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Methods and Techniques of Sociological Research

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SOC 23200: Methods and Techniques of Sociological Research (4 credits)

Spring 2023 Course Syllabus (Updated: Jan 23)
Tues and Thurs 3:30-4:45 pm @ Shepard 21

Instructor: Prof. Larry Au (lau1@ccny.cuny.edu)

Office Hours: Thurs 2-3:15 pm (sign up: <https://bit.ly/spring2023au>) @ NAC 6/135

Course Description

Sociological research—like all forms academic research—is a conversation. Like all conversations, sociology has established conventions, styles, and genres. To participate in this conversation, we first need to understand how sociologists make and substantiate claims. As an empirical social science, much of the sociological enterprise consists of the collection and analysis of data that allows us to measure, interpret, and theorize social relations. But because social life is complex, sociological inquiry also requires an understanding of the limitations of different methodological approaches and the positionality of the researcher. Furthermore, sociology is a diverse field: diverse in its objects of study, and diverse in its research methods and techniques. This course attempts to expose you to the different ways in which sociologists think about and go about doing research, so you can begin to think about what type of sociology most appeals to you and your interests. Throughout the semester, we will also have many small group and in-class activities where you will try out different methods.

Our readings are a mix of “how to” texts that give us a sense of how to apply a method, exemplary examples of how a method can be applied, and critiques of each method. We begin the semester by *learning to think like a sociologist*. This entails learning to ask sociologically relevant research questions, how to conduct research ethically, and gaining entry and trust of the community you hope to study. We then continue by looking at the *quantitative approaches* that sociologists employ: primarily the design and dissemination of surveys, that allow for researchers to make claims about representativeness for different populations. In these weeks, we will learn about how to write and design survey questions, issues about sampling, descriptive statistics, data visualization, statistical significance, and interpreting statistical models. We then look to the many *qualitative approaches* that sociologists use to understand meaning and complexity in social processes. These include semi-structured interviews, ethnography and participant observation, and focus groups. We then look to *other approaches* that sociologists rely on, such as content analysis, computational text analysis, experimental methods, and social network analysis, and discuss *social research beyond the academy* and how the skills you learn in this class can translate to careers outside of academic sociology.

There are three components to your grade for this class. First, there will be four *in-class quizzes* at the end of each part of the course. These are meant to help ensure that you have gained an adequate understanding of the content, and are meant to help summarize what you have learned in each section. Second, the final product of this class is a *research project* where you will use a method to gather data to help answer a research question of your own choice. There are several exercises throughout the semester, such as a research proposal, in-class peer review, office hours consultation, and a presentation that will help you produce the research paper that you will submit at the end of the semester. Third, you will also be asked to write two reflection memos that will help me gauge your *course engagement*. These memos are designed to help you track growth throughout the semester, as you become more acquainted with sociological thinking and research methods.

Assignments and Grading

The following activities are designed to help you achieve the class objectives. Your grade will include these components:

- **In-Class Quizzes (40%):** There will be four in-class quizzes. The questions will be a mix of multiple-choice questions and short answer questions. These are open notes and open book, and are meant to be a low-stakes way to gauge your understanding of the material. I will also drop the lowest-scoring quiz. The quizzes will be administered on the last class of each part of the course. If you require testing accommodations, please let me know and we can discuss how best to support you. We will recap each quiz the next class and answer any lingering questions we have from the previous section of the course. **There will be quizzes on Feb 16, March 16, April 20, and May 11.**
- **Research Project (40%):** The final product of this class is a research project. You will be tasked with identifying a research question and a method that will allow you to gather data that can help you answer this question. The end product is a paper, but we have a series of exercises throughout the semester that will help you get to this end goal. Details to be provided.
 - **CITI Certification:** IRB Human Subjects Research Training. **Due on Feb 12.**
 - **Research Proposal:** A proposal form will be provided to help you narrow down your research interests into a sociologically relevant research question. The form will also prompt you to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different methods, as well as to reflect on what potential challenges that you foresee. I will provide written feedback on your proposals, which also serve as an ethics review of sorts. Aside from this, you will also receive human subjects research training. **Due on March 7.**
 - **In-Class Peer Review:** We will spend half a class session in March in pairs, where you will read and comment on another student's research proposal. This process of peer review should help you solicit suggestions from a knowledgeable peer about the feasibility, relevance, and significance of your research project. **In-class on March 14.**
 - **Progress Report:** You can either come to my office hours or send a paragraph describing your progress on your research to help ensure that you are on track, and to help you tackle any unexpected challenges you face when conducting your research project. If you cannot sign up a slot during my regular office hours, please email to set up an appointment outside of these times. **Please do this by April 25.**
 - **Optional Presentation:** We have time on the last class to host presentations where you can present your findings. These may be particularly helpful if you want to use the presentation as a way to start writing the paper, or if you would like feedback from your peers before finishing your paper. **Due on May 16.**
 - **Research Paper (5 to 10 pages):** Paper will consist of the usual elements of articles you read in class: an introduction, brief literature review, data and methods, findings, and a discussion section. **Due on May 21.**
- **Course Engagement (20%):** Attendance is part of this, as we will have ample opportunity in class for small group activity and discussion. But I define engagement as your ability to gain something out of this course. These goals are necessarily individualized. So throughout the semester, you will be asked to conduct self-assessment exercises that will prompt you to reflect on what you were able to learn from the readings, activities, and lectures. This will take the form of two reflections. 1-2 paragraphs each. **Due on Feb 14 and May 4.**

