"'Method' has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. 'Theory' has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination."

— C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, 1959

"The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth and expose lies."


"I've learned more from the readings listed in your syllabus than I did in my two graduate methods courses at [other Ph.D. sociology program]."

— e-mail sent to your instructor from someone who found a previous syllabus on the web, 12/5/2003

PREREQUISITES
An introductory course in social research methods and a course in statistics that provided extensive coverage of the linear regression model.

OFFICIAL COURSE DESCRIPTION (date of composition unknown)
Application of scientific methods to the analysis of social phenomena; methodological orientations in sociology; types of research procedure; nature of sociological variables; lectures and lab. [mercifully, there will be no lab]

OVERVIEW
Talk to people in graduate sociology departments around the country and you will find that a required course in research "methods" is often among the least popular offerings of the graduate curriculum. This is lamentable if you believe that good research practices have some association with good empirical work and that good empirical work has some association with the continued vitality of our discipline. Fortunately for you, however, 750 will be a course you adore, its meetings will serve as cherished highlights of your forthcoming semester, and it will revitalize any flagging enthusiasm you may have about being in graduate school. Or, at least, this is the boundless optimism with which I always try to begin.

The course will survey major research designs and research techniques that provide the core of contemporary empirical inquiry into social phenomena. The "methods" of the course title are practices toward offering descriptions and drawing inferences about human life from observations of it, and much of the course will involve discussions of three themes: inferences about how phenomena are related (implying much consideration of causality), inferences from a part to a whole (implying much consideration of sampling), and generating appropriate representations of phenomena (implying much consideration of
conceptualization and measurement). The extant research strategies used by sociologists are extraordinarily
diverse—which is fitting given the extraordinary diversity of the research questions sociologists pursue—and
the course will attempt to provide an appreciation of this diversity. Among the specific methodologies of
which at least a spoonful will be served at the 750 feast are experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys,
quantitative analysis of archival materials, meta-analysis, ethnography, in-depth interviews, historical
methods, the analysis of texts, and the analysis of interactional data. Although your instructor personally has
an aversion to talking about the “unity of method”—or, worse, the “unity of science”—the course
emphasizes fundamental principles and logic disciplining research design. This is much more a theoretical
course than an applied one, even though plenty of practical examples will be discussed in the readings and in
class.

This will consider both some basic general issues of method and some issues regarding specific methods that
your instructor believes comprise important things for you to encounter somewhere, sometime in your
graduate training (even should your own intellectual pursuits lead you down entirely different sociological
avenues). Importantly: This course is most emphatically not intended as a substitute for the more specialized
methodological training that successful dissertations typically demand. Just in case the italics are insufficient to
drive this point home, let me repeat: This course is most emphatically not intended as a substitute for the more
specialized methodological training that successful dissertations typically demand. As things go, one might end
up finding it difficult securing optimal specialized training over the course of one’s studies; however blame
might be assigned for such regrettable deficiencies, it cannot be laid at the door of this course, as such
specialized training is not (once again) what this course is intended to provide.

More generally, your instructor wishes to express his passionate belief that gaining command of the methods
of social inquiry—both as producer and consumer—is a continual, open-ended project. He is quickly
exasperated by those who embark on the course with the idea that they presently know nothing about
methods and they will finish the course having learned all they need to know. Developing good research
sense does not work like that.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
Grades for the course will be based on student performances on exercises (60%), weekly reactions (30%),
and class attendance/participation/manifested conscientiousness (10%). One should expect the final overall
distribution of student grades for the course to resemble that of other required graduate courses.

