Instructors: Jonathan Jackson, Alasdair Jones, Flora Cornish and Dominik Hangartner, all from the Department of Methodology

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Lectures: Friday 12:00pm – 2:00pm
Week 1: TW1.G.01
Weeks 2 to 10: CLM.G.02

Seminars: A series of seminars supports the MY400/500 lectures. Please sign up via Moodle if you are an MSc student or PhD student taking the course for examination. If you are auditing, please contact Esther Heyhoe (e.heyhoe@lse.ac.uk).

The discussion in each seminar is based around a specific paper (see below). All papers are available on the e-library and via the Moodle page. A requirement to attend each seminar is that you have read the paper. It is assumed that everyone will come with questions and comments. Indeed, marks are assigned not just for turning up but also for contributing to each seminar. Each week, a group of two or three students will be asked to give a short presentation on the paper set, to set the scene for discussion.

MY400 seminars: TW2.3.01 12PM TUE; TW2.3.01 1PM TUE; TW1.1.03 4PM TUE; OLD.3.28 12PM WED; OLD.3.28 1PM WED; OLD.3.28 2PM WED.

MY500 seminar: TW1.2.03 2PM TUE.
Course Description
This course introduces students to the theoretical and practical foundations of empirical social science research. One basic premise is that social research should investigate an empirically falsifiable claim about the observable world, be it social, political, legal, financial, or some other aspect of human behaviour or institutions. However, this premise is not the only foundation for good empirical methodology in social research, and the course will also cover approaches that derive from alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives. Throughout we will be focusing on the foundations of social scientific research designs. In short, scientific inquiry aims to be cumulative, evidence-based, systematic, sceptical, ethical, and based on rational argument.

This course is neither qualitative nor quantitative in focus. We will cover the logic of both strategies without taking sides as to which is in some sense ‘better’, since this will ultimately depend on the nature of the particular research question and the type and amount of data that is available. Indeed, the two approaches are most fruitfully used in a complementary fashion, since almost all quantitative data can be described numerically. There are strengths, weaknesses and usually trade-offs to most of the decisions we make when planning research.

This course is therefore designed to be a sort of primer in asking the right questions, exploring the options available to us and understanding the consequences of the design decisions that we make. Accordingly, this course treats research design as a practical rather than theological matter that is ultimately about turning good research questions into systematic projects that deliver interesting and worthwhile results.

Materials
The main text for this course is:


Other readings are listed in this handout and available for download from the course Moodle site. Other useful texts:


Assessment

**Reading**: All course participants are expected to come to class each week having completed all the assigned readings and having thought about them carefully.

**Class Participation (10%)**: Class sessions will mainly involve an active discussion of assigned examples of good research designs (from published literature) with a staff member. You will be expected to discuss these texts actively, a process that involves both talking to and listening to each other.

**Outline Research Design (90%)**: This is a course about generic research design for empirical projects. As such the fairest and most productive method of assessment is to ask each participant to carve out a research question and produce an appropriate research design for a possible project. The good news is that this course has no final exam. The less good news is that developing a professional research design is not easy. It requires hard thinking, creativity, study and practice.

The main purpose of the course, then, is to discuss the range of possible research designs in order to help you produce one of your own.

You may use this time to start thinking about the design of your eventual MSc or PhD dissertation. Many (probably most) of you may not have settled on a final MSc topic as you begin to take this course. And even if you have you may change topic or approach later. This is not a problem and is in fact quite typical of the development of real world research projects. We learn how to do it better as we proceed. Thus the assignment for this course asks participants to submit a proposal for a (hypothetical) research project. You will not actually be ‘conducting’ the study during this course. We will evaluate this proposal according to the standards for research design that we cover in class. For this class, you will particularly emphasise the methods and data, rather than the substantive importance of the topic in question, which might otherwise require a lengthy literature review and substantive defence of the projects importance (although, despite this, at least some – and perhaps a great deal – of knowledge of previous work will be necessary to create a useful design on any topic). The class requires a project that is well-defined and specific, feasible, and methodologically sound.

