participation grade; I will attempt to post responses to at least some of your comments and questions on-line, but I strongly urge you to respond to each other as well. I repeat that I expect to see a **minimum of a half-dozen such remarks/questions/replies/suggestions posted by each student over the course of the semester.**

Rather than complicated penalties imposed on the grades of individual assignments, the grade for all assignments will reflect the content of that assignment. ALL penalties (for excessive absences, late work that is nonetheless accepted, unwillingness to follow formatting rules, not turning in homework when requested, etc.) will be collected in a “penalty box” and applied proportionately to reduce your overall grade for the course.

**Academic integrity**

Although I would hope that this paragraph is by now totally superfluous, for the record let me remind you that Section 14.03 of the University of Wisconsin System Administrative Code defines academic misconduct as “an act in which a student: (a) seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation; (b) uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise; (c) forges or falsifies academic documents or records; (d) intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others; (e) engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of a student's academic performance; (f) assists other students in any of these acts.” If you have any questions about what constitutes academic misconduct generally, you must consult http://www.wisc.edu/students/amsum.htm before proceeding. Lack of familiarity with these rules in no way constitutes an excuse for acts of misconduct. Any instance of cheating, plagiarism, or other misconduct will be dealt with strictly according to University policy, and the penalties recommended to the Dean of Students will be severe.

BUT because I DO encourage all students to form their own study groups and work together on thinking through the assignments, let me clarify the application of this policy to such joint work: (a) not only the writing in the sense of literal words, but the decision-making that goes into writing – what is your main point, how are you going to prioritize issues, what is your overall conclusion – should be your own work and be clearly and distinctively **NOT** the same as any other student’s work; (b) brainstorming about wide scope of issues raised in an article or assignment should bring out dissensus as well as some common points, and failing to report ideas that you tested and rejected in favor of seizing on and presenting as your own what you perceive to be the good ideas raised by someone else in the group misrepresents your own work. In short, do not let fear of plagiarism cause you to “hoard” your ideas, but make sure that your presentation of your ideas fairly represents your own thinking process, including saying what you have learned from others. Such learning is commendable, and is not plagiarism -- but trying to present ideas acquired from others as being your own original insights is academic dishonesty.

**Readings**

All of the primary readings, all of the exemplars, and many of the readings on the “background” list are available on electronic reserve through the Social Science Library. All the primary readings and exemplars are also linked to the course website and can be downloaded directly there. There is no printed coursepack, as this would be prohibitively expensive. Use your own judgment about what you read on line or print out.

There is a supplemental list (not on the syllabus but provided on the course website) intended to be a long term resource for your growth and development as a methodologically astute social scientist rather than something that even the most ambitious student should attempt to sample extensively in this
semester. However, if you are having trouble with a method or issue, such alternative readings might provide you with the ‘aha moment’ that you are missing in the main reading and would be recommended in such cases.

The category of reading that I call “background” introduces a topic or consideration, and I would expect that you would already know it or a similar reading. If you do not, you should at least skim this source or discuss it in your study group so that the language or tools it offers will not be alien or incomprehensible in class. Since I have no expectation that you will be all rushing out to buy or borrow the same background books or articles, they are not ordered or on reserve, but some of the articles are on Learn@UW.

Schedule of readings, homework and written exercises

WEEK 1 January 23: Introduction to the class, some ideas about philosophy of science
Primary:
Kuhn, 1962, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Ch 3 (the nature of normal science), Ch 6 (anomalies), Ch 11 (the invisibility of scientific revolutions).
Ferree, Myra Marx 2004 “An essay on the art of reviewing: Some guidelines for new reviewers”
Also available for background to discussion of review process: original submission, r&r reviews and revision memo, final paper (MMF, Resonance and Radicalism, AJS)
Handout: Positivism vs. Critical/Fallible Realism (and relativism)
To discuss: syllabus, “science” and “truth” in sociology, variation in epistemologies in sociology, the visible nature of scientific communities, writing journal reviews and recognizing the rhetoric of persuasion, how to evaluate articles/scientific contributions as more or less credible.