Exercises
There will be several written exercises over the course of the semester, which will provide opportunities for
you to further develop and articulate your thinking about methodological considerations, including as they
pertain to the research you personally plan to pursue. By far the most important of these will be a final
exercise in which you are asked to describe a research project of your own and reflect at length about it
(details to follow)

Written exercises will all have a specified word or sentence count to which you must adhere; you
might think this overly constraining and you are right—but I believe that it is good training since much of
your subsequent writing (although not syllabi!) will be constrained by strict word counts. Late work not
cleared with me in advance will either be penalized or not accepted.
**Turning exercises in.** Written exercises will be submitted to me via electronic mail (jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu). You should already know how to send documents as attachments as well as just as text in the body of an e-mail message. Details on the preferred format for submitting exercises will be provided. If asked to provide an assignment as an attachment, please send it in Microsoft Word regular (.doc) or rich text format (.rtf), with a filename that includes your surname (e.g., smith_ex3.doc; filenames like 750_ex3.doc or freese_ex3 are spectacularly unhelpful).

**Overall exercise grade.** Exercises will either be graded using standard letter grades or (for some low weighted assignments) an analogue of the OK grading system that will be used for Weekly Reactions. A weighted average of all your exercise grades will be used to provide a cumulative exercise grade for the course. Except for your final project, each exercise will have a weight of 1-4 points, with the # of points intendedly based on how demanding the exercise seems in terms of estimates about the amount of time it will take to do and the intellectual energy required.

**Exemplar reaction papers**
One goal of the course is to promote exposure to (some of) the extraordinary diversity of research methods used by sociologists. Chief among the ways in which this specific goal will be pursued is through a Weekly Research Exemplar drawn from the annals of articles that have the imprimatur of validated sociology—that is, those that have appeared in one of the discipline’s two flagship journals, *American Sociological Review* [ASR] or *American Journal of Sociology* [AJS]. (Articles written by anyone presently employed by UW were excluded from consideration.) The articles included have been deliberately selected for their methodological diversity and with little consideration of their substantive particulars. We will spend the first 15 to 30 minutes of each Tuesday class discussing the Weekly Exemplar.

One of your assigned tasks for this course is to provide written Reactions to the weekly readings. You are not required to do these every week (see below). These Reactions should be between 300 and 500 words (or so), and they should focus on the research conducted in the paper (reasonably broadly construed). You should write your Reaction presuming that I have also read the paper.

**Some ideas for what you can write about.** Your Reactions might consider, among other possibilities: (1) things you found praiseworthy about what the researchers did; (2) things you thought the researchers might/should have done differently; (3) things you thought the authors were mistaken about; (4) things that you see as advantages and limitations to the kind of data the researchers used; (5) things the researchers did that confused you; (6) things about how the research was conducted that you wished they had talked more about; (7) ways the authors might extend their research; (8) connections between the research discussed in the article and things discussed in class/other readings; (9) specific connections between the research discussed in the article and things you think should be considered in class/other readings; (10) questions the research raised for you about how research is conducted more generally; (11) reactions the paper inspired for how you think about some kind of research more generally; (12) ways the paper did or did not exemplify things you see as strengths and weaknesses of its kind of research.

Your Reactions can take the form of a few enumerated points rather than a single, flowing narrative. *Your Reactions should evince that you have thoughtfully read the paper.*

**Due date/time of Reactions.** Reactions are due at the stroke of 9PM (8:59:59.999...) on the Monday before the Tuesday class in which that reading is assigned. This is so that I will be able to read the

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1 *Exemplar*, here, is intended in terms of its sense as example of a type, not necessarily in its alternate sense of a model to be imitated (as the worthiness of the paper as a model is something for you to consider as you read it).
Reactions prior to that day’s class. Late assignments will be penalized (see note on grading below).

**Format of reactions.** Reactions should be e-mailed to your instructor at jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu. Reactions should be sent in the body of the message, not as an attachment, and with the subject line “Weekly Reaction.” If your e-mail address is something like purplejellybean@aol.com, your name must be evident from either the header or body of the e-mail. Failure to submit your Reaction according to these not-at-all-unreasonable formatting guidelines will result in a 1 point deduction in your grade.