*An important disclaimer follows:* each department has different methods and procedures for supervising MSc dissertations. Ultimate responsibility for your dissertation rests with you and your home department. Typically your topic and general approach must be agreed with your supervisor and your final dissertation will be marked by staff in your home department, not by the Methodology Institute. It might be useful to think of the project for this course as a ‘practice run’ a first attempt at producing a professional design. We are confident that all the effort that you put into this will be rewarded by your ability to create a better research design for your eventual final dissertation.

The research design will evolve in two stages:

1. **Research Proposal (30%)**: Each student will be asked by Week 8 (due by Friday 29 November 2013 by 5pm) to identify a question that the proposed research project is expected to answer. Please put your assignments in the correct folder on Moodle. The paper, *not to exceed 1,000 words*, will include a research question, an indication of the proposed explanation, and a brief explanation as to why this is an important question.
Try to pick a feasible research question. This assignment is required, and you will receive some feedback.

2. **Provisional Research Design (60%)**: Due in week 1 of the Summer term (by Monday 28 April 2014 by 5pm). This proposal will define the problem to be investigated, identify the variance to be explained, outline alternative explanations, and address issues of testing, data collection and analysis. There should be a statement of the research topic and brief ‘state of the art’ (slightly expanded literature review if appropriate), and a clear research question. This should now include a concrete statement of your ‘point of departure’ (i.e. what you would propose to do), and early identification of any difficulties that may arise, be they methodological or data related. This provisional research design should be *no more than 5000 words* (excluding bibliography, but including all tables etc). A template will be provided with sections to guide you in addressing each required component.

All assignments must be submitted via Moodle.
Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction: research questions and research designs
This lecture introduces the aims, objectives and structure of the course. Particular attention is given to the coursework: namely, to develop a research proposal that specifies a research question and appropriate research design.

Required reading
Robson. Chs 1-4.
King, Keohane and Verba. Ch 1.

Week 2 – Research questions: Theory, variation, description and causation
Formulating and answering research questions goes to the heart of the social sciences. Without posing interesting questions, we cannot develop knowledge about a particular subject, nor can we open up new research areas and new theories. This lecture considers how research questions are generated, how fixed and flexible designs (roughly speaking, large-n quantitative and small-n qualitative respectively) structure studies, and the differences between descriptive, relational and causal questions. Empirical studies document facts, meanings and patterns, building systematic evidence about the nature of social, psychological and political phenomena. But the social sciences also attempt to understand the world, and central here is the notion of causation. Causal inference allows us to go beyond ‘what?’ questions to ‘what-if?’ and ‘why?’ questions. What factors cause crime? What processes shape political action? What kinds of effects would different public policies have on society?

Required reading:
King, Keohane and Verba. Chs 1-3.
Robson. Ch. 3.

Further reading:

Papers discussed in the lecture:

Week 3 – Fixed designs and theory: Operationalisation and measurement
The goal of measurement is fundamental to social sciences, since social concepts cannot be compared unless they can in some way be measured. Any empirical research design, whether primarily descriptive or explanatory, must develop benchmarks by which to assess and compare the qualities of the phenomena being observed. Quantitative research strategies consist of designs that examine questions using numerically coded data analysed using descriptive or
statistical methods, primarily in large samples, requiring an explicit measurement strategy. This week outlines the logic of conceptualisation, operationalization and measurement, and presents several key examples in applied fields.

**Required readings:**
Robson. Chs. 12 & 16
See also: Gerring. Chs. 5-7.

**Papers and books discussed in the lecture:**

**Class exercise for the seminar in week 4:**

**Week 4 – Fixed designs and causal inference: Experimental versus observational methods**
This lecture continues the theme of causal inference that was introduced in week 2. The meaning of causality and causal effects is discussed, starting with a formal definition and considering what it means in the context of research questions in the social sciences. The definition of effects suggests a research design for testing causal claims, the experimental design of comparing units which differ only in the proposed causal factor. The gold standard experimental design, at least for internal validity, is the randomized experiment where conditions are allocated to units at random. The use of randomized experiments in the social sciences, and the advantages and problems associated with them, is discussed. In very many cases it is not possible or appropriate to carry out randomized experiments. Causal questions may then be examined using observational studies which have the same apparent structure as randomized experiments but without the random allocation of conditions. Drawing convincing causal conclusions from observational studies usually requires stronger assumptions about the data and more involved methods of analysis than is the case for randomized experiments. Design and analysis of observational studies is discussed, including questions of confounding, matching and statistical adjustment.

