

Sociology 246: Basic Research Methods

Fall 2009

Professor Virginia Adams O'Connell

Office: PPHAC 317

Phone: 610-625-7756

Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:45-12:55

Abstract: This class is designed to expose students to the basics of social research for social scientists, with a particular focus on the methods used by sociologists. By the end of the course, students will have a foundation in generating social science research questions, drafting a research proposal, and choosing appropriate methodologies.

Main Text: The Basics of Social Research: Fourth Edition, Earl Babbie, (Thomson, 2008). In addition to this text, supplementary readings and handouts will be distributed in class and posted on Blackboard.

Communication: This class can only be successful for both of us if there is good communication between and among us. I will use Blackboard to organize the course materials and to communicate with students. You are required to check the Blackboard site at least every other day to see if new postings have been made. I will try to alert you in class, but additionally, you must get into the habit of checking the site even without my prompting. I will post course documents and course assignments on the site.

You are also responsible for checking your email accounts on a daily basis. Emails are an official form of communication at the college and you should be checking your account every day. If you miss a communication from me and, for example, hand in an assignment late, failing to check your email to retrieve my correspondence will not stand as a valid excuse for not completing the assignment on time.

Assignments: Assignments are due at the *beginning of class on Thursday*. So the assignment listed on the syllabus under Week 2 is actually due on Thursday of Week 2.

The particular project you undertake for this course will provide multiple opportunities for feedback (from the professor and from your peers) and revision. The central assignment for this course will be the creation of a sociology research proposal. The research proposal will basically have four main components:

- 1) In the first section of the proposal, you will state your main research question with accompanying hypotheses. In this section, you will have to argue why it is important for sociologists to study this particular topic—addressing a core question of the field—“So what?” In this section, you will learn the writing tools to make a concise but strong argument to motivate the study.
- 2) In the second session, you will provide information on what is already known about the topic you have chosen and provide a concise literature review. How will your research add to the body of knowledge already in existence? Again, concise and clear writing will be stressed.
- 3) In section 3, you will discuss the form your research will take. What is the time period expected? How many people will you study (what is your sample and how will you choose/access the sample)? What methodologies will you use? What are the benefits of using these particular methods?
- 4) In the final section, you will critique your own proposal—what are the strengths and weaknesses. There are always trade-offs no matter what methods you choose. Can you recognize what can be gained from your endeavors and what you simply will be unable to know at the end of the project?

Each section will be handed in at different points of the semester and you will have many opportunities to revise your submissions. You will also be encouraged to read and edit each other’s submissions.

Grades:

Each assignment will be graded on either the following 0.0-4.0 scale, or on a corresponding 0-100 scale.

4.0/95-100: A	2.0/74-76: C
3.7/90-94: A-	1.7/70-73: C-
3.3/87-89: B+	1.3/67-69: D+
3.0/84-86: B	1.0/64-66: D
2.7/80-83: B-	0.7/60-63: D-
2.3/77-79: C+	

Smaller assignments such as in-class quizzes or short out-of-class exercises will be graded with the following grades: v+, v, or v- . These grades roughly correspond to an A, B and C. The short assignments and quizzes will be weighted differently depending on the amount of time and effort it takes to complete the assignment. At the end of the semester, all of these points will be added together and you will get a corresponding letter grade for this accumulated short assignment work based on the total percentage of points earned.

Assignment grades will be posted under “Grade Center” on the Blackboard site. You are responsible for checking to make sure that your grades are recorded correctly on the Blackboard site. I rarely make a mistake, but I will enlist your help to make sure that the records are accurate. So when I return an assignment to you, you should check to make sure

the grade has been recorded. You should also check to make sure that you have handed in all of your assignments.

Grade Distribution:

60% for the entire research proposal: the proposal itself will be weighted by the following percent breakdowns based on 100%.

Abstract—5%

Introduction (including literature review)—35%

Methodology—35%

Literature Cited/Appendices (including survey instrument and/or interview protocol)—15%

Critique —10%

(These are rough guidelines for the weight distribution. For example, some students create fairly complicated survey instruments, and in these cases, their instruments will be weighted more than 15%. I retain some flexibility in the weight distribution but will stick to this distribution in all but the unusual case.)

20% for short assignments

20% class participation

Class attendance/participation is mandatory. If you are going to miss a class, I expect that you will contact me prior to class to let me know, either by phone or email. Although I understand that people might occasionally miss class due to illness or personal emergencies, patterned absences will result in a lowering of your class attendance/participation grade and I will contact your advisor/the dean's office. Regular attendance will yield a class attendance grade of a 3.0 (B). Participation will increase that grade upwards, and patterned absences will decrease that grade. Basically, everyone will start out with a B.

Cheating/plagiarizing: If any student is caught plagiarizing, you will automatically fail the class. If there are any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please review drafts of your assignments with me. Please also see Moravian College's Academic Honesty policy (on the website) to review the institution's definitions of cheating and plagiarism.

Assignments:

I expect **assignments to be handed in on time**, on the day that they are due. Late assignments will be docked one full grade for each day that they are late. So an "A-quality" assignment that was due on Tuesday that is handed in on Wednesday will drop to a "B." If handed in on Thursday, the grade will drop to a "C." I know students occasionally run into computer/printer problems, and if you are in this situation, email me as soon as possible. If you are having a printer problem, you can send me your assignment as an attachment so that you can still get

full credit for handing the assignment in on time. I do not have much sympathy for students who wait until a few minutes before class begins to print up their assignment and then discover that they are having trouble. So try to make it part of your schedule that you will finish and print up your assignments at least the night before the assignment is due. This way, you will have time to either solve your problem or contact me.

