

**Course Syllabus for Sociology 30902-01
Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)
Summer 2011**

Instructor Dr. Richard A. Williams

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Office Hours I will be available immediately after class and by appointment on most days. I am generally very accessible via phone, voicemail, email and Skype. I may set up extra office hours on the weekends right before projects are due.

Time and Place DeBartolo 335,
8:30-11:10 MTWRF June 20 – July 8 (No class July 4)

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 (2010). *The Basics of Social Research, Fifth 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 two take-home exams during the semester and two major projects. These are each worth 20% of your grade. The remainder of your grade will be determined by attendance, class participation (including your presentation) and short assignments. At the end of the semester, you will be given approximately 15-20 minutes to present one of your projects in class. *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 two projects are designed to give you the opportunity to apply the principles you have learned to real or hypothetical problems. The final will emphasize material from the second half of the course but will also give you a chance to apply principles that were learned earlier in the semester.

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. 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.

Special features of a summer class

Several studies show that accelerated classes can be just as successful and even more successful than classes taught during the regular year. Students have fewer distractions – or at least they should! Classes are smaller, more relaxed and more open to interaction between professors and students. At the same time, some adjustments in teaching style are called for. Lecturing for 2.5 hours a day would get pretty tiring for everyone, and a few areas may fall by the wayside as you make sure people have time to understand the most critical topics. I have therefore (reluctantly) dropped one project and reduced the number of required readings. I will also be giving you more handouts than I normally do. In exchange, I will expect you to be highly active participants in the course. Remember, one day during the summer is like a week during the regular school year, and taking a three week class takes as much time as five classes normally would. So long as you can make the necessary commitment (and remember, it is only for three weeks!) I think you will find this course highly useful and rewarding for you.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE
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Jun 20 - Introduction.

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

Jun 21, 22 – 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."

Jun 23 - Measurement I. Levels of measurement, validity, reliability, random vs. nonrandom error.

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

Jun 24 - Measurement II. Scaling, questionnaire construction.

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

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

Jun 27 - First project due

June 27 - 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."

Jun 27 – Take home exam handed out. Due June 29 by 5:00.

Jun 28, 29 - Surveys II. Examples of surveys, Census 2010, longitudinal designs, Administering surveys, Advantages and disadvantages of mail/telephone/personal/online interview approaches

Babbie, Ch. 9, "Surveys," pp. 286-311.
Readings Packet, "Surveys II."
The readings packet includes a study I did that may help you with project 2.

June 30 –Content Analysis.

Babbie, ch. 11, “Unobtrusive Research.”
Readings Packet, “Content Analysis”

July 1 – 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.”

Jul 5 - Second project due

July 5 - Observational research. Participant observation, field studies.

Babbie, ch. 10, “Qualitative Field Research.”
Readings Packet, “Observational Research.”

July 6 - Research ethics; Optional Topics

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

July 7 – In-class presentations of projects; Take home final passed out (or else emailed the day before)

July 8 – Take Home Final due by 5:00. You do not need to show up in class.

Key Dates

June 27	First project due
June 29	Take home exam due by 5 p.m.
July 5	Second Project due
July 7	In-class presentations
July 8	Take home final due by 5 p.m.

FIRST PROJECT: EXPERIMENTS
Sociology 30902
Due June 27, 2011

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 July 5, 2011

Using Census Data (including the American Community Survey) or other statistical information available on the World Wide Web or elsewhere, do a statistical profile of your home town or community, and compare and contrast it with one or more other areas (e.g. the entire US) and/or look at changes within your community across time. (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.) 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. (Or, if you prefer, you might choose a nearby community that is different from yours. Past students have often remarked on how different their community is from communities that are just a few minutes away.)
2. 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?
3. How did the racial and economic composition of your community change between 1990 and 2000, or between 2000 and today?
4. 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 1990/2000/2010, 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.

Options for Foreign Students. Foreign students are welcome to choose the neighborhood they live in now or lived in in the past for Project 2. However, they are also welcome to compare, say, their country with the US, or some other country, or the entire world. You could, for example, compare countries on literacy rates, educational attainment, women in the labor force and other gender-related variables, birth rates, population growth, use of contraception, health and mortality, income... Actually, there are a lot of interesting variables in international data sets that you don't find in the US Census. See the course web page.

Hints: Begin by telling a little bit about your community. Where is it located? Is it a small town out in the middle of nowhere? A rich suburb of a large city? Or what?

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.