

Understanding Research Design

B.A. level course, CPS

Fall 2023/24

Credit value: 2 credits (4 ECTS credits)

Prof Andreas Dafinger

Office hours: after classes and by appointment (email)

Course Description

This seminar prepares students to plan a research design in anticipation of their own Research Project. It will focus on how to identify a topic and question, how to determine the appropriate disciplinary specializations, to consider which data and methods are most appropriate, and how and where to find relevant secondary literature. As we go along, Students will start planning their own project, including possible research methods, while considering the benefits and limits of particular methods and data.

Students should reflect and bring their own ideas about possible projects. Some will come with a rather clear idea of their project, others will still be uncertain about their what exactly they want to do (or hover between options). This seminar will address both: identifying interesting and researchable topics and turning them into a researchable and feasible plan, and refine and rebuild existing projects.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course students will be able to:

- Specify their Research Project topic
- Relate specific research questions to appropriate disciplines
- Conduct a focused library and information search
- Identify the appropriate methods for their project
- Acknowledge the limitations of their chosen methods
- Develop a work plan for project completion

Learning activities/teaching methods

Class sessions focus on active development of Project proposals. Students will complete weekly assignments for developing the proposal, including defining a topic, identifying appropriate theoretical foundations, selection of sources and methods, research ethics and developing a project plan and feasible time-line.

Assessment

Students are expected to complete at least 8 of 10 weekly assignments. Weekly assignments consist of short papers, discussing progress of individual research projects, related to the respective week's topic.

Active participation in classroom debates includes engagement with your peers' projects and ideas, it includes staying on top of the week's readings and taking active part in the classroom discussions.





The final assignment will be completion of a Project Proposal at the end of the semester. Students will present their draft research proposals in workshops in the final two weeks of semester.

1. Weekly assignments 30 %
2. Active participation 20 %
3. Final Project proposal 2000 words and presentation 50%

Course materials

Selected and further reading will be available on the course's e-learning platform.

General and background readings:

-  Abbott, Andrew. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. UCP.
-  Becker, Howard Saul. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*. UCP.
-  Burawoy, Michael. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory* 16 (1): 4–33.
-  Davies, J. O. 2007. *Doing a Successful Research Project: Using Qualitative or Quantitative Methods / by Martin Brett Davies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- 📖 Engelke, Matthew. 2008. "The Objects of Evidence." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14: S1–21.
- 📖 Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: CUP.
- 📖 Johannes Fabian. 2014. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. Columbia University Press.
- 📖 Pzeworski, Adam. 1995. "On the Art of Writing Proposals." <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/the-art-of-writing-proposals/>.
- 📖 Ragin, Charles C., and Howard Saul Becker, eds. 1992. *What Is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge England ; New York, NY, USA: CUP

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the course

Outline of the steps towards the final proposal.

Week 2: Thinking about Social Science Methodology

- 📖 Flyvbjerg, Bent. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: CUP, 2001. Chapter 2

Week 3: The Research Question

The first, and most important step consists of identifying the general academic and social field to which your research will contribute and carve out a question that is both general and specific enough to be tackled by your research. We will consider what *should* be known and what *can* be known (Relevance, accessibility, feasibility, capability). Start thinking about identifying relevant scholarship and where to locate your research.

- 📖 Becker, Howard S. (1998). *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research*: chapter 01

Week 4: Cases and Sites

What is a case study? How do we identify cases that will help answer our question and understand what our site *is actually a case of*.

- 📖 Charles C Ragin. 2015. "Case-Oriented Research." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (2nd)*, 2nd ed., 3:187–93. Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier.
- 📖 Robert K Yin. 2015. "Case Studies." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (2nd)*, 2nd ed., 3:194–201. Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier.

Week 5: Causation, Evidence, Explanation, Interpretation

How to deal with data: what counts as evidence – and for what?

- 📖 Daniel Stoljar. 2015. "Causation: Physical, Mental, and Social." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (2nd)*, 2nd ed., 3:261–65. Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier.
- 📖 Engelke, Matthew. "The Objects of Evidence." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): S1–21.

Week 6: The Time and Space of Research

History, Comparison and Narrative

- 📖 Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2014: Chapter 2


Part of the research process is the researcher's own positionality; defining the inside and outside of the field, both in temporal and spatial terms. This leads to considerations of comparison, the importance of history, and the risk of 'othering'.

Week 7: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed Methods


- 📖 Davies, J. O. *Doing a Successful Research Project: Using Qualitative or Quantitative Methods / by Martin Brett Davies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: Chapters 4-5

Week 8: Connecting methods to research questions


Having identified both research question and accessibility and relevance of sources – the next step ahead is the appropriate combination of methods: Identifying strengths and appropriateness of selective methods and how to compensate for potential shortcomings: The *way we ask* informs what we will eventually *know*.
Locating your research in relevant scholarship II

 Davies, J. O. *Doing a Successful Research Project: Using Qualitative or Quantitative Methods* / by Martin Brett Davies. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Chapters 11-12

Week 9: The Ethics and Politics of Research Design

 Neyfakh, Leon. "The Ethics of Ethnography." *Slate*, June 18, 2015. (The Goffmann Controversy)

Week 10: Proposal Drafting, feasible research plans

 Pzeworski, Adam. 1995. "On the Art of Writing Proposals."

Week 11+12: Research Proposal Workshop and Presentations