

SOCIOLOGY 246
Research Methods
Spring, 2007

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Text: Babbie, Earl. The Practice of Social Research (Tenth Edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2004.

Course content:

This course is an inquiry into both the philosophical and practical aspects of research in social science in the Information Age. Particular attention will be devoted to the location and evaluation of useful information (using both traditional and electronic means); the uses and abuses of research; ethical and practical dilemmas in dealing with human subjects; and the construction of empirical research designs. Writing as a way to foster critical thinking will be emphasized throughout the course.

Course Objectives:

- (1) To provide students with an opportunity to apply some of the social science principles they have learned in earlier courses to the design and/or analysis of empirical research projects.
- (2) To cultivate the analytical skills that are critical to social science.
- (3) To sensitize students to the ethical conflicts and constraints which confront social science researchers.
- (4) To encourage mastery of the conventions of social science writing through numerous practice exercises.
- (5) To give students some practical experience in analyzing information as empirical data.
- (6) To familiarize students with the use of microcomputers, for locating useful information on-line, word processing, and data coding and analysis.
- (6) To foster an appreciation of the vital role which research plays in sociology and related disciplines.
- (8) To help students develop the critical skills necessary to make them "wise consumers" of research information in their future roles as professionals and citizens.

Course Requirements:

(1) Examinations:

Two hourly exams will be given at appropriate times during the term. Each will constitute 20 percent of the student's course grade (for a total of 40 percent).

(2) Laboratory Exercises:

Portions of some class periods will involve discussion of laboratory exercises designed to give students direct experience in a number of methodological techniques/issues studied in the course. Accordingly, each student will need to draft a written response to each assignment by the due date announced in class. Most assignment results will be collected for formal evaluation using the **Blackboard** system. (The various assignments will be described in detail in separate assignment instructions and/or via oral instructions in class. Each will be related to one of the substantive units of the course.)

These detailed directions concerning the execution of the various assignments (as well as due dates) will be distributed via the Blackboard system as the term proceeds. Students should make every effort to complete these assignments on time since they need to be prepared to share with the class the results of their efforts by the announced due dates. Adequate responses during the discussions of these lab assignments will significantly affect that portion (20 percent) of each student's grade determined by his/her response to these class/lab participation opportunities.

(3) Term Project:

The major term project requires the writing of a **formal research design** for an empirical research project. This involves generating a testable hypothesis or focused research question, surveying the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, devising a process for selecting an appropriate sample of subjects/respondents, constructing an instrument for collecting the relevant data (designing or modifying an existing data collection instrument/process as necessary), and suggesting specific processes for analyzing the data that would result.

This assignment will likely be the most complex project undertaken by sociology students in the major to date. Therefore, the assignment will unfold in three component parts. The components of the formal designs must also be written using word processing and should be formatted in the standard style of empirical research journals in sociology. They will be submitted via Blackboard. The objectives of this assignment are to prepare the student to appreciate the complexity of the research process and to prepare to take the next step in executing an empirical research project. [Chapter 19 in Babbie's text gives detailed information on the writing of such proposals.

Detailed instructions on the writing of the three components of the term project will also be distributed on Blackboard.

Since these research projects will constitute the litmus test of what each student has learned in the course, the combined **revised** project paper will be considered a de facto take-home final examination and, thus, will be due on the date assigned by the Registrar for the final examination. The final paper is worth 30 percent of the course grade and the Phase 1 and Phase 2 papers are worth 5 percent each.

(4) Attendance and participation:

Since a number of the laboratory components require in-class participation, it is expected that students will attend class unless absent for a valid reason. In any case, students who need to be absent should notify the instructor of the particulars and should consult with her about the best way to make up work missed. In sum, there is not a special "cut policy" in this course, but absences will erode the student's ability to master the material covered and will affect negatively the lab participation grade.

