

Understanding Research Design

B.A. level course, CPS

Credit value: 2 credits (4 ECTS credits)

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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 may already come with a good idea of their project, others will still be uncertain about what exactly they want to do. This seminar will address both: identifying interesting and researchable topics, 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 a project

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.

Requirements and Assessment

Participation includes taking active part in the classroom discussions.

Careful preparation of the mandatory readings by the date on which they are to be discussed in class. All readings will be available on Perusall (an annotation and reading software). This will allow you to write notes on the text, both notes for yourself (that no one else will see) and others that will be public. The idea is that through your notes, comments, doubts and question we get to read together and develop a discussion directly in the text. This will be a very important part of class so you are expected to engage with our questions and with one another, which will be part of the final grade. We will introduce and discuss Perusall in week 1. Students will comment on at least 8 of the 11 reading weeks.

For the mid term assignment (around week 8), you will be given 5 questions to choose from that allow you to engage with the readings and discussions we had had so far. 1000- 1500 Words

1. Mid term assignment (proposal draft) 30 %
2. Active participation 20 %
3. Weekly comments on Perusall 50%

Course materials

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

General and background readings:

- 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.
- 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

Overview of research design principles.

Feasibility, relevance, and academic contribution.

Week 2: Thinking About Social Science Methodology

Understanding the purpose of social science research.

Readings:

Gerring, John. *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*. Cambridge: CUP, 2001. Chapter 1. (30 pages)

Machi, Lawrence A., and Brenda T. McEvoy. *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. Corwin Press, 2016. Chapter 1. (10 pages)

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 problem and 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. Start thinking about identifying relevant scholarship and where to locate your research.

Reading:

Becker, Howard S. *Tricks of the Trade*. University of Chicago Press, 1998. Chapter 1. (25 pages)

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.

Readings:

Yin, Robert K. "Case Studies." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3, 194–201. Elsevier, 2015. (8 pages)

Ragin, Charles C. "Case-Oriented Research and the Method of Comparison." In *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. U of California Press, 1987. Chapter 2.

Week 5: Causation, Evidence, Explanation, and Interpretation

Dealing with data: What counts as evidence and for what purpose?

Reading:

Engelke, Matthew. "The Objects of Evidence." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): S1–S21. (21 pages)

Week 6: Literature Review

The importance of literature reviews for research design and how to conduct and organize a literature review.

Reading:

Machi, Lawrence A., and Brenda T. McEvoy. *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. Corwin Press, 2016. Chapter 2. (30 pages)

Week 7: Reading Week

Week 8: The Time and Space of Research

Temporal and spatial considerations in research design. Part of the research process is 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'.

Reading:

Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other*. Columbia University Press, 2014. Chapter 2. (30 pages)

Week 9: Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity in research: Addressing power dynamics and researcher bias.

Reading:

Rose, Gillian. "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics." *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–320. (16 pages)

Week 10: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods

How to choose methods appropriate to the research question.

Readings:

Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th ed. Sage Publications, 2014. Chapter 1: "The Selection of a Research Design."

Week 11: 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.

Reading:

Maxwell, Joseph A. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. 3rd ed. Sage Publications, 2013. Chapter 6: "Validity: How Might You Be Wrong?"

Week 12: The Ethics and Politics of Research Design

Ethical dilemmas and the politics of research in specific contexts.

Readings:

Neyfakh, Leon. "The Ethics of Ethnography." *Slate*, June 18, 2015. (5 pages)

Miller, Tina. "Ethics in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 2, no. 3 (2002): 397–418. (22 pages)

Week 13: Final Synthesis and Analysis

Synthesis of key research design principles.

Group discussions on analyzing case studies and refining hypothetical research designs.