Policies and Other Considerations

The following are a general set of policies that I expect you to follow to ensure that the course operates smoothly and so we are aligned in our expectations for one another:

- **Communication:** Our primary means of communicating outside of the classroom would be through your CCNY email. I will try to respond to emails during the weekdays within 24 hours, and within 48 hours over the weekends and during the holidays. Please also check your spam inboxes periodically to make sure our course emails are not sent there.
- **Classroom Etiquette and Technology Use:** Please be mindful of how your presence can alter the learning environment for others. The most concrete way this manifest is your use of technologies during class. Laptops and tablets can be used for note-taking and for referring to the readings assigned that week, but please refrain from online browsing and other disruptive activities. Try also to stay off your phones during class. In short, be respectful.
- **Office Hours:** I encourage you to use these hours at least once during the semester! Please come in to talk about anything related to the course (e.g. help with readings and concepts, brainstorming for your assignments) or related to your broader collegiate career (e.g. internships, what you hope to get out of sociology). I hope to get to know you better during these meetings. Please book a time at <https://bit.ly/spring2023au> and feel free to let me know what you would like to discuss. I am also happy to chat before or after class.
- **Disability-related Accommodations:** If you require accommodations to ensure that you are able to participate fully in this course, please let me know so I can help develop a plan. Please also reach out to the AccessAbility Center/Student Disability Services to help ensure accommodations for this and other courses (<https://www.ccnycuny.edu/accessability>).
- **Personal Emergencies:** Should you encounter health and personal emergencies that hinder your ability to come to class, please be in touch with your instructors, via email. While participating in class is important, nothing is more important than your health and wellbeing. I will do my best to help ensure that you are able to make up what you miss.
- **Late Work and Extensions:** Deadlines coordinate work. For instructors, deadlines help us organize time to read and provide feedback. But should you find yourself unable to meet a deadline, email me at least 24 hours in advance to arrange for a penalty-free extension. Otherwise, assignments will incur a 5% reduction for every 24-hour period that it is late.
- **Complaints About Grades:** I am happy to provide further feedback during office hours about grading. In assignment prompts, I also provide a rubric of sorts to be transparent about grading criteria. My grading attempts to be constructive and my written feedback typically points to places where you can improve in your writing. Should you ask for a grade to be reconsidered, your grade can be the same, increased, or decreased than the original grade.
- **Course Materials:** Please do not share assignments, recordings, slides, and other course-related material with individuals outside of the class or with third-party websites.
- **Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:** Please ensure that you review the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy (<http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/legal-affairs/policies-resources/academic-integrity-policy/>), which details the forms of academic dishonesty and the related sanctions that will be imposed on students who violate this policy. Part of what we try to do as instructors is to ensure that you find your own “voice” so you can take part in the broader academic conversation—and plagiarism goes against this mission.