WEEK 2 January 30: Facing the theory-method interlock: which side of the coin is up?
Primary:
TO COMPARE THEIR PARADIGMS:
Armstrong and Crage, 2006 “Movements and memory: the making of the Stonewall myth”

Homework 1: Be prepared to answer questions about paradigms in your area (see website).
Background: Becker “The epistemology of qualitative research” From Richard Jessor, Anne Colby and Richard Schweder, eds. Essays on Ethnography and Human Development. University of Chicago Press. (a positivist interpretation of qualitative work and an application of Kuhn’s concept of incommensurability). Barnes, Barry. 1982. T.S. Kuhn and Social Science, Ch 1 (Traditions of Research), and selections from chapters 2 (training) and 4 (evaluation), pp. 1-27, 66-67, 86-90 (a direct application of Kuhn to social science modes of working).
WEEK 3: February 6: In the beginning was the word: starting from the literature

**Primary:**

**Background:** Piven, Frances Fox 2003. “Public sociology and politicized sociologists” and also use of Web of Knowledge for citation-based searching, creating citation networks and citation counts. *(be sure you know both what public sociology is and how to work with the web)*

**Homework 2:** Prepare answers to questions about the literature in your field (see website).


**Exercise 1:** Identifying replications and extensions of previous work.
Find a recent (post 2001) empirical replication that confirms or challenges at least one of the findings of the classic/paradigmatic study you have chosen. Compare the two studies closely; discuss what the “replication”/extension preserves of the original and what it “improves.” Is it an “improvement” in your view (not just that of the authors)? Explain the theoretical assumptions and rhetorical strategies that allow the authors of the second to say they are studying the "same thing" as the first. How do they interpret their results? Could you interpret them differently (e.g. as not studying the same thing, not measuring it as well as the first did, as failing to replicate the master)? What would you have to question shift your perspective in this way? *(Due noon Sunday February 11)*

WEEK 4 (February 13): Significance is more than statistical

**Primary:**

And

**OR** Gill, Jeff. 1999. "The insignificance of null hypothesis significance testing." *Political Research Quarterly* 52:647-674. *(Choose one, from whichever neighboring discipline you like best)*

**Background:** Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*. University of Chicago Press. *(a book I always recommend to dissertation writers; explains how it is “really” done)* and Margrit Eichler, *Non-Sexist Research Methods* ch. 1, 6 and Appendix *(an overview of unfortunately still-too-common errors of framing that make unwarranted assumptions about gender in research design)*

**WEEK 5 (February 20): Measurement: validity and reliability**

**Primary:**

Deacon, Deasley 1985 APolitical arithmetic: the 19th century Australian census and the construction of the dependent woman@ Signs: 11(1): 27-47. (non-scientific concerns that enter into apparently innocuous measures).


**Homework 3:** Measurement


**WEEK 6 (February 27): Coding & analyzing written content, oral conversations, and other texts**

**Primary:**


**AND EITHER:**


OR

Kochis, Bruce & Diane Gillespie 2006 “Conceptual metaphors as interpretive tools in qualitative research: college students discuss diversity.” The Qualitative Report 11(6): 566-585

**Homework 4:** content analysis with ASR

**Background:** Neuendorf, Kimberly 2002. The Content Analysis Guidebook, Ch 1-4, Ch7 and Ch 9, (a very basic how-to and definition of terms). Some sort of content analysis program (see demo of LWIC on learn@UW - or Atlas.ti or NVivo at SSCC) and/or Nancy Naples chapter on discourse analysis as part of institutional ethnography (on Learn@UW).

of an emergent concept” ASR 70(1): 29-52.

WEEK 7 (March 6): Research ethics & IRBs
Primary:
ASA Code of Ethics
Some short practical discussions:
1) Christopher Shea, 2000. “Don’t Talk to the Humans: The Crackdown on Social Science Research” Lingua Franca 10 (6)
3) Levy, Judith, Report to ASA Council on ethics issues in NIDA project
Background: other ethics codes (AAUP common statement, ISA, COPE procedures)

Homework: be sure you have done UW ethics training & certification, know UW’s IRB guidelines and can answer these questions about them.


Exercise 2 – operationalization – This is a SMALL venture into the messy “real world” of data collection. Your measures must be “unobtrusive” but can be any sort of text, interaction, behavior, or artifact (as long as ethical). The point is to operationalize an idea creatively and code some data as reliably as possible in line with that operationalization. You should (a) advance a simple hypothesis, (b) operationalize both an independent and a dependent variable (either can be a scale), (c) introduce at least one control variable or indexing correction, and collect a small pre-test’s worth of data to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your measure. (Due March 11).

