

Sociology 246: Basic Research Methods

Fall 2013

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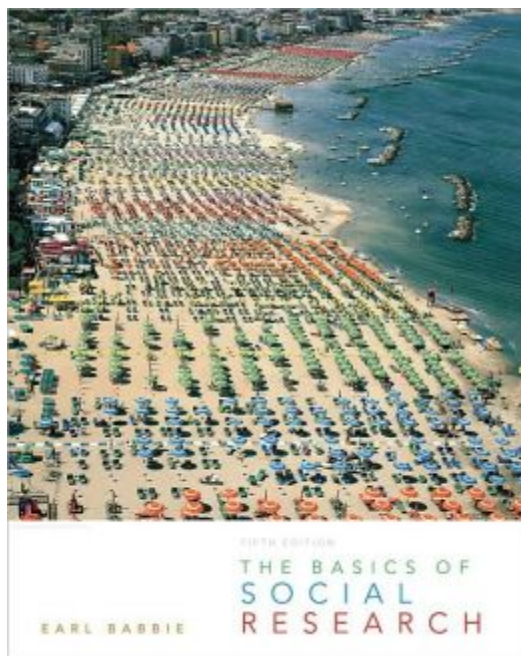
Office hours: please check Blackboard

Course Details 2013-2014 FALL TERM | DAY UNDERGRADUATE | SOC 246 | BASIC RESEARCH METHODS

Faculty	Meets	Dates	Rooms
O'Connell, Virginia Adams	TR 1:10 PM-2:20 PM	8/26/2013 -12/14/2013	MAIN/ PPHAC/ 112

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: Fifth Edition, Earl Babbie. In addition to this text, supplementary readings and handouts will be distributed in class and posted on Blackboard.



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Goals of the Course:

By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- generate null and alternative hypotheses
- develop a fundamental understanding of probability theory and its relation to the use and interpretation of statistics in social science research
- understand the ethical guidelines associated with social science research
- appreciate the dynamic dialogue between quantitative and qualitative methodologies
- be familiar with the challenges associated with the conceptualization and operationalization of social science research
- be able to generate a research instrument and defend its components
- understand the fundamental tenets of sampling theory
- appreciate the art as well as the science behind survey design
- have exposure to conducting and recording observations

Assignments: Assignments are due at the *beginning of class*.

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 section, 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 three, you will discuss the form your research will take. What is the expected length of the study? 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?

I will provide detailed outlines which will describe in detail what information needs to be included in each section of the proposal. We will also look at examples of research proposals. You will also have opportunities to read and critique each other's work.

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Each section of the proposal will be handed in at different points of the semester and you will have many opportunities to revise your submissions.

The key to doing well in this class: hand in your assignments on time, take advantage of both professor and peer feedback, and revise, revise, revise.

Each large assignment will be graded on the following 0.0-4.0 scale:

4.0: A	2.0: C
3.7: A-	1.7: C-
3.3: B+	1.3: D+
3.0: B	1.0: D
2.7: B-	0.7: D-
2.3: C+	

Smaller assignments such as in-class quizzes or short out-of-class exercises will be graded with the following grades: ✓+, ✓, or ✓-. 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.

Grade Distribution:

60% for the research proposal (roughly 15% for each section)

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 and minimal participation will yield a class attendance grade of a 3.0 (B). Regular and engaged participation will increase that grade upwards, and patterned absences will decrease that grade. Basically, everyone will start out with a B. What you do with that B is your responsibility. Unexcused absences will result in a lowering of the B. Active participation will be assessed on the basis of volunteering thoughtful answers on a regular basis, and passive participation as merely being there, taking notes, and looking attentive. And the "looking attentive" is key here—please do not fall asleep in my class. Even in a large class, it is very hard to hide and sleep. I understand that you might not be feeling well or had a very late night, but if you are sleepy before class, please grab a cup of coffee. Students who come to class but sleep do not get credit for class attendance—sleeping in class will earn you an unexcused absence.

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Students who miss an in-class activity due to an excused absence will not get credit for the assignment but will not be penalized. Often, the in-class activities cannot be “made up” outside of class time, but you will be responsible for knowing what we did in class in case it is referenced in future classes. You will lose the designated points for the assignment which means that your other remaining assignments will count more towards your final grade. For example, if the total of all in-class activities ends up counting for a total of 200 points, but you missed an activity due to an excused absence that was worth 20 points, and your total points earned was 160 points, your final grade for class activities will be scored as 160/180 instead of 160/200. If you, however, miss an in-class activity due to an unexcused absence, you will earn a zero for that class activity and as noted above, you will not be able to “make up” the lost points.

Students who miss a class are responsible for getting notes and copies of handouts from a fellow student. I advise that every student find a partner(s) in the class that will share notes and collect handouts for them when they have an anticipated or unanticipated absence. I will not be responsible for collecting or keeping track of handouts for students who miss class, nor will every handout be scanned and posted on Blackboard. You must also collect the notes and review the material covered in class before you ask me “what did I miss the other day when I was not here.” I am not responsible for repeating one of my lectures in a private session with students who miss class. While I am happy to review material that students do not understand during office hours, you must review the material before you schedule a meeting. Do not wait until a couple of weeks have passed before you realize that you are missing certain key handouts necessary to complete an essay or assignment—trying to track down handouts a few weeks down the road can be a nightmare.

