

# **Fundamentals of Political and Social Research**

Robert M. Fishman  
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2007

## **1. Introduction to the subject:**

This course is designed to introduce students to practical problems and options encountered in the course of social and political research as well as to underlying theoretical issues posed by social science investigation.

## **2. Prerequisites**

There is no formal prerequisite for this course other than admission to the UPF's graduate program. Students with a relatively limited background in political science and sociology would find it useful to read Arthur Stinchcombe's Constructing Social Theories as advance preparation for the course.

## **3. Competences to be achieved in the subject**

The course also serves to familiarize students with several research strategies including comparative work and interviewing with both a survey and qualitative format. We will examine all these themes from the standpoint of the decisions to be made when designing research and when evaluating the work of others. The logic of social research and causal analysis will be emphasized throughout the trimester along with the difficult challenge of building our research efforts on the twin foundations of theoretical generalization and the constant effort to understand empirical reality in all its substantive complexity.

## **4. Assessment**

Course requirements include a number of brief written assignments, participation in seminar and tutorial discussions, as well as a final paper offering a methodological critique of a major scholarly publication. The final paper will represent 50% of the course grade. The other 50% will be based on student participation in class and the short exercises.

## **5. Contents**

The course focuses most heavily, but not exclusively, on problems and issues that emerge at the design stage when one is formulating the goals, scope and setting for research. The course covers a number of the fundamental components of the overall research process including the delineation of research problems, the collection of evidence, the elaboration or selection of categories to group together discrete observations, and the development of causal interpretations. Among these issues, considerable attention will be devoted to differing strategies for the formulation of

categories and concepts, a problem which -- in both its practical and philosophic dimensions -- deserves much attention in graduate study. The attempt throughout the course will be to link practical research choices with broad theoretical issues in the methodology of the social sciences.

## **6. Methodology**

The course is built around a series of components: lectures, readings that will be discussed in seminar sections, and individual exercises that will be discussed in tutorial sessions. Although class attendance is not formally required as such, student grades will be based in part on contributions to class discussions.

## **7. The programming of activities**

Week 1, Wednesday May 16.

Lecture class. Introduction to the course. Presentation of rationales and approaches for the use of interviews in social science research. Discussion of closed ended and open-ended questions.

Week 2, Tuesday May 22.

Seminar. discussion on Recurrent Issues in Social Science Methodology: The Formulation of Categories and of Causal Interpretations

Reading: Max Weber, " 'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy", pp. 49 - 112 in The Methodology of the Social Sciences, and Emile Durkheim, Author's Preface and Book II Ch. 1 in Suicide.

Assignment: Write a brief paper of no more than five pages comparing the arguments of Weber and Durkheim on the meaning and the status of categories or classifications in social science. If possible (a tall order in five pages) discuss the fit between their arguments concerning categorization and their views on the sort of causal analysis possible in the social sciences.

Wednesday May 23.

Lecture: Lecture on Quantitative, Qualitative and Comparative Approaches to the Design of Social Research.

Readings: Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, Designing Social Inquiry. and Charles Ragin, The Comparative Method.

Week 3, Tuesday May 29.

Seminar: Discussion on quantitative, qualitative and comparative approaches to the design of research

Wednesday May 30.

Lecture: Lecture on the implications for research methodology of the “James Scott problem” which is to say the danger that many sentiments, attitudes, discourses and behaviors may be hidden from public view.

Reading: James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.

Week 4, Tuesday June 5.

Seminar: Seminar discussion on methodological issues in modern classics of social science.

Reading: Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work, and Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions.

Wednesday June 6.

Lecture: Lecture on Methodological issues in modern classics and ongoing challenges for social science research.

Week 5, Tuesday June 12.

Tutorials: Interviews and Surveys

Assignment: Draft a questionnaire designed, if possible, to be used in a project you would be interested in pursuing. The questionnaires will be distributed and discussed in the tutorial sessions.

Thursday June 14.

Seminar: Coding

Assignment: Code the responses to an open ended survey question. The survey responses to be coded will be distributed at least one week prior to the due date for this assignment. Tutorial discussion will focus on both the concrete difficulties of coding and the broader issue of the challenge posed by formulating categories and classifications.

Week 6, Tuesday June 19.

Tutorials on final assignment.

Final Assignment: Write a methodological critique, roughly ten pages in length, of a major social science work.