“‘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

"The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth and expose lies."


“Lies! Lies! Lies! That’s all we get from those who pretend to know but don’t... Remember: No one knows, so let’s find out.”


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 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 weekly highlight of your forthcoming 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.

Having said that, sociology has been called “the impossible science,” and, if this is the case, then it would seem like there would be two impossible (and yet inevitable) graduate courses: theory and methods. Since providing the impossible is definitionally not an option, those charged with hosting theory or methods have typically resorted to some combination of the following when planning the menu: serving up work that can be regarded as “foundational” either because of genealogy or generality; serving a heaping portion of one specific cut of the general topic; or serving small portions from the smorgasbord of issues and debates that could be discussed. The possibilization of this class will be accomplished using the first and third of these strategies: we will consider both some basic general issues of method and some issues regarding specific methods that your instructor believes comprise important things for you to encounter somewhere, sometime in your graduate training (even should your own intellectual pursuits lead you down entirely different sociological avenues). This course is most emphatically not intended as a substitute for the more specialized
training in a specific methodological domain that successful dissertations typically demand. Your instructor also believes passionately that gaining command of the methods of social inquiry—both as producer and consumer—is a continual project, and he is quickly exasperated by those who embark on the course with the idea that they presently know nothing about methods and they will finish the course having learned all they need to know. While we are at it, I should also note there is a continuum of the philosophical and practical on which instructors approach a course like this. Despite a love of details, your instructor has a penchant for abstraction and a proclivity toward the philosophical side of things, which means that the relentlessly practical-minded among you should brace yourself for a course whose course you may regularly imagine to be taking a direction contrary to your druthers.

The course will survey 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 toward 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 how phenomena are related (implying much consideration of causality), inferences from a part to a whole (implying much consideration of sampling), and generating appropriate representations of phenomena (implying much consideration of conceptualization and measurement). The extant methods used by sociologists are extraordinarily diverse, and the course will attempt to provide an appreciation of this diversity. Among the specific methodologies of which at least a spoonful will be served at the 750 feast are experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys, quantitative analysis of archival materials, meta-analysis, ethnography, in-depth interviews, historical methods, the analysis of texts, and the analysis of interactional data. Although your instructor personally has an aversion to talking about the “unity of method”—or, worse, the “unity of science”—the course emphasizes fundamental principles and logic disciplining research design. As already noted, 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: No books will be assigned for this course in their entirety. The reading list for the course is included at the end of this syllabus. You will note that the reading list is very long; moreover, amendments to this list will likely be made over the duration of our semester together. Many of the readings are included as supplemental readings (denoted by the leisurely symbol 🌟). Some of these are readings which will find their way into lectures; others are articles/books that I believe are interesting or provocative and cannot resist sharing at least the reference with you. In this regard, the appended list is as much a bibliography as reading list, and should not freak anyone out.

You are expected to do the primary readings for the course (denoted by the more imperative ❝). All of the primary readings, and many of the supplemental ones, are available on the web (denoted by the symbol 🌟) through the the Social Science Reference Library. The URL is:

http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/SocialSciRef/reserves/soc/soc750sp03/soc750.htm

I am amenable to other ways of distributing the primary readings and will discuss this with you during our first meeting.

Attendance: Especially since we are only meeting once per week, attendance at this weekly meeting is expected. If you not going to be able to attend, it would be courteous of you to e-mail me to let me know. The instructor reserves and will likely exercise the right to reduce the grades of students with inadequate attendance. Of course, so as not to distract either yourself or your colleagues,
appropriately professional behavior—e.g., not passing notes, not falling asleep, not interrupting my lecture to ask if what I’m talking about will be on the test—is be expected.

