POLS 503: Political Science Research Methods

Washington State University, Fall 2007
Thursdays, 6:10-9 p.m., CUE 218

Instructor: Dr. Travis Ridout
Email: tnridout@wsu.edu
Phone: 509-335-2264
Office Hours: Monday 10-11:30, Tuesday 1-2:30
816 Johnson Tower
Course webpage: www.wsu.edu/~tnridout/ps503.htm

Introduction

The goal of this course is plain and simple: to teach you how to do rigorous social scientific research. That’s a big goal given we only have 14 weeks to accomplish it, but I can almost guarantee you that your ability to do research will have advanced by leaps and bounds by the end of this course. A few points to ponder:
--Our emphasis in this class will be on the practical (e.g., how to get an interview, how to come up with an idea for a project) without ignoring the theoretical (e.g., how I know what I know, how can I “prove” one thing caused another).
--For the length of this course we will be (or pretend to be) methodological pluralists. That is, we will not privilege one method of research over another. Our only bias is in favor of well conceived and well executed research—something that can be accomplished using almost any research method.
--I’m not a scholar of criminal justice, and so few of my examples will be derived from that field. Nonetheless, criminal justice students should rest assured knowing that that the logic of social inquiry spans disciplinary boundaries. In fact, we will even read a piece or two by sociologists and (gasp!) psychologists.

Readings

There are two books available for purchase:


There will also be several other readings that I will place in the 7th floor computer lab file cabinets. Please DO NOT remove them from the building.

Grading
Your final grade in this course will depend on your success in five areas:

1. Three short papers (30%). For each of these papers, you will “try out” a methodology and write about your experience using it. You will:

   A. Conduct a short (approximately 10 questions) face-to-face survey in which you ask at least 25 respondents about a topic of interest to you. You must receive Institutional Review Board approval before beginning this assignment. As long as you avoid sensitive topics, find respondents age 18 or older, and obtain informed consent, you should not have much difficulty in obtaining an exemption from full IRB review. You will need to submit the human subjects approval form found at http://www.irb.wsu.edu/forms.asp. After completing the survey, answer the following questions:
      - What was your research question?
      - How well do you believe your survey results answered that question?
      - How did you choose your respondents? Was that a good choice?
      - How might your choice of respondents have affected the results you received?
      - What difficulties did you encounter in writing the questions?
      - What are some potential threats to the internal validity of your research?
      - What are some potential threats to the external validity of your research?
      - What was the most difficult part of doing the research?
      - What would you do differently next time?

   Include a copy of your questionnaire in your write-up. DUE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 6:10 P.M.

   B. Participate as a subject in an experiment. Several researchers on campus conduct experiments as part of their research, and I will alert you to opportunities that I come across. After participating as a subject in the experiment, answer the following questions:
      - What was the researcher’s question or was it unclear to you as a subject? If you had to guess, what do you believe the researcher was trying to find out?
      - Describe your experience from beginning to end. Were you ever confused by what you were supposed to do? How were you treated?
      - What difficulties did you encounter in participating as a subject?
      - What are some potential threats to the internal validity of the research?
      - What are some potential threats to the external validity of the research?
      - What would you have done differently had you been the researcher?

   DUE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 6:10 P.M.

   C. Conduct either participant or non-participant observation. Pick a setting to observe for an hour or two, either as a participant or non-participant. The possibilities are many, and may include a classroom, a courtroom, a public park, the local pub, a church service or coffee hour, and many more. I have obtained blanket Institutional Review Board permission for this assignment. As a condition of that approval, you must 1) avoid settings in which there are likely to be many people under age 18 (e.g., a daycare center) and 2) get approval of your location from
me before you begin your research. Upon completion of your research, answer the following questions:

- What was your research question?
- Did you have a theory going into your research or was your research intended to help you develop theory? That is, was your research more deductive or inductive?
- What, in general, did you learn from your observation?
- Did your observation generate new research questions?
- Did those you observed know that you were observing them? Do you believe that affected their behavior? How could you tell?