**Grading.** Reactions will be scored as follows: 5 points – reserved for instances of seemingly exceptionally conscientious or insightful engagement of article; 4 – good job; this will be the default and massively modal grade for a solidly done reaction; your instructor will not have much interest in explaining why an assignment received a “4” instead of a “5”; 3 – Reaction did not evince engagement with the methods of the article at quite the expected level; 2 – worth partial credit, but a superficial or otherwise inadequate reaction. Reactions may be turned in late, but will be penalized and will (frankly) not be graded with any haste. **Penalties:** 1 point of credit will be deducted for work that is turned in after the time of grading but before class; 2 points of credit will be deducted for work turned after class but later in that same week. Overall grades for the course will be determined according to the following scale: 43 points and above – A; 39-42 points – A/AB; 35-38 points – AB; 31-34 points – B; 27-30 points – BC; below 27 points – something below a BC.

**Additional note:** Excerpts from your Reactions may be distributed to the class, with props to you.

**Stern paragraph about academic integrity and propriety**
(Your instructor recognizes that this paragraph is likely unnecessary, but, just in case, he wishes to be extremely clear about his policy.) Section 14.03 of the University of Wisconsin System Administrative Code defines academic misconduct as “an act in which a student: (a) seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation; (b) uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise; (c) forges or falsifies academic documents or records; (d) intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others; (e) engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of a student’s academic performance; (f) assists other students in any of these acts.” If you have any questions about what constitutes academic misconduct generally, you must consult [http://www.wisc.edu/students/amsum.htm](http://www.wisc.edu/students/amsum.htm) before proceeding in this course. Lack of familiarity with these rules in no way constitutes an excuse for acts of misconduct. Any instance of cheating, plagiarism, or other misconduct will be dealt with strictly according to University policy, and the penalties recommended to the Dean of Students will be severe.

**Readings**
A reading list for the course is included at the end of this syllabus. You will note that the reading list is very long; moreover, amendments to this list may be made over the duration of our semester together. Many of the readings are included as supplemental readings (denoted by the leisurely symbol 🔁). Some of these are readings which will find their way into lectures; others are articles/books that I believe are interesting or provocative and cannot resist sharing at least the reference with you. In this regard, the appended list is as much a bibliography as reading list, and should not freak anyone out.

Other readings have a designation as primary readings (denoted by the more imperative ⚙). Except for the Weekly Exemplars, such designations are meant to urge but not insist. If you feel like you are not getting anything out of a particular topical reading except psychic pain, do not feel obliged to soldier ahead out of some sense of 750 duty.
All of the primary readings, and many of the supplemental ones, are available on the web (denoted by the symbol 🌐) through the Social Science Reference Library.

**Attendance**
If you not going to be able to attend, it would be courteous of you to e-mail me to let me know. The instructor reserves and will likely exercise the right to reduce the grades of students with inadequate attendance. Of course, so as not to distract your colleagues and instructor, appropriately professional behavior—e.g., not passing notes, not falling asleep, not playing Spider solitaire on your laptop, not continually glaring at me with maniacal hatred, etc., etc.—is expected.

