Research Practicum I

This seminar is the first part of a two-course sequence. The main goal of the sequence is for each of you to produce a paper that will be submitted to an academic journal. In the first part of the sequence we will focus on designing a research project that will be carried out over the next 12 months and written up for the second part of the sequence. This will involve some reading in research design. Mainly, it will involve sharing work in progress and commenting constructively--in writing and in person--on one another’s work as you develop your research plan, piece by piece.

Required reading

There are three kinds of assigned reading for this seminar.

1. Published guides to research design and academic writing.

Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Still the best guide I know to mainstream thinking about research design. Note that it was written for graduate students in political science, and it includes some distracting mathematical jargon alongside some very sensible advice. We will focus on the latter.

Howard S. Becker, Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research while You’re Doing It, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Becker is especially useful for different ways of thinking about “sampling” in research design. He also proves that sociology and good writing can go together.

I have put copies of these on reserve. Since you're getting this syllabus well in advance and can get cheaper copies online, I haven't ordered them through campus bookstores.

2. Exemplary articles that illustrate how some of your practicum predecessors have dealt with problems of presentation and method.

I chose these particular articles for several reasons. They provide interesting examples of literature reviews, strategies of case selection, discussions of analytical methods, etc. They illustrate the diversity of data-gathering and analytic strategies that sociology honors. They introduce you to work by some older grads -- and thus offer hope that there is an article at the end of this tunnel. And they represent a wide range of substantive topics. The diversity of style and (to most of us) unfamiliarity of topics in these articles will help keep our discussion focused on
methods of research and presentation. I do not mean to hold any one of these articles up as a perfect model for emulation, but even their weaknesses are instructive. All are available online.

3. The papers that your peers write in the course of the seminar.

This seminar will be run as a workshop, which means that every week beginning in week 4 we will all read and discuss the work of several students. At first we’ll circulate and discuss pieces of the proposal -- literature reviews, methods sections; in the last four weeks, we’ll move to full drafts of the proposals (5 each week -- a first draft weeks 7-8 and a second one weeks 9-10). I’ll have a sign-up sheet in the second week.

In addition to these three kinds of assigned reading, you are expected to do lots of independent reading in pursuit of your own research agenda. This reading is particularly needed for the literature reviews you'll be drafting for week 5 and expanding in the final version of the proposal.

Written assignments

Your written assignments are also of three kinds.

1. Short(ish) assignments. From week 4 through week 6, everyone will submit pieces of your papers-in-progress. These excerpts will range from a catchy introduction to your research to a first stab at a literature review (week 5) and a methods section (week 6). Half the group will circulate their lit review for discussion in week 5, the other half their methods section in week 6. They are due SUNDAY evening. That gives those who are commenting on your work time to read it and circulate comments by the end of the MONDAY night, which in turn gives everyone a chance to read comments before we meet Tuesday. All this should be done electronically -- no need to waste the paper.

2. The research proposal (or paper if you're at that stage). A draft of this will be presented and workshopped TWICE during the last 4 weeks, once in week 7-8 and once, reflecting feedback from the first round, in week 9-10. As with the earlier pieces, these drafts are due to everyone no later than SUNDAY evening, with comments due Monday evening. The final paper will be due by 5 pm on Wednesday of finals week.

3. Written comments. Every week (beginning week 5) you are to write constructive comments to the authors of the drafts that are circulating that week IF you are not one of the authors who is circulating your work (so, in weeks 5-6, you'll be alternating between circulating your work and commenting on others'; in weeks 7-10, you'll be alternating between writing (or rewriting) a full draft and commenting on others'). These comments are due Monday evening, so that authors have time to read and consider responses to them by seminar time the next day. These should be 2-3 paragraphs of general evaluation -- what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the draft, and what recommendations you have for improving it (other ways of formulating the question, other theories or studies to consider, other ways of selecting cases or asking interview questions, etc.). Please send this text to the entire seminar in a self-standing email or document file. If you
want to add embedded comments to the author's file, fine, but this should be in addition to a separate set of comments highlighting the main (constructive) criticisms and suggestions.

Even during weeks when you are "on" as an author, do try to read, if not comment on, your peers' work, so you'll be able to contribute to seminar discussions.

Requirements

-- Attendance and participation, including regular assignments (30%)
-- Written comments on papers (20%)
-- Research proposal (incl. draft and final version) (50%)

Most of you will be starting with a proposal, a rough draft, or an idea. Some of you will begin with a seminar paper that you would like to develop for publication. A few may have already done significant amounts of data collection. For this reason, evaluation of your papers will be based on how they progress toward the goals you set for yourself in consultation with the instructor.

Before the end of the quarter, each of you should also get a faculty member to sign on as an advisor to your project over the coming year. I would be happy to broker these if needed.

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Schedule

**Week 1** Preliminaries. I’ll give an overview of the course and we’ll discuss research interests

**Week 2** How to find a compelling puzzle and how to set up a research project that can solve it

Reading: King, Keohane and Verba, ch. 1-2, section 3.5, ch. 4, ch. 6
Becker, ch. 3-4

Assignments: A 1-2 sentence formulation of your research question (as a question!)

**Week 3** Some nuts & bolts: IRB rules and procedures; library databases
We'll divide our time this week between 414 and the library.

**Week 4** Examples from different genres; managing notes and citations

Reading: Angela Garcia, "Return to Sender? A Comparative Analysis of Immigrant Communities in ‘Attrition through Enforcement’ Destinations," *Ethnic and Racial*


**Assignment:** A first draft of your introduction

**Week 5**
**Literature reviews: Who are you arguing and agreeing with?**

**Assignment:** A first draft of your literature review. Half the group circulates these drafts, the other half circulates comments on them. Be sure to include the current version of your introduction, too.

**Week 6**
**Methods sections: selecting cases, identifying relevant data, planning how to analyze that data**

**Assignment:** A first draft of your methods section that discusses your choice of cases to study (i.e., your "sample" of something), what data you’ll gather, how you’ll gather it (e.g., examples of interview questions), and what you’ll do with it (e.g., content analysis, event histories, statistical methods, etc.). Half the group circulates these drafts, the other half circulates comments on them. Be sure to include the current version of your introduction, too.

**Week 7-10**
**Discussion of full drafts**

**Readings:** 4 (or so) drafts by your peers per week

**Assignment:** Be working on your own drafts.

**FINAL DRAFT DUE WEDNESDAY OF FINALS WEEK**

**Recommended Reading**

There are many other guides to research and writing, from general overviews to texts that focus more on particular issues or methods. I am most familiar with those in my own field, comparative-historical methods, and would be happy to share a syllabus of readings in that field. Of more general interest are:

Robert Alford, *The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence*
Howard Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*
Henry Brady and David Collier (eds.) *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*
Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*
Paul Gray et al., *The Research Imagination: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*
Bob Hancké, *Intelligent Research Design*
Kimberly Kempf-Leonard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*
Charles Ragin & Howard Becker (eds.), *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*
Charles Ragin, *Redesigning Social Inquiry: Fuzzy Sets and Beyond*
Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories*
Richard Swedberg, *The Art of Social Theory*
William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*