In addition to expecting regular class attendance, I also expect students to arrive to class “on time.” Patterned late arrivals will also be penalized. Being a commuter, I understand the challenges associated with traffic, accidents and other unanticipated delays, but it is your obligation to arrive to class on time. If you are commuting from the other end of campus, I understand that the new shuttle system may be a nightmare, but you need to catch the earlier bus if there is a chance that the shuttle might be a few minutes late getting up to the other end of campus. Again, I understand that “stuff happens” and you may “every now and then” arrive late, but it cannot be a regular pattern. You would not regularly arrive late for a job (it would not be tolerated by your employer and you would eventually be fired). Think of your college career as one of your current jobs. If you are late, however, come into the classroom as soon as you do get to your designation. Do not wait outside the class for some optimum time to enter as all this will do is make you miss more of the class instruction. Quietly and unobtrusively enter the classroom and take a seat.

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. Plagiarism is easier to recognize than you might think—I have caught a number of students in the past.

Due Dates and Formatting:

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.” A “D-quality” assignment handed in late is an F. 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 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, Calibri, 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.

More details on classroom behavior:

Recording Devices:

Students have my permission to use audio recording devices in class. I know some students like to use these devices in order to review lecture notes, so this statement serves as my “informed consent” to be taped.

Cell phone, texting, email, web surfing: I expect that students will NOT be using their cell phones, texting, sending emails or web surfing during class time. Students who are caught engaged in any of these activities will immediately lose **one full grade** of their class participation grade (i.e. a B will drop to a C). If you engage in this behavior multiple times, then getting caught a mere three times in the course of a semester will earn you an F for class participation. For students who take notes on laptops, I know the temptation to check your Facebook page, or answer a few emails during what you might think is a less interesting part of my lecture may be overwhelmingly tempting, but please resist the urge. You may think you are pretty good at hiding this activity from me, but it is actually fairly easy to tell when a student is engaged in other activities (although I hear that students are getting very adept at texting when the phone is in your pocket!). Sometimes your neighbor actually gives you away, so why you are making sure to keep looking up at me, your neighbor might get very interested in looking at your newly posted profile picture. So best just not to do it, no matter how good you think you are at it. And even if you think you might be so good, I will not necessarily confront you in class if I catch you. I will merely dock your class participation grade and you will not be aware of the penalty until the end of the semester.

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There are some circumstances under which I will allow students to take a phone call or surf the web during class.

Phone calls: I know some students occasionally have family, work and/or personal obligations that may need their immediate attention. For example, there may be students who have a sick child at home and need to be reachable during class time in case there is an emergency. If you find yourself in this kind of situation, please contact me before class via email or approach me at the beginning of class. I will expect your phone to be on vibrate, but I will allow you to leave the room to take the call.

“Facilities” Break: I have had the experience of students regularly leaving class for what I can only assume is a “bathroom” break, leaving class for a few minutes during basically every class period. Unless there is an underlying medical issue, I do think it is necessary for students to regularly leave the class for what is often only a one-hour ten-minute class period. If you do have some underlying medical condition that requires you to regularly leave class, then please make sure I get a note from disabilities support (see contact information below). If I do not get official notification from disabilities support, then the regular bathroom break will be considered a series of “unexcused” absences and will result in a lowering of your class attendance grade. I have absolutely no problem with an occasional bathroom visit, but please limit your visits.

Web surfing: Sometimes a class activity might actually involve searching the web for resource materials. In this case, I may ask students with laptops to help search for a piece of data or reference during class. But I will expect that students will be searching for the task assigned and not looking up newly posted videos.

In-class Activities/Short Assignments: We will have a number of **in-class activities** 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**. These two kinds of assignments will constitute the short assignment 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.

If I suspect that students are not keeping up with the readings (this suspicion arises when the professor asks a question about the reading and no one responds...), I have the habit of distributing ***pop quizzes***. I do not think that pop quizzes are “unfair, unjust!” They are just one tool to help keep you on track and to help cement the concepts. I would like to treat you like college students and not as high school students, so please make sure that you keep up with the work and I will not feel compelled to give pop quizzes.

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 for me then to get to the end of the

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semester to 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.

Blackboard and Email: Moravian College recognizes email as a form of official communication between faculty and students and I will use both Blackboard and email as a communication device. I will occasionally send out a message for you to take a look at an article online, or check a new posting on Blackboard before the next class. Therefore it is your obligation to regularly check your email account for messages from me. You should check your email accounts at least once a day. Failure to complete an assignment/request because “I did not see your email—I did not check my account,” will not suffice as a legitimate excuse. You also need to make sure that your mailbox does not reach its limit as you will be unable to receive emails once it is full.

Students with Disabilities:

Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Elaine Mara, assistant director of learning services for academic and disability support at 1307 Main Street, or by calling 610-861-1510. Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center.

Outline of Weekly Readings and Assignments:

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

Week 2: Part One: An Introduction to Inquiry

Chapter 1: Human Inquiry and Science

Chapter 2: Paradigms, Theory and Research

Assignment: *First draft of research proposal statement and 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 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.

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

Assignment: Path analysis

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

Assignment: Interpreting Data

Week 6: Chapter 6: Indexes, Scales and Typologies

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

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.

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Week 10: Chapter 10: Qualitative Field Research

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

Assignment: During one class period this week, we will be doing some observation research during the class time period. You will then write up your observations and compare them to the notes/write-up conducted by a fellow student who observed the same social scene.

Week 12: Chapter 12: Evaluation Research

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

Weeks 13 and 14: In-class work on the research proposals and reviewing material not yet covered. We will take the last two weeks of the class to cover any material not yet covered in the class and to work collectively on the research proposals.