WEEK 8 (March 13). Multi-method concerns, triangulation, combining & comparing studies
Primary:
McGrath, Martin & Kulka, Judgment Calls in Research, ch. 1 (pp.17-39) & ch. 3 (pp.69-102)
& 3 (“Comparisons...”)


**WEEK 9 (March 20) Macrosociological analysis, historical sociology, archival data**

**Primary:**


**Exemplar:** Lange, Mahoney and vom Hau 2006. “Colonialism and development: a comparative analysis of Spanish and British colonies” *AJS* 111(5): 1412-162

**WEEK 10 (March 27) Ethnographic Analysis: diverse approaches**

**Primary:**
Thatcher, David “The Normative Case Study” AJS, 2006 111(6): 1631-76. (*a very different approach to what case studies can provide*)


**Exemplar:** Fields, Jessica 2005 “‘Children having children’: Race, innocence and sexuality education” *Social Problems*, 52 (4) 549-571.

**Exercise 3:** Book reviewing and methodological concern. Choose a book to review (some suggestions are available in the qualitative bibliography on the website, though NOT ALL the books in this list ARE ethnographic) that deals primarily with ethnographic data. First make sure it IS an ethnography (you can ask other students and faculty for suggestions) then read it anytime in the semester before March 27. Then write a *methodologically focused* book review due Sunday, April 8. However, you must be prepared to consider why you are choosing this book as an example of an ethnographic approach in our discussion in class March 27 (before break) – in effect this is the homework for this week.
WEEK 11 (April 10)  Surveys & Interviews: writing questions, interpreting answers
Primary:

Homework: Constructive critique of question wordings

WEEK 12 (April 17)  Generalization: thinking clearly about samples and populations
Primary:
Stuart, Alan. 1984. The Ideas of Sampling. New York: Macmillan. (this is LONG – four files and not especially easy, but it is really the core of what you need to know to draw ANY sample)
OR **Cohen, Jacob. 1992. "A power primer." Psychological Bulletin 112:155-159. (Choose only one, depending on whether you want to go in a more qualitative or quantitative research direction)

Homework: Sampling Problem Set

Exercise 4: sample design – Assume you are a new faculty advisor helping UW undergraduates do a one-semester study of UW students’ beliefs about their future family and work life balance (as a small part of just one course). Help them form a specific hypothesis and recommend a detailed sampling strategy to test it. Provide a justification of what population you advise them to represent (and why), what sampling frame and strategy you recommend to these students, for the overall methodological design (based on what you want to know, resource constraints, preferences for qualitative or quantitative design, etc.). Discuss what they will learn from the process and what generalizability you think the student study would have (if any), what ethical concerns you would have and how you present these to the students, etc. For example, what are the costs and benefits and do you think the benefits of the study exceed the costs (to the interviewer and/or interviewee)?
(due by noon April 22)

WEEK 13 (April 24) Experimental design in lab, field and survey contexts

Primary:

Homework: recognizing and naming parts of the experimental model


WEEK 14 (May 1) Quasi experimental and observational “natural experiment” designs

Primary:
Smith, Herbert L. 1997. "Matching with Multiple Controls to Estimate Treatment Effects in Observational Studies." Sociological Methodology 27: 325-353. This is a fairly accessible introduction to propensity-score adjustment for sociologists; other virtues are that it talks about many-to-many matching and the idea of using a panel-type regression model instead of explicit matching.

Depending on the types of issues that make more sense to you choose one of these:


Week 15 (May 8) – catch up and discussion of final projects
Final Project due May 16 (5 pm).
This final project is an outline of the methodological issues raised by your dissertation. What is your choice of method and how does it relate to paradigmatic/classic closely related studies? How are you improving on existing work methodologically (or not)? What are the thorniest methodological questions (measurement, ethics, sample, inference or other) and why are they difficult? What plans do you have for addressing them? What other issues, considerations, problems present themselves as tangled up in methods (gender and generalization? politics of access? interdisciplinarity of audience? etc). Maximum length 3000 words.
*Post final project on Learn@UW in appropriate section.*