Meeting at night: As many of you know, the current meeting time for the course is quite different from what was originally planned. The course meeting time was changed to the evening because this seemed the only alternative that would remove conflicts between this course and either graduate courses or undergraduate courses with numerous TAs. In any case, I am not bothered by the changed time bringing the course into conflict with Must See TV, but I am more concerned that the class will be ending after dark. Anyway, although I’m sure many of you are more familiar with this system than I am, I wanted to make sure that all are aware that students can use the free campus SafeRide system to get a ride home after class. The telephone number is 262-5000; student ID’s are required; one gets up to eight rides a month; and they encourage giving a dollar tip to the cab driver.

Requirements: Grades for the course will be based on student performances on exercises and the final examination. The final overall distribution of student grades for the course will resemble that of other required graduate courses.

Exercises: There will be a number of written exercises over the course of the semester, which will provide opportunities for you to further develop and articulate your thinking about methodological considerations, including as they pertain to the research you personally plan to pursue. The precise number of these examinations has not yet been determined. You will always have at least one week to do any particular exercise. Written exercises will all have a specified word count to which you must adhere; you might think this overly constraining and you are right—but I believe that it is good training since much of your subsequent writing (although not syllabi) will be constrained by strict word counts.

Written exercises will be submitted to me via electronic mail (jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu), which means that if you do not currently have facility with sending documents with e-mail you should develop it quickly. The documents you send should be in Microsoft Word regular (.doc) or rich text format (.rtf). The filename of the document you send me should include your surname (e.g., freese_ex3.doc).

Examination: There will be only one (closed-book, two-hour) examination in this course. It will be held during exam week; the precise date and time will be arranged since no time was assigned in the time table. Announcements pertinent to what material will be on the exam will be made over the course of the semester. 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 beleaguered and often sour one of me, the exams will be limited in terms of opportunities for detailed ruminating expositions on all that you have learned in the course. However, you should make no assumptions that the exam will evince any necessary resemblances to the exams I gave last year or the exams previous instructors in this course are given.

Stern paragraph about academic integrity and propriety, with many boldfaced words used to emphasize its gravity: Your instructor recognizes that the vast majority of students in the course, if not everyone, do not need this paragraph in the syllabus, but, for any who do, he wishes to be extremely clear about his policy. Your instructor is already known to be deeply combustible when confronted with instances of academic misconduct. 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 in this course. You are expected to be familiar with these guidelines before you submit any written work or take any exams in this course; put another way, 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 (at the graduate level, this generally implies either suspension or expulsion, and one will certainly be kicked out of the course and barred from taking any future incarnation of 750 in which I am the instructor).

List of Readings

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

1. Prefatory


The Science Question in Sociology


The Conjunction of Method and Substance


Being sociological about debates between the qualitative and quantitative


**Relationship between existing literature and original research**


**Additional readings**


2. Causal inference, basic notions

**Standard criteria of causality and counterfactual conditionals**


Mill’s methods


3. Causal inference, elaborations


Wright, Erik Olin, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober. 1992. "Causal Asymmetries." Pp. 129-175 in Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History. London: Verso. [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]


Causal mechanisms


4. Reverence for the Experiment

Orienting examplars


Experimental methodology


Experiments in survey research

5. Causal inference without the luxury of experimentation

Quasi-Experimental Designs

 النظر في العوامل الفعلية


Control by design versus statistical control


Quantitative analysis of data from observational studies


Propensity-score adjustment


The importance of getting important things right


6. More on inference

Combining numbers, models, and narratives


Inference in ethnographic/interview data

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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.]


7. Phenomenal synecdoche, orienting considerations

Sampling in qualitative research


*External validity in experiments*


*Single locus research*


8. *Sampling theory, nuts and bolts*

*Sampling theory for statistical research*


9. *Sampling theory, further considerations*
Sampling on the dependent variable


Missing Data in Quantitative Analysis


Significance testing and power


10. Conceptualization and Operationalization


11. Representation

Accuracy in ethnographic research


Reactivity in ethnographic research


Problems of self-report in survey research


12. Measurement

Overview of measurement


Reliability


Scale development and factor analysis


Levels of measurement