Menu of Essay Questions for the Final Exam

Note: When the final exam begins, you will be told which of the following questions you need to answer.

In answering these questions, the idea is that you should draw upon things that you learned in the lectures or the readings (primary or supplementary). You are also free to draw on the methodological sense that you have cultivated over this class and the rest your studies, as well as other materials that you have read that have been informative in your journey toward becoming a discerning producer and consumer of research conducted well. Good essays will have many different things to say and be clearly written. Write legibly.

1. In observational studies, multiple regression (a.k.a. regression with control variables) is often used to estimate causal effects. One of the essays you read (Freedman) poses a question unthinkable to many social scientists—does regression actually work in the social sciences? You all have learned in previous classes that it is relatively simple to show that, given particular assumptions, multiple regression produces unbiased estimates of causal effects and precise estimates of the uncertainty of those estimates. Other than problems with sampling, describe some scenarios in which the coefficients generated by multiple regression would give you a potentially misleading picture of the true causal relationship or true amount of uncertain in one’s estimate of that relations and why regression can be misleading.

2. The redoubtable Jerry Marwell (a former 750 instructor) once wrote that “The primary attraction of the experimental method is undoubtedly that it is more persuasive than other methods in its fit with causal arguments.” First, why are experiments regarded by many as being more persuasive? Why are randomized experiments more persuasive than other methods of allocating subjects to treatment within an experimental framework? Second, describe some ways in which individual experiments can fail to be persuasive (discussions of validity with regard to experiments might be helpful here).

3. Some people find a good ethnography more compelling than a good experiment any day, while others think that ethnographic research in sociology should generally be regarded with much suspicion. Discuss what you think it is about ethnographic research generally that some find very compelling. Also, discuss what you think are some of the main inferential problems that confront the ethnographer and what good ethnographers can do to confront these potential problems.

4. Several readings and points in lecture discussed comparative historical research in sociology. Given that history exists as its own discipline in the academy, what are some of the kinds of questions that historically-minded sociologists might pursue that are different from the typical mission of the historian? Describe some of the ways in which the sociologist using historical data can go astray in trying to make inferences about causality using historical data.

5. In an undergraduate methods course, much is said extolling the virtues of the simple random sample. Meanwhile, in this course, you have read and heard various arguments for doing something other than simple random sampling. As one thing, we have talked about stratification and clustering. Why and in what sense can these procedures sometimes be regarded as more advisable than simple random sampling? As another thing, you have encountered discussions suggesting the benefits of purposive sampling of one kind or another. What are some of the different grounds on which one might purposively select some cases from a population for further examination, and what are some conditions in which might it be more advantageous to do so.

6. The plurality of empirical studies in sociology use survey data in one way or another. Many discerning people are distrustful of conclusions drawn from survey data (an extreme example of which you saw in the Lewontin reading). Apart from issues of sampling or the intricacies of statistical models, what are some of these causes of concern about survey data? What are some ways in which survey researchers, successfully or not, have tried to address these concerns?
List of primary readings for the course:


