

**Course Syllabus for Sociology 30902-02
Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)
Fall 2009**

Instructor	Dr. Richard A. Williams
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Office Hours	Tuesday 10:30-12:00 and by appointment. I am generally very accessible via voicemail and email. Immediately after class is often a great time to catch me too.
Time and Place	DeBartolo 204 11:45-1:00 Monday, Wednesday

Course objectives

Sociology 30902 is designed to provide an overview of research methods in the social sciences. Topics covered include (1) hypothesis formulation and theory construction (2) the measurement of sociological variables (3) data collection techniques - experimental, survey, and observational. At the end of the course, students should appreciate both the strengths and the limitations of sociological research methods.

Course web page

Online readings, discussion questions and other links of interest will be available on the course web page:

<http://www.nd.edu/~rwilliam/xsoc30902>

Required texts

Babbie, Earl (2008). *The Basics of Social Research, Fourth Edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Online Readings Packet and Discussion Questions for Sociology 30902-02. Available from the course web page.

Babbie should be read carefully enough to understand the major concepts. Most of the online readings are designed to illustrate the application of research principles and strategies; hence, you should understand the major points contained in each reading, but you do not have to be concerned with memorizing every little detail and finding.

Assignments, exams, grading

There will be one take-home exam during the semester, three projects, and a take-home final. These are each worth 20% of your grade. *Regular attendance and classroom participation is expected; particularly in borderline cases, strong (or weak) class participation and attendance will also affect the final grade.* At the end of the semester, you will be given approximately 15 minutes to present one of your projects in class (I will try to give you flexibility on which one but I also want to avoid having everyone choose the same project). *The projects and take-home exams should be submitted in both printed and electronic form. Make sure you keep a copy for yourself; you are responsible for producing another one if for some reason I can't find the original you submitted.*

The first exam will consist of short answer problems and 2-3 essay questions. The three projects are designed to give you the opportunity to apply the principles you have learned to real or hypothetical problems. The take-home final gives you a chance to critique a major study that was federally funded. You will apply principles that were learned throughout the course.

One of the things that will be most important on the exams will be your ability to incorporate material from the readings. The best exams will go beyond what was said in class and will cite specific facts, opinions, authors and articles. They will be like short research papers, incorporating information from a variety of sources, except I have provided you with the readings in advance.

Format and policies

We will use a variety of learning styles in this class. Often I will do lectures and/or PowerPoint presentations, usually asking questions or inviting comments as I talk. We may have one or two guest speakers. Near the end of the semester the students will take over the class as they present their projects.

Often, though, we will break down into small groups. I therefore expect you to be familiar with the readings in advance, especially the material in the readings packet. The course web page has discussion questions that will help you to focus your reading and prepare for class discussion; since similar or related questions often show up on the exam, it will be to your advantage to prepare answers for these questions as we go along.

To prepare for discussions, I want you to jot down notes from the readings that you think are especially important, any thoughts of your own on the subject, and questions which you would like to see discussed. Keep in mind, too, that you are reading opinions as well as facts, and that you are welcome to raise alternative viewpoints. Depending on how classroom discussion goes, I may start asking you to turn in your notes before class. In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked.

I have found that students who talk with me outside of class are less likely to make major mistakes on their projects or exams. (This seems to be especially true for the first project on experiments.) I encourage you to meet with me whenever you have questions about the homework or the course.

Honor code

As with all classes at Notre Dame, this class is taught under the honor code. Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Your rights and obligations are spelled out in the Academic Honor Code. I take the Honor Code very seriously, and will recommend the maximum penalties allowed for any proven violation of it. This potentially includes failure for the course. Notre Dame has access to software and services that check for plagiarism and I reserve the right to use them.

Key Dates

Sept. 23	First project due
Oct. 7	Take home exam due by 5 p.m.
Oct. 28	Second Project due
Nov. 18	Third project due
Nov. 23, 30, Dec. 2, 7	In-class presentations
Dec. 16	Take home finals due by 5 p.m.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE
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Aug. 26 - Introduction.

Babbie, Chapter 1, "Human Inquiry in Science;" also pp. 48-49
Babbie, rest of Chapters 2 and 4 are optional.

Aug 31 through Sept. 9 (4 classes) – Formulating Hypotheses; Threats to Causal Inference; Experimentation. Advantages and disadvantages of experiments, threats to internal and external validity, Experimental design, Lab vs. field experiments, quasi-experiments, how to conduct an experiment. While experimentation is the first research design we focus on, principles concerning causality that are presented here are applied throughout the semester.

Babbie, Ch. 8, "Experiments."
Readings Packet, "Experimentation."

There may be some additional Web Page Exercises and/or Readings on "Experiments."

Sept. 14, 16 - Measurement I. Levels of measurement, validity, reliability, random vs. nonrandom error.

Babbie, Ch. 5, "Conceptualization, Operationalization and Measurement."
Readings Packet, "Measurement I."

Sept. 21, 23 - Measurement II. Scaling, questionnaire construction.

Babbie, Ch. 6, "Indexes, Scales and Typologies."
Babbie, Ch. 9, "Surveys," pp. 269-286.
Readings Packet, "Measurement II."

The web page will also have several examples of questionnaires you can look at.

Sept. 23 - First project due

Sept 28, Sept 30 - Surveys I. Reasons for surveys, types of surveys, sample vs. population, types of samples, probability vs. nonprobability sampling

Babbie, ch. 7, "The Logic of Sampling."
Readings Packet, "Surveys I."

The readings packet includes a study I did that may help you with project 2.

Oct. 5 – Catch up; Review for first exam; take home exam handed out

Oct 7 – Take Home Exam due by 5:00. No class.

Oct. 12, 14 - Surveys II. Examples of surveys, longitudinal designs, Administering surveys, Advantages and disadvantages of mail/telephone/personal interview approaches

Babbie, Ch. 9, "Surveys," pp. 286-311.
Readings Packet, "Surveys II."

Oct. 26, 28 - Content Analysis.

Babbie, ch. 11, "Unobtrusive Research."
Readings Packet, "Content Analysis"

Oct. 28 - Second project due

Nov. 2, 4 - Qualitative Methods; Case study research; Unobtrusive research. Introduction to case study research, qualitative methods, Content analysis, unobtrusive measures, secondary analysis.

Babbie, ch. 13, "Qualitative Data Analysis."

Nov. 9, 11 - Observational research. Participant observation, field studies.

Babbie, ch. 10, "Qualitative Field Research."
Readings Packet, "Observational Research."

Nov. 16 - No formal class. You should use this time to work in the Library archives on your project and/or spend time writing your project up

Nov. 18 - Third project due

Nov. 18 - Research ethics.

Babbie, ch. 3, "The ethics and politics of social research."
Readings Packet, "Ethics."

Nov. 23, 30, Dec. 2, 7 - In-class presentations of projects. As a courtesy to your fellow students, I expect everyone to be there on those days. We may shorten this by a day depending on final class enrollment.

Dec. 9 - Course wrap-up and review; Take home final handed out

Dec. 16 - Take Home Final due by 5:00. You do not need to show up in class.

FIRST PROJECT: EXPERIMENTS
Sociology 30902
Due September 23, 2009

In this project, you will formulate a hypothesis and design a lab or a field experiment to test it.

(1) Develop a hypothesis on a topic that is interesting to you. Briefly explain why you think it would be important and worthwhile to test your hypothesis. Also explain why you think your hypothesis is plausible. For example, you might note how your hypothesis can be inferred from some sociological theory, how the hypothesis is consistent with your own personal observations, etc. Try to show that you have given some thought to the problem before blindly going out to investigate it.

(2) Design either a lab or a field experiment to test your hypothesis. Ideally, the experiment will be something that could reasonably be conducted by a researcher with a small grant (or even by a student such as you).

(3) Discuss the following:

(a) How would you set the stage? What “cover story” (if any) would you use? That is, if your experiment uses deception, how would you keep subjects from becoming suspicious of the true nature of the experiment? Also, be sure to note just who your subjects would be (e.g., college students, riders on a subway, etc.), and where the experiment would take place.

(b) Explain how you would construct the treatment and manipulate the independent variables. Be very explicit as to what the treatment would be, and explain why you think the treatment is appropriate given your hypothesis. Also explain how you would go about controlling for extraneous influences - for example, would you use random assignment to groups? If you didn't (or couldn't) use random assignment, what would you do to safeguard against threats to internal validity?

(c) Discuss how you would measure the dependent variable. Again, be very explicit as to what the dependent variable is, and why you think it is appropriate. Note whether you would rely on the respondent's own reports, or whether you would rely on observations of his/her actions.

(4) Critique your experiment. Note how well or how poorly it deals with threats to internal and external validity. Be sure to note the advantages and disadvantages of the type of setting you have chosen. Point out any problems you think you may encounter. Most research is not perfect, and good researchers recognize and acknowledge the limitations of their work.

(5) Not including tables or figures, the paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 5 to 8 pages long.

HINTS:

(1) When looking for inspiration for your hypothesis, you may find it helpful to refer to some of the other coursework you have had in sociology or other fields. It is not essential, but doing a little bit of research on the topic you are interested in (and briefly reviewing that research in your paper) could be tremendously helpful.

(2) It is permissible to use one of the course readings as a source of inspiration for your hypothesis. However, your experiment(s) should be radically different, i.e. don't just make one or two little changes.

(3) When grading, I will be primarily interested in how well the paper illustrates your understanding of lab and field experiments and your appreciation for threats to internal and external validity. Beyond that, I will consider such things as how innovative and original the experiment is, the complexity of the experiment, how well you have thought out the issues you wish to address, how feasible it would be to actually conduct the experiment, and your appreciation for problems researchers are likely to encounter.

Sociology 30902
Second project: Surveys and Measurement
Due October 28, 2009

Using Census Data or other statistical information available on the World Wide Web or elsewhere, do a statistical profile of your home town or community. (In practice, you probably want to examine the county or MSA you are from – but if you want, you could even examine the census tract your family lives in.) Compare your community to the United States as a whole and/or examine how your community changed between 1990 and 2000. Some of the topics your profile could include (but you are welcome to choose others) are

1. The racial composition of your community compared to the entire U.S.
2. How heavily segregated your community is compared to the U.S.
3. How your community compares economically to the U.S. Is your home town relatively poorer or richer? Is there relatively more poverty where you live, or less?
4. How did the racial and economic composition of your community change between 1990 and 2000?
5. Based on what you know about the area you are from, offer any insights you may have about why it differs from the United States as a whole, e.g. what are some of the historical and economic factors that have made your community what it is? You can also discuss the possible causes of any changes between 1990 and 2000, e.g. were there factors that attracted many immigrants to your area, were there changes in schools or industry that attracted or drove people away?

Not including tables or figures, the paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 5 to 8 pages long.

Hints: The course web page will include links to several useful Census (and other) web sites. The best strategy, I think, is just to play around with these sites a bit and find out what information they have to offer. In general, you can usually find fairly detailed information, right down to the census tract level. The readings packet includes a paper I did several years ago examining one of South Bend's neighborhoods, which may give you some ideas. Charts and figures may help. They can be hand-drawn, but this would be a great time to learn how to use Excel or some other program for such a purpose if you don't know how already.

Sociology 30902
Third project: Content Analysis
Due November 18, 2009

The Alumnae Association wants to see how the attitudes and interests of Notre Dame Students have changed over the last 25 years or so. Some of the things they want to investigate include (1) religious attitudes (e.g. are students less religious than they used to be?) (2) attitudes toward women (have N.D. students become more “feminist” or less “sexist”?) (3) reasons for getting an N.D. education (are today's students more motivated by career concerns, and less motivated by other benefits of education?) (4) social consciousness (are students more concerned or less concerned about social issues than they used to be?) and (5) students' perceptions about the quality of education they are receiving (has increased emphasis on research led students to be less satisfied today than in the past?)

Choose one of these topics (or, with the instructor's permission, some other topic that you think would also be worth examining). Using the University Archives or other resources, conduct a pilot study that will demonstrate to the Alumnae Association how content analysis could be used to research this topic. You don't need to go over all aspects of content analysis, but you should be sure to discuss the following:

(1) What would an appropriate sample frame be? The student newspaper is one obvious source, but suggest other documents that might be worth considering, and why. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this sample frame - in particular, are there any important ways in which the sample frame might be biased?

(2) What are some of the categories that should be used? A complete set of categories probably cannot be specified until after the analysis is well underway, but you ought to be able to suggest at least four or five categories that are likely to be relevant. Give examples of the types of statements that would be coded in each category. (Note: Examples drawn from actual documents are likely to be the most helpful. Be sure to provide the source for any illustrations you use, e.g. “The Observer”, Dec. 5, 1980).

Not including tables or figures, the paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 5 to 8 pages long.

HINTS:

1. The rare book department and the archives of the library contain all sorts of material on N.D. - you will almost certainly find it helpful to go browsing through them. These are not always open, however, so do not wait until the last minute to start your research!
2. Try to use a variety of sources, from a variety of times. Only using the last two weeks of the Observer is not a good strategy!
3. The examples from the readings on content analysis should be extremely useful to you. Go over them carefully so you have an idea as to how a good content analysis study can proceed.
4. Remember, the Alumnae Association is not only interested in students' attitudes, it is interested in how attitudes have changed across time. Your discussion should indicate how content analysis could be used to detect such changes, e.g. what sorts of things would indicate that students had become less or more sexist?