Additional Campus Resources

- **Academic Help:** For help with writing and navigating campus academic resources, please see the following links to learn more about resources at the Colin Powell School and at CCNY.
 - **The Writing Center:** The writing center provides one-on-one help to students through synchronous and asynchronous online support, or in-person sessions. Please see their website for more information <https://www.ccnycuny.edu/writing>
 - **CCNY Library:** For help with accessing library resources, such as identifying relevant sources for your research, you can always schedule a consultation with a librarian <https://library.ccnycuny.edu/askus>
- **Advising and Fellowship/Internships:** For help with planning your major, navigating academic difficulties, and connecting what you learn to outside the classroom, please visit the wonderful advisors at the Colin Powell School or at the Sociology Department.
 - **Office of the Academic Advisors:** For questions about degree completion, changing majors, leaves of absence, etc., please schedule an appointment with an advisor <https://www.ccnycuny.edu/colinpowellschool/office-academic-advisors>
 - **Office of Student Success:** There are many fellowship and internship opportunities organized through the OSS. The advisors there also offer help with resume writing, preparing for interviews, connecting you to alumni, etc. <https://cps-oss.ccnycuny.edu>
- **Wellness and Mental Health:** Please take advantage of these free resources for mental health should you find yourself struggling during the school year.
 - **Counseling Center:** All services are free and confidential, and are available to all students. Issues covered by counseling include relationship problems, managing stress, improving academic performance, substance abuse, anxiety, etc. <https://www.ccnycuny.edu/counseling>
 - **City Stress Coaches:** Staffed by Psychology graduate students, the peer tutoring program offers 45-minute one-on-one navigation sessions that help you plan and manage your stress and workload, and to go over strategies of self-care <https://calendly.com/peernavigation/calendar>
- **Benny's Pantry:** Students who find themselves experiencing difficulties obtaining food every day or who lack a stable and safe place to live are urged to come to Benny's Pantry for assistance (<https://www.ccnycuny.edu/bennysfoodpantry>). Benny's Pantry is located on the ground floor of the North Academic Center (NAC) and is *open to anyone* within the CUNY community (students, staff, faculty) in need of support. The pantry is open from 10 am to 6 pm and is self-serve. Additional emergency support for financial, health and housing needs are also available through Benny's. Please contact Dee Dee Mozeleski at dmozeleski@ccny.CUNY.edu or Charles Ramirez at cramirez@ccny.CUNY.edu for additional details.
- These are some other sources of help from CCNY and CUNY:
 - **Food Insecurity:** <https://www.cuny.edu/snap/>
 - **Gender-based Harassment:** <https://www.ccnycuny.edu/affirmativeaction>
 - **Housing Insecurity:** <https://www.healthycuny.org/resources-housing-homelessness>
 - **Financial Insecurity**
https://petriestudentemergency.formstack.com/forms/petrie_student_emergency_grants

Course Readings

All readings are provided as PDFs. A Dropbox link will be sent via email. The page count of readings each week ranges from 50-100 pages (or 2-3 journal articles/chapters). I expect that students come to class reasonably able to answer “what did the author argue in this reading”, which requires you to grasp the general themes but *not* all the details. If you find yourself spending too much time with the readings, come by office hours. I will provide additional optional resources throughout the semester.

Part I: Thinking Like A Sociologist

In this week, we learn to think like sociologists by learning to ask sociologically relevant questions. We then learn about the history of research ethics in sociology (social scientists do not have the best track record here), and discuss more broadly what being a “good” sociologist entails, such as reflexivity and gaining the trust of our research participants.

Week 1: Connecting Theory to Data

Jan 26 (Thurs)

- Howard S. Becker. 1998. “Ch. 4: Concepts” in *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You’re Doing It*. [p. 109-145]

Week 2: Research Questions and Case Selection

Jan 31 (Tues)

- Wayne Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. 2003. “Ch. 3: From Topics to Research Questions” in *The Craft of Research*. [p. 35-64]

Feb 2 (Thurs)

- Ashley Rubin. 2021. “Ch. 6: Starting on the Right Foot: Making and Justifying Your Case Selection” in *Rocking Qualitative Social Science: An Irreverent Guide to Rigorous Research*. [p. 108-137]
- Kristin Luker. 2008. “Ch. 6: On Sampling, Operationalization, and Generalization” in *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-glut*. [p. 99-128]

Week 3: Research Ethics, Earning Trust, and Reflexivity

Feb 7 (Tues)