I also expect assignments to follow whatever **formatting and page instructions** given when the assignment is assigned. For example, if I assign an essay question that I suspect will take at least two pages to answer, I expect a full two pages of writing will constitute your response. This is two pages, word processed, double-space, one inch margins, Times New Roman, 12-point font, without additional spaces between your name and date at the top of the page, and between the title of your essay. Assignments that fall short of the page requirement will automatically lose points.

We will have a number of **in-class activities/quizzes** throughout the semester—this is another reason why regular class attendance is so important. These activities will help to solidify the concepts of the course. There will also be **sporadic short out-of-class activities associated with the class project(s)**. These two kinds of assignments will constitute the short assignment/quizzes grade. I expect people to keep up with the readings for the class, otherwise you will not be able to successfully complete the in-class activities.

Professor/Student dialogue: I highly value good communication between us, and I therefore encourage you to contact me at any time in the semester to talk about the class in general or your individual performance. Few things are as frustrating to me than to get to the end of the semester and find out someone struggled with some aspect of the course (for example, understanding the assignments!). If you do not understand some aspect of the course material, or my assignment instructions, then please send me an email, call, or stop by my office hours. I am more than willing to read and respond to drafts of your work, so please take me up on my offer to read work before final due dates. I typically ask for at least one week to turn work around.

Outline of Weekly Readings and Assignments:

Week 1: An introduction and review of the course as well as introduction to some basic research frameworks.

Proposal statement outline

Research proposal outline

Dice Rolling

Starting the Research Process

Assignment: Dice rolling exercise! I want you to begin to understand that the probabilities we talk about in the social science are similar to the probabilities we associate with other human activities—in particular, game playing and gambling! Although we will allot a block of time towards the end of the semester on data analysis, we will do various activities throughout the semester to acquaint ourselves with probability theory and statistical analysis. The first activity will be to roll dice 100 times and record the distribution!

Week 2: Part One: An Introduction to Inquiry

Chapter 1: Human Inquiry and Science

Chapter 2: Paradigms, Theory and Research

Freedman et al.: Chapter 1: Controlled Experiments

Chapter 2: Observational Studies

Dice Rolling Continued

Some Major Frameworks

Assignment: First draft of research proposal statement.

Week 3: Chapter 3: The Ethics and Politics of Social Research

This week we will review the Nuremberg Code and the beginning of the concept of informed consent.

Research Ethics: What to tell participants

When Research Involves Human Subjects

Drafting the Informed Consent Letter

A glimmer of hope for microbicide research.

Assignment: Start reviewing/collecting the literature on your research topic, and work on expanding section I of the proposal.

Week 4: Part Two: The Structure of Inquiry: Quantitative and Qualitative

Chapter 4: Research Design

Geertz, Clifford, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture"

Lowery, Christine, "Ethnographic Research Methods"

Dear Recipient—critique of a survey invitation.

Correlation does not equal Causation

Bread Facts

Assignment: Path analysis

Week 5: Chapter 5: Conceptualization, Operationalization, and Measurement

Checklist for Methodology Section
Comment on Babbie excerpt.

Assignment: Interpreting Data

Week 6: Chapter 6: Indexes, Scales and Typologies

Schuman, Howard, Methods and Meaning in Polls and Surveys
Chapter 3: Interpretive Survey Work: Why Questions

Assignment: Start working on Section 3 of your proposal—what kind(s) of methodology(ies) is best suited for your research project?

Week 7: Chapter 7: The Logic of Sampling

Freedman et al.: Chapter 19: Sample Surveys
Chapter 20: Chance Errors in Sampling
Chapter 21: The Accuracy of Percentages

Sampling

Assignment: Continue working on Section 3 of your proposal, this time focusing on the question of your sample.

Week 8: Part Three: Modes of Observation: Quantitative and Qualitative

Chapter 8: Experiments

True experimental design is the gold standard of scientific research. Social scientists should have a firm understanding of this design, because every way that their research deviates from a true experimental design impacts the kinds of conclusions we can draw from the research.

Week 9: Chapter 9: Survey Research

Assignment: This week you will be asked to generate a number of survey questions, based either on your own study, or on a common theme chosen by the class. You will have to focus on the clarity and format of the question.

Week 10: Chapter 10: Qualitative Field Research
Lofland et al.: Logging Data

Assignment: Over the course of the next couple of weeks, you will be given a variety of short data analysis exercises, as well as a review of basic statistics. You will also be expected to continue to revise your proposals.

Week 11: Chapter 11: Unobtrusive Research

Bernard, H. Russell, Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Chapter 14: Field Notes: How to Take Them, Code Them, Manage Them

Chapter 15: Direct and Indirect Observation

Week 12: Chapter 12: Evaluation Research

Assignment: Work on the final section of your proposal—the critique of your research design.

Week 13: Analysis of Data: Quantitative and Qualitative

Chapter 13: Qualitative Data Analysis

Chapter 14: Quantitative Data Analysis

Week 14: Chapter 14: Reading and Writing Social Research

This week, we will primarily be spending time putting the final touches on our research proposals.