DUE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 6:10 P.M.

2. A literature review (15%). You will select a research question (we will talk about how to do this in week 3) and then write an approximately 8-10 page paper that reviews the literature that speaks to the topic you have chosen. You should use at least 20 sources, and they should be academic sources (i.e., books that can be found in the library or articles from scholarly journals such as the American Political Science Review or American Journal of Sociology). This literature review will serve as a basis for your research design. DUE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 12, 5 p.m.

3. A research design (25%). You will propose a research project (possibly a future conference paper, your master’s thesis or dissertation) on an important question in your area of interest. About 15-20 pages is a good length for this assignment. Your proposal should include a statement of your research question, a review of the literature on the topic, a discussion of your theory and the hypotheses you derived from it and a plan for how you will answer your question. I will give you a detailed handout describing how to write a research design, and we will discuss this in depth during week 7 of class. DUE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 5 p.m.

4. A final exam (15%). This will be a take-home exam on which you will answer a few essay questions of the type likely to appear on a prelim exam. I will make the exam questions available on Monday, December 10. DUE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14, 5 p.m.

5. Class participation and attendance (15%). Class participation and attendance are required. Notify me beforehand if you must be absent from class. I also expect that everyone will make contributions to our class discussions.

Other information

If there are things I talk about in class that you do not understand, do not hesitate to talk to me about them. I am here to help you learn the course material. And if there are other matters that you think should be brought to my attention, let me know.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS. Assignments must be at my office by 5 p.m. on the date they are due or they will be considered late. For each day an assignment is late, I will subtract 10 percent of the assignment’s total point value from your score.
ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT. I do not tolerate plagiarizing or cheating of any kind. Such behavior will result in failing the course and other disciplinary action. Please see the Student Handbook at the Division of Student Affairs website at www.studentaffairs.wsu.edu for a full description of the types of academic misconduct. If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating, see me immediately.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION. Students with Disabilities: I am committed to providing assistance to help you be successful in this course. Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. Please visit the Disability Resource Center (DRC) during the first two weeks of every semester to seek information or to qualify for accommodations. All accommodations MUST be approved through the DRC (Admin Annex Bldg, Rooms 205). Call (509) 335-3417 to make an appointment with a disability counselor.

Course Outline

I. Introduction

Introduction (Aug 23)

Prisoners of silence [videorecording]—in class

Introduction to Library Research (Aug 30)

I will be at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting during our August 30 class meeting. Lorena O’English, social sciences librarian at WSU, will lead you through a tour of the resources available to you at the university’s libraries.

II. Designing Research

Finding and Developing Ideas: Theory, Theories, and Hypotheses (Sept 6)


Neuman. Chapter 1, 2.


Concepts and Indicators (Sept 13)


Neuman. Chapter 5.


**Data Issues (Sept 20)**


Neuman. Ch. 6.


**Writing a Research Design, Journal Article, Book or Funding Proposal (Sept 27)**
Bem, Daryl J. “Writing the Empirical Journal Article.”


Fuller, Frank. “A Short Guide to Preparing Proposals For Theses and Research Projects.”
http://www.education.nsula.edu/adult/Resources/Proposal.htm


Neuman. Chapter 4, 14.

**III. Research Methods**

**Surveys (Oct 4)**

Asher. All

Neuman. Chapter 7.

**Experiments (Oct 11)**


Neuman. Ch. 8

**Participant and Non-Participant Observation  (Oct 18)**


Neuman. Ch. 11.


**Interviews and Focus Groups (Oct 25)**


**Case Studies and Comparative Social Inquiry (Nov 1)**


Neuman. Ch. 12.

**Historical Analysis (Nov 8)**


**Game Theory (Nov 15)**


**IV. Wrapping Up**

**Qualitative v. Quantitative Inquiry (Nov 29)**


Mahoney, James and Gary Goertz. “A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research.” *Political Analysis* 14: 227-249


**Research Ethics (Dec 6)**


Obedience [videorecording] / Stanley Milgram (in class)

WSU Human Subjects Research Guidelines