- Laud Humphreys. 1975[1970]. “Ch. 2: Methods: The Sociologist as Voyeur,” “Postscript: A Question of Ethics,” and “Retrospect: Ethical Issues in Social Research” in *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. [p. 16-44, 167-173, 223-232, please skim]
- **Complete CITI training courses and upload certificate to Blackboard by Feb 12 (Sun)** on “[Human Subjects Protection Basic Course](#)”

Feb 9 (Thurs)

- Mario Luis Small and Jessica McCrory Calarco. “Ch. 5: Self Awareness” in *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research*. [p. 119-144]

Week 4: The Politics of Data (or Ethics Part 2)

Feb 14 (Tues) [We will meet in the Computer Lab]

- Galen Panger. 2016. “Reassessing the Facebook experiment: critical thinking about the validity of Big Data research”. *Information, Communication & Society* 19(8). [p. 1108-1126]
- **Course Engagement Reflection #1 Due**

Feb 16 (Thurs) – Quiz #1

- ***No reading, please review previous material***

Part II: Quantitative Approaches

At the core of quantitative approaches to sociology is the survey. In the next few weeks, we will dive into how the sausage is made: starting from how sociologists craft questions to include in their surveys, how they sample and make claims of representativeness, and how they present their findings through descriptive statistics, data visualizations, and statistical modeling.

Week 5: Designing Survey Questions and Sampling

Feb 21 (Tues) – Classes follow MONDAY schedule, no class for us

Feb 23 (Thurs)

- Howard Schuman. 2022. “Sense and Nonsense About Surveys”. *Contexts: Sociology for the Public*. [p. 40-47]

Week 6: Types of Variables (Nominal, Ordinal, and Interval/Ratio Variables)

Feb 28 (Tues) [We will meet in the Computer Lab]

- Browse the variables available on the General Social Survey: <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/variables/vfilter>

March 2 (Thurs)

- Earl Babbie. 2010. “Ch. 6: Indexes, Scales, and Typologies” in *The Practice of Social Research*. [p. 158-186]
- **Please complete the class survey (see your email this week!)**

Week 7: Descriptive Statistics and Data Visualization

March 7 (Tues)

- K.M. Ramachandran and Chris P. Tsokos. 2009. “Ch. 1: Descriptive Statistics” in *Mathematical Statistics with Applications*. [p. 1-51, please skim]
- **Research Proposal Due**

March 9 (Thurs)

- On Edward Tufte’s data visualization principles: “Guidelines for Good Visual Information Representations” <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/guidelines-for-good-visual-information-representations>
- On W.E.B. Du Bois’ works: “W.E.B. Du Bois’ Visionary Infographics Come Together for the First Time in Full Color” <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/first-time-together-and-color-book-displays-web-du-bois-visionary-infographics-180970826/>
- On the #DuBoisChallenge, idea from Allen Hillery and Sekou Tyler (if you participate, let me know for extra credit): <https://nightingaledvs.com/the-dubois-challenge/>

Week 8: Interpreting Inferential Statistics

March 14 (Tues) [We will meet in the Computer Lab]

- John H. Evans and Eszter Hargittai. 2020. “Who Doesn’t Trust Fauci? The Public’s Belief in the Expertise and Shared Values of Scientists in the COVID-19 Pandemic”. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 6. [p. 1-13]
- **In-Class Peer Review:** Please bring in your Research Proposal (paper or digital) to share

March 16 (Thurs) – **Quiz #2** [We will discuss how to read an academic article in this class]

- **No readings, please review previous material**

Part III: Qualitative Approaches

In the next few weeks, we examine three types of methods that qualitative sociologists have used to advance our understanding of meaning-making and behavior in different social groups. First, we take a look at the bread and butter of sociology: semi-structured interviews. We then examine ethnography and participant observation, in order to appreciate how this method can help us appreciate the complexity of social life. Finally, we turn to the still relatively rarer use of focus groups by sociologists.

Week 9: Semi-Structured Interviews

March 21 (Tues)

- Robert S. Weiss. 1994. "Ch. 5: Issues in Interviewing" in *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. [p. 121-150]
- Annette Lareau. 2021. "Ch. 5 How to Conduct a Good Interview" in *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*. [p. 91-139]

March 23 (Thurs)

- Anthony Abraham Jack. 2015. "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University". *Sociology of Education* 89(1): 1-19.