### SCHEDULE OF EXERCISES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Describe instance of instructive research</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>February 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Design an experiment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>March 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Causal inference in observational studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>March 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Brief description of final project</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>March 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Research ethics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>March 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Book review</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>April 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Toy exercise on sampling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>April 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Project description</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>May 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: As with everything else on this syllabus, this list of exercises is potentially subject to revision. Any exercises added to the above list will be small.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Single Sentence Preview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1 – Jan 18 &amp; 20</td>
<td>Salutations and orienting remarks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2 – Jan 25 &amp; 27</td>
<td>Prefatory</td>
<td>Amidst the various philosophical issues that typically preface considerations of social science methodology, there are some serious exercises for the sociological imagination afoot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3 – Feb 1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Causal relationships, basics</td>
<td>The empirical justification for causal claims in social research is almost always based on some kind of comparison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4 – Feb 8 &amp; 10</td>
<td>Causal relationships, complexities</td>
<td>The plausible complexity of actual causal relationships in the social world can very quickly outstrip the usual language we have for talking about causes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5 – Feb 15 &amp; 17</td>
<td>Causal inference, experimentation</td>
<td>There is nothing so powerful as a properly designed experiment for making determinations regarding causality; too bad, then, that experiments end up having such limited use for most questions of interest in sociology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6 – Feb 22 &amp; 24</td>
<td>Causal inference, covariance analyses of observational data</td>
<td>Regression may seem like the workhorse technology of causal inference in quantitative sociology, but its actual effectiveness in this regard is often severely limited (note: this is something that should give one pause, not paralysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7 – Mar 1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Causal inference and observational study design</td>
<td>As noted, all kinds of perils await the researcher who approaches causal questions without the benefit of experimentation; as a rule, these can be more effectively addressed in the design of data collection than they can be through subsequent analytic procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 8 – Mar 8 &amp; 10</td>
<td>Inference from field observation</td>
<td>Among the most pervasive threats to our ability to learn about social processes through first-hand observation and interaction are the many preconceptions we have when we begin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9 – Mar 15 &amp; 17</td>
<td>Numbers and narratives</td>
<td>“Quantitative” and “qualitative” data can sometimes be jointly analyzed in ways that bring forth the inferential strengths of each.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10 – Mar 29 &amp; 31</td>
<td>Sampling and generalization</td>
<td>Data are very often (extremely) partial relative to the desired scope of generalization implied by one’s research question; this implies a need for a strategy about what to observe and for a logic of extrapolation between the actually-observed and the target-of-one’s-conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 11 – Apr 5 &amp; 7</td>
<td>Sampling theory, nuts and bolts</td>
<td>Where random sampling is desirable, simple random sampling is often inferior to alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 12 – Apr 12 &amp; 14</td>
<td>Selectivity and incompleteness</td>
<td>Sometimes we know that our sample is systematically deficient and can do more about it than merely being extra-cautious and apologetic in our conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 13 – Apr 19 &amp; 21</td>
<td>Conceptualization and measurement</td>
<td>Rigorous conceptual thinking early in a research project can reap many subsequent rewards, even as the same concepts can be modified as a consequence of research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 14 – Apr 26 &amp; 28</td>
<td>Measurement, validation</td>
<td>The adequacy of a measure is often judged in terms of its relation to other measures and its own internal consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 15 – May 3 &amp; 5</td>
<td>Measurement, scales and dimensions</td>
<td>A recurrent strategy of social measurement is to construct global measures from an aggregation of individual measures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*spring break – amusement and rest recommended (but not mandatory)*
READING LIST

I. Weekly Research Exemplars


II. Topical readings

1. Salutations and orienting remarks


2. Prefatory

The Science Question in Sociology


The Conjunction of Method and Substance


Being sociological about debates between the qualitative and quantitative


Relationship between existing literature and original research


Additional readings


3. Causal inference, basic notions

Standard criteria of causality and counterfactual conditionals


Mill’s methods


Goodwin, Jeff. 1998. "How to Become a Dominant American Social Scientist: The Case of Theda Skocpol." Pp. 31-37 in Required Reading: Sociology’s Most Influential Books, edited by D. Clawson. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. Okay, not so much about methodology, but some interesting speculation on the massive fame of Skocpol’s State and Social Revolutions.


Braumoeller, Bear F. and Gary Goertz. 2000. "The methodology of necessary conditions." American Journal of Political Science 44:844-858. Makes several points about evaluating theories that assert necessary conditions of an outcome, especially for studies that involve comparative inspection of a modest number of cases. Includes discussion of trivial vs. nontrivial necessary condition arguments and how triviality in this case is an empirical matter.


4. Causal relationships, complexities


**Causal mechanisms**

Link, Bruce G. and Jo Phelan. 1995. "Social Conditions as Fundamental Causes of Disease." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* Supplement: 80-94. Considering how causes of causes might be seen as more “basic” or “fundamental” than the more proximate causes; has spawned a line of work in medical sociology.