A WORD ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Recognized standards of honesty are part of the foundation on which the integrity of an academic community rests. Accordingly, the Moravian College Faculty in 1986 adopted a statement on Academic Honesty, the standards of which will be strictly applied in this course. You are encouraged to read carefully the description of this policy which is printed in your Student Handbook. Any student who is unsure about the propriety of a given procedure or approach for completing assigned work in this course should consult with the instructor before completing the assignment. Any breach of the College's honesty code will constitute grounds for the assignment of a course grade of F.

READING AND LABORATORY ASSIGNMENTS

I. Introduction

Unit 1: Why Do Social Research?

Reading: Ch. 1, Text

Lab: Make a list of ten examples of social regularities that you observe in everyday life around you. From that list select one of these patterns and construct a testable hypothesis about the causes of the pattern involved or about its relationship to some other pattern of behavior or human trait. Explain in general terms how these hypotheses could be tested.

Unit 2: Evaluating Social Science Research

Reading: Ch. 2, Text

Project Assignment 1: Finding possible projects

Unit 3: General Measurement Issues

Reading: Ch. 5, Text

Lab: Find an example of a writer implicitly operationalizing some concept in a newspaper or mass circulation magazine article (most such articles can now be found on the website of the relevant publication). Assess the adequacy of the operationalization. Then, find a journal article in which a social scientist has operationalized some concept for use in an empirical study. Assess the adequacy of this operational definition (especially in light of the hypothesis being tested). Draft a summary of your assessments, and bring a photocopy of each of these articles to class and link your response to the original source in your Blackboard submission or provide a photocopy of the original article to the instructor.

II. Basic Types of Research Designs

Unit 4: Causality and Experiments

Reading: Chs. 4 & 8, Text

Lab: During Unit 4, the instructor will meet separately with individual students to focus the process of selecting specific questions/hypotheses for their empirical research designs.

Unit 5: Sampling and the Logic of Surveys

Reading: Ch. 7, Text

Lab: Using the population list that will be provided for this purpose, select (1) a simple random sample of 10 names, (2) a systematic sample of 10 names, and (3) a stratified sample of 10 names. (The stratification variable to be used is sex, and the strata should be proportionally represented. In each of the three cases, describe briefly the exact procedure used.)

Mid-term Examination

Unit 6: Evaluation Research: a Special Case

Reading: Ch. 12 Text

Lab: Look through recent newspapers or magazines and find an account of some "innovative" social program (e.g., a prisoner training program, an anti-drug campaign, etc.). Briefly describe the program, detailing its major objective (i.e., its "dependent variable"). Tell how you would measure that variable and how you would incorporate that measurement into a formal evaluation of the program. Consider the possibility that some modification of the program might be necessary in order to permit adequate formal evaluation. Bring to class a photocopy of the article.

III. Ethical Issues

Unit 7: Ethical Issues in Social Research

Reading: Ch. 3, Text

Project Assignment 2: Review of the Literature

VI. Methods of Data Collection

Unit 8: Verbal Techniques and their Results

Reading: Chs. 6 & 9, Text

Lab: Each student will conduct ten structured interviews designed to measure levels of "pronatalism" (i.e., positive attitudes toward having children) among Moravian College students. The results will be combined, and we will do a brief analysis of the combined results.

Unit 9: Observation, Field Work, and Secondary Data

Sources

Reading: Ch. 10, 11, & 13, Text

Lab: Play the role of participant observer in some group of which you are already a member (The group may be either a formal or informal one). Try to observe during the entire duration of one of the group's activities (or "meetings"), preferably for at least an hour. Write a summary of your observations, keeping detailed field notes. Be prepared to share your summary and the essence of what you learned from the exercise with the class. In the spirit of good ethical practice, all your descriptive comments must be planned so as to protect the identity of your subjects.

SECOND EXAM

VI. Analysis and Presentation of Data

Unit 10: Writing a Research Design or Report

Reading: Ch. 17, Text

COMPLETED RESEARCH PROJECTS DUE - On the date assigned for the SOC 246 Final Examination

NOTE: The instructor reserves the right to change the specifics of individual assignments as fresh opportunities arise, but the general structure of the course will be that described above.