**Basic Readings:**
Trochim. Chs. 9-10.
Robson. Ch. 5.

**Papers and books discussed in the lecture:**


**Class exercise for the seminar in week 5:**

**Week 5 – Fixed versus flexible designs: quantitative versus qualitative**

**Required Reading**
Robson Ch. 6.

**Additional Reading**


Lecture 6 – Grounded theory: an approach to systematising qualitative social research

Qualitative social scientific studies are often subject to the accusation that their methods are obscure and hard to unpack. This lecture introduces ‘grounded theory’ as one of the more established approaches to systematising the procedures that inform qualitative analysis. Developed by two American sociologists (Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss) in the mid-1960s (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), grounded theory (and its constituent techniques) has emerged as the ‘go to’ approach for much qualitative research. The lecture will set out Glaser and Strauss’s ‘rules of thumb’ for the development of theory grounded in empirical data as well as the key analytical principles described by this approach. The lecture will also use a number of worked examples of the operationalisation of grounded theory in the social scientific literature to illustrate the ways that researchers have used this approach and the types of questions these researchers have sought to answer through their respective analyses.

Required reading


Additional reading


Applied examples


Class exercise for the seminar in week 7:

Lecture 7 – Case studies and the extended case method
The first part of this session will pick up on the end of last week’s lecture by introducing students to the ‘extended case method.’ The extended case method, developed by the British sociologist Michael Burawoy (Burawoy, 1998), has been developed as an alternative to grounded theory. Rather than orient itself towards the discovery of theory, the extended case method looks to provide a methodological framework through which researchers can empirically test existing theories. Examples of the application of the ‘extended case method’ will be discussed. In the second half of the lecture we will consider the premises of research using case studies more broadly, before reviewing other research design approaches that have been developed for studies concerned with tracking people, objects and processes through space and beyond the confines of geographically-defined ‘cases.’

Required reading

Additional reading

Applied examples

Class exercise for the seminar in week 8:
Lecture 8 – Observational methods in qualitative research

Using ‘observational methods’ has different meanings for quantitative and qualitative researchers. The uses of ‘observational studies’ by quantitative researchers to examine causal questions was explored in Lecture 3. In this lecture, we will consider the various uses of more literally ‘observational’ methods in qualitative research. Using Raymond Gold’s (1958) classic paper on ‘roles in sociological observations’ as a starting point, this lecture will elaborate the various ways that qualitative researchers observe and record social phenomena with a particular emphasis on the ways that the observational mode adopted can vary by study ‘realm’ or setting. The use of observational methods in qualitative research has generated a number of ethical debates, and this lecture will conclude with a discussion of such instance.

Required reading


Additional reading


Leo vs Kai controversy (chronological order)


Applied examples


Class exercise for the seminar in week 9:


Lecture 9 – Comparable cases and mixed methods research

Drawing on John Stuart Mill’s (1843) classic dual approach to social research, the ‘method of difference’ and the ‘method of agreement,’ this lecture considers the underlying principles of comparative research in the social sciences. The lecture will set out four categories of comparative research in the social sciences with a particular emphasis on the process of selection of cases for comparison. With reference to real world research projects, the second
part of the lecture will explore the ways that qualitative and quantitative techniques have been, and might be, combined to complement one another in mixed methods studies.

**Required reading**

Robson Ch 7

**Additional reading**


**Applied examples**


**Class exercise for the seminar in week 10:**


**Week 10 - Endgame: Writing, Finishing and Publishing**

**Basic Readings:**
Seminars
There are seven seminars. Each relates to material covered in the preceding week(s).

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<th>Lecture date</th>
<th>Seminar week</th>
<th>Lecture topic</th>
<th>Paper(s) to be discussed in the seminar</th>
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