### 5. Causal inference, experiments

**Experimental methodology**


**Experiments in survey research**

External validity in experiments


6. Causal inference, covariance analysis of observational data

**Empirical comparisons of experimental results with results of observational study**


**Quantitative analysis of data from observational studies**


**Propensity-score adjustment**

Smith, Herbert L. 1997. "Matching with Multiple Controls to Estimate Treatment Effects in Observational Studies." *Sociological Methodology* 27: 325-353. *This is a fairly accessible introduction to propensity-score adjustment for sociologists; other virtues are that it talks about many-to-many matching and the idea of using a panel-type regression model instead of explicit matching.*

Rubin, Donald B. 1974. "Estimating the causal effects of treatments in randomized and non-randomized studies." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 688-700. Early paper that anticipates the propensity score method; an easier read than the Rosenbaum and Rubin paper.

The importance of getting important things right

Debate concerns the validity of the most widely cited statistic from Weitzman’s *The Divorce Revolution*, 1986 Winner of the ASA Distinguished Scholarly Publication award. Can be read as a cautionary tale, both for research-producers and research-consumers


Regression to the mean


Assorted other readings


Stata Corporation. 1998. “What are some of the problems with stepwise regression?” From their Frequently Asked Questions webpage. Basically sums up the reasons why stepwise regression is regarded with disfavor by many social scientists for many applications.


7. Causal inference, design of observational studies

Purposely narrow samples


Instrumental variables


Natural experiments


Control by design versus statistical control

Freedman, David A. 1991. “Statistical models and shoe leather.” Sociological Methodology 21: 291-313. This is an article by a statistician that basically argues that the virtues of multiple regression for causal inference in the real world have been greatly exaggerated.

studies where the effort to solve causal inference problems focuses mainly on well-designed and strategic data collection, rather than post-hoc statistical adjustment.

8. Inference from field data


Miles, Matthew B. and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. Qualitative Data Analysis (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Although parts of this book are less compelling, I like its discussion of all the different types of displays it presents as methods of realizing patterns in your data or of thinking more carefully through what your data show.

Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin. 1990. Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Chapters 5-12. This book is a maybe oversimplified rendition compared to the Glaser and Strauss book on grounded theory. Anyway, you should read some kind of primary source on grounded theory before you (a) actually do any work that claims to be employ grounded theory methodology [seems obvious, but the available literature suggests otherwise], or (b) take too seriously some of the characterizations of grounded theory that are made by its detractors.


9. Combining numbers and narratives

Of these two readings: the Laitin article is more applicable for people interested in comparative work; the Goldthorpe article is more applicable for people interested in survey or other secondary quantitative analysis.


**10. Sampling and generalization, orienting considerations**

*Sampling in qualitative research*


Romney, A. Kimball. 1999. "Culture Consensus as a Statistical Model." *Current Anthropology* 40:S103-115. *Beyond the particular method described, a reason I like this paper is the general point about how usual ideas about sample size are dramatically transformed when what one is trying to get at as some shared conception (e.g., cultural knowledge) of respondents.*


**11. Sampling theory, nuts and bolts**

*Sampling theory for statistical research*


*Significance testing and power*
McCloskey, Deirdre N. and Stephen T. Ziliak. 1996. "The Standard Error of Regressions." Journal of Economic Literature 34: 97-114. What they call the "standard error" is the confusion of statistical and substantive significance; includes systematic examination of ways in which regression results are discussed in a sample of papers by economists.

On the misuse of significance testing


Sampling with knowledge of the outcome


Lustick, Ian S. 1996. "History, historiography, and political science: Multiple historical records and the problem of selection bias." American Political Science Review 90:605-618. If one is going to use the work of historians as "facts" for comparative inquiry, and historians themselves disagree, does this open itself up to the possibility that one can pick and choose the histories that happen to confirm one's theory?


12. Selectivity and incompleteness

Winship, Christopher and Larry Radbill. 1994. "Sampling Weights and Regression Analyses." Sociological Methods and Research 23:230-257. Article that quantitative researchers are likely to be told to read when they start asking questions about weights.


13. Conceptualization and operationalization


14. Representation


Accuracy in ethnographic research


Reactivity in ethnographic research


Question design in survey research


Problems of self-report in survey research


15. Measurement, validation

Overview of measurement


Reliability


Levels of measurement


**Coding in historical research**


**Anchoring vignettes as a measurement strategy**


**16. Scale development and factor analysis**