Course Syllabus for Sociology 30902-01
Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)
Spring 2015

Instructor
Dr. Richard A. Williams

Contact Information
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Office Hours
MW 2:30-3:30 and by appointment. I am generally very accessible via phone, voicemail, email, Facetime and Skype. I may set up extra office hours right before projects are due.

Time and Place
117 O’Shaughnessy
11:00-12:15 Monday, Wednesday

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, electronic, and observational.

Course web page
Online readings, discussion questions and other links of interest will be available on the course web page:

http://www3.nd.edu/~rwilliam/xsoc30902

Required texts

Online Readings Packet and Discussion Questions for Sociology 30902. Available from the course web page.

Babbie should be read carefully enough to understand the major concepts. Babbie will often go more in-depth than I can in class and/or present the material in an alternative way that may make things clearer if you don’t understand me. 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.
Format

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 videos or guest speakers.

The course web page has discussion questions that will help you to focus your reading and prepare for class discussion. While not identical, the discussion questions tend to be very similar to the exam questions. Hence, if you keep up with the readings and prepare notes on the discussion questions, you should be well prepared for the exams and projects. As noted below, when we have small group discussions, you will be required to turn your notes in before class.

Assignments, exams, grading

There will be one take-home exam during the semester, two projects, and a take-home final. These are each worth 22% of your grade. Short assignments/class participation/attendance will account for the other 12%.

- Both Projects & Exams
  - 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.
  - 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. We can use whatever means is mutually convenient, e.g. meet in person, talk on the phone, use Skype or Facetime, or exchange emails as needed.

- Exams.
  - Both exams will consist of short answer problems and 2-3 essay questions. 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.

- Projects.
  - The two projects (attached) are designed to give you the opportunity to apply the principles you have learned to real or hypothetical problems.

- Short assignments/class participation/attendance
  - I expect this to have a fairly neutral impact on most people’s grades. But, I think these will help you to understand the material better, produce better papers and exams, and improve the overall quality of the classroom experience.
  - I expect everyone to attend class regularly and to arrive on time; more than two or three unexcused absences and/or excessive lateness will severely hurt your class participation. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive,
University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice. I like to start class on time. I have actually had students complain that it is annoying and disruptive when a few people consistently show up late. If there is some compelling reason you can’t make it to class on time, let me know. Otherwise I will expect everyone to be punctual.

- I will let you know in advance when we are breaking down into small groups (probably 4 to 6 times during the semester). To make sure that everyone is familiar with the material and has something to contribute, I want you to jot down at least a half dozen 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. (It is a good idea to always do this but it is especially critical to do so on discussion days.) In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked. You should email me a copy of your notes before each small group discussion. I will mostly grade these on a present/absent basis but I do expect to see evidence that you have thought about the points and gone over the readings.

**Honor Code.** Entering Notre Dame you were required to study the on-line edition of the Academic Code of Honor, to pass a quiz on it, and to sign a pledge to abide by it. The full Code and a Student Guide to the Academic code of Honor are available at: [http://www.nd.edu/~hnrcode/docs/handbook.htm](http://www.nd.edu/~hnrcode/docs/handbook.htm). Perhaps the most fundamental sentence is the beginning of section IV-B: “The pledge to uphold the Academic Code of Honor includes an understanding that a student’s submitted work, graded or ungraded – examinations, draft copies, papers, homework assignments, extra credit work, etc. - must be his or her own.” I reserve the right to use University-approved mechanisms (such as Turnitin) if I suspect plagiarism or cheating.

**Non-Discrimination/ Inclusion Statement.** The University of Notre Dame is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and strive to maintain a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. In this class we will not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate, please advise me and we will work with the Office for Students with Disabilities to make appropriate arrangements. (My thanks to Kevin Barry for the suggested wording of this.)

**Key Dates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 16</td>
<td>First project due by 5 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar 2</td>
<td>Take home midterm exam due by 5 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar 30</td>
<td>Second Project due</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 6</td>
<td>Take home final exam due by 6:15 p.m.</td>
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TENTATIVE SCHEDULE  
Sociology 30902-01  
Research Methods in Sociology (Undergraduates)  
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Jan 14, 19 - Introduction.

Babbie, Chapter 1, “Human Inquiry in Science;” also pp. 46-47 (“Stating Hypotheses”) 
Babbie, rest of Chapters 2 and 4 are optional.

Jan 21 thru Feb 9 (6 classes) – 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.”

There may be some additional Web Page Exercises on “Experiments.”

Feb 11 – Optional: In Class help with first project. You can ask me questions, get feedback 
from other students, work in small groups with others. Attendance is optional but 
recommended.

Feb 16 - First project due by 5:00

Feb 16, 18, 23 - Measurement.  Levels of measurement, validity, reliability, random vs. 
nonrandom error; Scaling, questionnaire construction; Sensitive topics

Babbie, Ch. 5, “Conceptualization, Operationalization and Measurement.”
Readings Packet, “Measurement.”
Babbie, Ch. 6, “Indexes, Scales and Typologies.”
Babbie, Ch. 9, “Surveys,” pp. 260-276 (Asking Qs, Questionnaires)

Feb 25 – Catch up; Review for first exam; take home exam handed out

Mar 2 – Take Home Exam due by 5:00. No class that day
Mar 4, 16, 18, 23 - **Surveys.** Reasons for surveys, types of surveys, sample vs. population, types of samples, probability vs. nonprobability sampling. Examples of surveys, longitudinal designs, administering surveys. Advantages and disadvantages of mail/telephone/personal interview approaches. We will also talk a bit about “Big Data” here.

Babbie, ch. 7, “The Logic of Sampling.”
Readings Packet, “Surveys.”
Babbie, Ch. 9, “Surveys,” pp. 276-301 (Ways of administering surveys)

The readings packet includes a study I did that may help you with project 2.

March 25 - Optional: In Class help with second project. You can ask me questions, get feedback from other students, work in small groups with others. Attendance is optional but recommended.

Mar 30 - Second project due by 5:00

Mar 30, Apr 1, Apr 8 – **Qualitative Methods; Case study research; Unobtrusive research.**
Introduction to case study research, qualitative methods, Content analysis, unobtrusive measures, secondary analysis.

Babbie, ch. 11, “Unobtrusive Research.”
Readings Packet, “Content Analysis”
Babbie, ch. 13, “Qualitative Data Analysis.”

Apr 13, 15, 20 - **Observational research.** Participant observation, field studies.

Babbie, ch. 10, “Qualitative Field Research.”

Apr 22, 27 - **Research ethics.**

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

Apr 29 – Course wrap-up and review; Take home final handed out

Readings Packet, “Semester in Review.”

**Wednesday, May 6 – Take Home Final due by 6:15.** You do not need to show up in class.
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.

(4) People often make serious mistakes on this project – mistakes that could have been avoided if they had talked to me for 15 minutes or so first. For example, their proposal may not really be an experiment, but the basic idea could be reworked so it was an experiment. Or, some part of the proposal comes across as highly implausible, but with some brainstorming it could be fixed. In short, it is highly recommended with this project that you run your ideas by me first.
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; a very different community that you are very familiar with) 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, or form areas that they have done service work in.)

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 across time, e.g. between 2000 and today or between 1990 and 2000?

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? You have a lot of personal knowledge of the area that won’t be obvious from the data, and you should share those insights.

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.