Week 10: Ethnography and Participant Observation

March 28 (Tues)

- Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. "Ch. 2: In the Field: Participating, Observing, and Jotting Notes" in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. [p. 21-44]
- Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy". *Sociological Methods & Research* 34(2):

March 30 (Thurs)

- Peter Francis Harvey. 2022. "'Make Sure You Look Someone in the Eye': Socialization and Classed Comportment in Two Elementary Schools". *American Journal of Sociology* 127(5). [p. 1417-1459]

Week 11: Focus Groups

April 4 (Tues)

- David L. Morgan and Margaret T. Spanish. 1984. "Focus Groups: A New Tool for Qualitative Research". *Qualitative Sociology* 7. [p. 253-270]
- Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp. 2005. "When the Girl Are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens". *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30(4). [p. 2115-2139]

April 6 (Thurs): No Class, Spring Recess from April 5 to 13

Week 12: Content Analysis and Qualitative Coding [We will meet in the Computer Lab]

April 18 (Tues)

- Andrew M. Lindner. 2012. "An Old Tool with New Promise". *Contexts: Sociology for the Public* 11(1). [p. 70-72]

April 20 (Thurs) – Quiz #3

- ***No readings, please review previous material***

Part IV: Other Approaches and Research Beyond the Academy

Aside from quantitative and qualitative approaches, sociologists also rely on other techniques that are harder to categorize. These include content analysis, computational text analysis, experimental methods, and social network analysis. We will also look at social research outside of academic settings or applied sociology. While researchers at companies and industry may not bill their work as social research as such, much of what they do draw on the methods we have seen in previous weeks. We begin by looking at the work of market researchers and user experience researchers in advertising and tech firms. We then follow with a revisit of research ethics, by looking at the politics of big data.

Week 13: Experimental Methods (Laboratory, Field, and Survey Experiments)

April 25 (Tues)

- Lovaglia, M. J. 2003. "From Summer Camps to Glass Ceilings: The Power of Experiments." *Contexts: Sociology for the Public* 2(4). [p. 42-49]
- **Progress Report Due (either Office Hour visit or email me a paragraph describing your progress on your research project)**

April 27 (Thurs)

- Devah Pager. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record". *American Journal of Sociology* 108(5). [p. 937-975]

Week 14: Social Network Analysis and Computational Text Analysis

May 2 (Tues)

- Peter Bearman, James Moody, and Katherine Stovel. 2004. "Chains of Affection: The Structure of Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Networks." *American Journal of Sociology* 110(1). [p. 44-91]
- Eric Klinenberg. 2002. "Ch. 1: Dying Alone: The Social Production of Isolation" in *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. [p. 37-78]

May 4 (Thurs) [We will meet in the Computer Lab]

- Alix Rule, Jean-Philippe Cointet, and Peter Bearman. 2015. "Lexical shifts, substantive changes, and continuity in State of the Union discourse, 1790-2014". *Proceedings of the National Academies of Science* 112(35): 10837-44.
- **Course Engagement Reflection #2 Due**

Week 15: Market Research/UX and Policy/Public Sociology

[visit from Office of Student Success to talk about Internships and Fellowships]

May 9 (Tues)

- Paul Hauge, Nick Hague, and Carol-Ann Morgan. 2004. "Ch. 1: Introduction" in *Market Research in Practice: A Guide to the Basics*. [p. 1-16, skim please]
- Deborah Lupton. 2017. "Towards design sociology". *Sociology Compass* 12(1). [p. 1-11]
- Michael Burawoy. 2004. "For Public Sociology". *American Sociological Review* 70(Feb). [p. 4-28]

May 11 (Thurs) – Quiz #4

- ***No readings, please review previous material***

Part V: Wrapping Up

By now, you will be a bit tired of hearing from me. This last week will be used to share the findings from your research projects. The presentations are also opportunities for you to get instructor and peer feedback on your work, before you submit your final research project papers.

Week 16: Student Presentations

May 16 (Tues)

- **Presentation Due. Please come prepared to present your research, this is an opportunity for feedback from your peers before submitting your written report**

Research Project Papers Due May 21 (Sunday)