‘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)

Prerequisites: An introductory course in social research methods and a good background in statistics.

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. [mercifully, there will be no lab]

Overview: Talk to people in graduate sociology departments around the country and you will find that a required course in research methods is often among the least popular offerings of the graduate curriculum. This is lamentable if you believe that good methodology has some association with good empirical work and you believe that good empirical work has some association with the continued vitality of our discipline. Fortunately for you, however, 750 will be a course you adore, its meetings will serve as the highlights of your weeks this fall semester, and it will revitalize any flagging enthusiasm you may have about being in graduate school. Or, at least, this is the boundless optimism with which we begin.

The course will survey major research designs and research techniques that provide the core of contemporary inquiry into empirical social phenomena. The “methods” of the course title are methods of offering descriptions and drawing inferences about human life from observations of it, and much of the course will involve discussions of three themes: inferences about causality, inferences from a part to a whole (a.k.a., sampling), and generating appropriate representations of phenomena (a.k.a., measurement). The extant methods used by sociologists are diverse, and the course will attempt to provide an appreciation of this diversity. Among the specific methodologies that will likely make at least a cameo appearance on the 750 stage are experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys, quantitative analysis of archival materials, ethnography, in-depth interviews, historical methods, and the analysis of textual/interactional data. At the same time, the course emphasizes the fundamental principles and logic governing research design. It is much more a theoretical course than an applied one, even though plenty of practical examples will be discussed in the readings and in class.
Readings: The reading list for the course is (intentionally) not yet complete; amendments will be announced in class and made available through the webpage address listed above. As described below, many of the articles/book chapters on the reading list are available online, while others will be contained in reading packets that will be available at the L&S Copy Center on the 6th floor of the Social Science building. In addition, the following four books have been ordered at the University Book Store:

Ordered as “required”:


Ordered as “recommended”:


Requirements: Grades for the course will be based on student performances on examinations (60%) and exercises (40%). The final overall distribution of student grades for the course will resemble that of other required graduate courses.

Examinations: There will be two in-class, closed-book examinations. The examinations mainly will cover material that is presented in lecture (which will overlap much with material in the readings). Reading material not also covered in lecture will only be fair game for exams to the extent this is announced in lecture. I bear no responsibility if you are not in class or not paying attention when such announcements are made. Regrettably, because there are so many of you and only a harried one of me, the exams will not contain opportunities for detailed, ruminating expositions on all that you have learned in the course (that is, no essay questions). The last exam will take place during the scheduled final exam period; the dates of the others will be announced no fewer than three classes in advance.

Exercises: Exercise #1 will require you to engage critically the methodology of a empirically-focused social scientific monograph that you have read (you do not have to read something new "just for this assignment"—in fact I would discourage that and want you either to choose something that you have read or something that is useful to your larger intellectual endeavors). Two catches: (1) no two students can write their exercise on the same monograph (a system for calling dibs on a book will be instituted) and (2) all exercises will be posted to the Web for your peers to read. Exercise #2 will do a similar engagement of two empirical articles that employ different methodologies but are
substantively linked (again, everyone will choose different articles and all exercises will be posted to the web). Exercise #3 will require you to provide a short description and engagement of a methods project that you are currently conducting, plan to conduct, or are thinking about conducting (if you are writing a master's thesis, you are allowed—encouraged—to write about this). I see this as providing an occasion to learn more about the different kinds of research everyone is doing/thinking about, and also as providing an occasion for you to think specifically about the methodology of your project. Details on these exercises will be provided as handouts in class.

Only in exceptional cases will late exercises be accepted or make-up exams given. Incompletes will be given only in the rarest and direst of circumstances. (Slackers among you may wonder if I really mean both of these things. I do.)

READING LIST

The order of materials to be covered is, like anything else in this course, subject to revision.

• is used to denote readings that are available online from various sources, mainly the Social Science Reference Library. The abbreviations used to indicate the location of these sources are as follows:

  SSRL: Social Science Reference Library  
  (http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/SocialSciRef/)  
  JSTOR: www.jstor.org  
  ASE: Academic Search Elite (see UW library homepage)  
  AR: Annual Review website (http://www.annualreviews.org/)

♦ is used to denote readings that are wholly intended as supplemental and are included as further reading for those who may become interested in specific topics

Introduction


♦ Becker, “Tricks,” Chapter 1


Causal Inference


King, Keohane, and Verba, Chapter 2 “Descriptive Inference” and Chapter 3 “Causality and Causal Inference.”


Verso. (SSRL) [an excellent essay that considers the merits of various grounds on which on cause is commonly said to be more important (or fundamental, etc.) than another]


**Experimental Methods**


Quasi-Experimental Designs


Quantitative Analysis of Data from Observational Studies


Propensity-score adjustment


**Analysis of Ethnographic and Interview Data**


Methodological appendices to monographs


Supplementary readings on analyzing ethnographic/interview data

♦ Miles, Matthew B. and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. Qualitative Data Analysis (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Although parts of this book are less compelling, its quite fascinating for all the different types of displays it describes as ways of realizing patterns in your data or of thinking more carefully through what your data show.]


Analysis of Historical Materials


♦ ◇ Ragin, Charles. 1987. *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Especially Chapters 1-5. [If you ever decide to read through Ragin’s admirable oeuvre of methods writings, a fun game to play is to count the number of times he uses the phrase “dialogue of ideas and evidence” throughout.]

**Sampling**

*Sampling theory in statistical research*


♦ Stuart, Alan. 1984. *The Ideas of Sampling*. New York: Macmillan. [This would be a required book for the course if it wasn’t out of print; understand this book and you understand sampling better than many (most?) quantitative sociologists.]

*Sampling for Qualitative Studies*
King, Keohane, and Verba, Chapter 4, “Determining What to Observe.”

♦ Becker, Chapter 3, “Sampling.”


**Measurement**

Traub, Chapter 1-7, 10

DeVellis, all

King, Keohane, and Verba, Chapter 4, “Understanding What to Avoid”


♦ Becker, “Concepts,” Chapter 4


Missing Data in Quantitative Analysis


