

SOCIOLOGY 246
Research Methods
Spring, 2008

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Text: Babbie, Earl. The Practice of Social Research (Eleventh Edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2007.

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 which 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 17 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 be distributed on Blackboard but they are also attached to this syllabus.

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 first day of the final examination period. 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 this 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 using an implicit operational definition of 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 operational definition. 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 to give 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, generally related to one of the three topic areas proposed in their first project paper.

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 a photocopy of the article to class on the due date.

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 the instructor will share a brief analysis of the combined results with the class.

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 framed 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 beginning of the Final Examination period.

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.

MAJOR TERM PROJECT – SOC 246

Note: Students may work collaboratively (in pairs) on the research project, but because this is the writing intensive course for the major, each student must write separate papers for each phase.

The Major term project for this course will result in the writing of a formal research design (proposal). However, in order to make the assignment more meaningful and more manageable (for students and the instructor), the process will be undertaken in three phases or parts.

Phase 1:

The first part of the process is to find a viable, interesting topic, one which will ultimately give rise to a testable hypothesis or a focused research question. In order to stimulate this problem-finding phase, you are to draft a brief paper in which you describe three topics that you find interesting and which you would like to investigate empirically.

To generate ideas, think back through the various social science courses that you have taken, and try to remember topics that interested and intrigued you (skim your notes and/or texts from such courses). You may also glean ideas from your own life experience (work, family, campus, etc.).

Once you have found your three topics, describe each in detail, answering (in narrative form) the following questions/issues:

1. Why does the problem interest you and why might others think it worthy of investigation?
2. Define a specific question related to the topic that you would like to answer (Such questions are often of either the "what kinds of people behave differently in given situations?" or "Why do some people act one way and others act differently in a given situation?" form.)
3. Try to frame each question in hypothesis form, stating what answer you expect to find to your question, preferably worded as a statement of relationship between two or more variables.
4. Identify the independent and the dependent variable for each of the three questions/hypotheses, as well as any other variables that seem to be of contextual importance.

Write your Phase 1 paper in three parts, providing a brief introduction and conclusion, as well as covering the four issues outlined above. Discussion of all these issues for each of the three different topic areas should result in a paper of 3 to 5 pages.

These papers are due (via Blackboard) on **Friday, February 22.**

Phase 2:

Select one of three projects that you proposed in your Phase 1 paper (or a revised version thereof), based on your interests and on feedback from the instructor.

Then proceed to investigate and draft the next component of your term project paper:

1. Conduct a brief review of the literature on your topic, including at least 3 – 5 primary sources (a larger number of sources will be typical of better work. (You may also refer to secondary sources if they assist in providing needed contextual understanding.)
2. Read the literature with a view to refining and focusing (or refocusing) your chosen hypothesis.
3. Also look for helpful models for measuring the variables of interest (i.e., look for useful “operational definitions”).
4. Consider carefully any ethical issues that might affect measuring your variables in the way(s) that seem most effective.

Summarize the results of your literature search in a 4–5 page paper. Give the paper narrative integrity by reminding the reader what your topic is and why it is important. The literature review will comprise the bulk of this paper, and it should summarize the prior research on this topic which you have located. This should then lead rather naturally into the formal statement of your hypothesis/ focused question, as well as the specification of the operational definition of the independent, dependent, and any other relevant variables which you will need to measure in your project. Conclude the Phase 2 paper with a discussion which shows that you understand the need to do the research in a fashion that is consistent with best ethical practice,

The Phase 2 paper is due on **Friday, March 28** and should be submitted using Blackboard.

Phase 3:

This final phase will require you to write an entire research design, but that will not be as daunting a task as this may seem since you will have already accomplished significant components of this task in your Phase 1 & 2 papers. Moreover, you will have received substantive feedback from the instructor on those earlier efforts which should enable you to improve those components. The introductory material should, of course be updated and integrated into your final paper.

Three additional matters need to be addressed in Phase 3:

1. Describe the specific sampling plan that you intend to use, including your rationale for selecting your subjects in the manner chosen and making it clear that collection of this sample is feasible for a student with few resources and only three and a half months to complete the work.
2. Specify in detail the data collection method you intend to use. (This means that if you are using interviews, you should include a draft of the interview plan/schedule; if you are doing a survey via a questionnaire, provide a draft questionnaire; etc.)
3. Explain in as much detail as feasible how you plan to analyze the data that you collect. (This may require some additional consultation with the instructor.)

Having accomplished these tasks, you need to write a coherent full-scale research design, integrating these final components with your earlier efforts into a coherent narrative.

The final paper should be written in the standard style of empirical writing in sociology.

The quality of the analytical content as well as of the writing will affect the evaluation of this paper. The instructor is happy to evaluate earlier drafts of any and all papers prior to the due date.

The due date for your final design will be the first day of the final examination period, **Monday, April 28**, although early papers will be accepted. Papers should be submitted via Blackboard.