The object of this course is to familiarize those planning to undertake an empirical inquiry, such as a doctoral dissertation, with the principal challenges facing those doing empirical research in the social sciences and some of the methods available for coping with these challenges. We begin by considering a few of the issues raised by the philosophy of science about what we can know about the world and causal relations in it. In subsequent weeks, the course considers three broad types of research designs, based on large-n aggregate analysis, small-n comparison, and case-studies, as well as current debates about how each of these kind of studies should be conducted. We consider some specific issues about how to select cases and how to improve measurement. We read a number of examples of empirical research with a view to considering such issues through the eyes of those undertaking research. There is an emphasis on recent debates and the problems of coping with various types of causal complexity.

The course is suitable for all doctoral students in Government regardless of year, and we welcome the participation of those in their third-year and above working on dissertation topics as well as first and second-year students. If there is space, advanced undergraduates or graduate students in other fields will be admitted. Auditors are welcome but will be asked to do all the course readings and to participate in discussion.

Requirements

Since the class proceeds largely by discussion, all the required reading must be done carefully and class participation will form a component of the grade. Books should be available at the Harvard Coop and we have asked that all materials be placed on reserve in Littauer Library.

Participants will be asked to prepare a 2-3 page response to the readings for any two weeks of the course to be circulated by email to all participants the Tuesday before class.

In the third week, all participants will be asked to turn in a two-page proposal for a piece of research, which can be a planned dissertation topic or any other research project (however notional) that involves some primary empirical research. In the seventh week, participants will turn in a six-page (double-spaced) revision of this proposal (or a new one). In the final week of the course, participants will hand in a 15 page (double-spaced) revision of this proposal designed as a prospectus or grant proposal for this research.
Readings and Course Outline

** - Readings for purchase at the Coop.
$$ - Readings available on line.
++ - Readings to be distributed.

INTRODUCTION

1. (Jan 30) The Evolution of the Discipline

At this session we will introduce the course and review the development of the discipline of political science from a methodological perspective.

PART ONE: SOCIAL SCIENCE AS DISCOVERY AND EXPLANATION

2. (Feb 6) Positivism and Interpretivism (PH)

"...Nature is pleased with simplicity and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes"

-- Isaac Newton

This week we examine positivist models of inquiry (represented here by Friedman and in more nuanced and modest way, Moon), which continue to influence mainstream social science, and the interpretivist critique of them (represented by Geertz). Overarching issues include: What do social scientists do? Why should they do it this way? What, according to positivists and interpretivists, constitutes a valid intersubjective social scientific claim?

Required Reading


Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (NY: Basic 1973), pp. 3-32.
**Recommended Reading**


**3. (Feb 13) The Evolution of Positivist Science (AM + PH)**

This week, we examine a series of criticisms and revisions of the basic positivist model of how (social) science progresses, beginning with the influential critique of Kuhn and proceeding through the efforts of Lakatos to preserve elements of a positivist approach while accommodating such critiques to the recent perspectives of 'scientific realism' (represented here by Outhwaite). We then examine whether efforts to apply the resulting formulations (“research programmes,” “hard cores”, “novel facts,” etc.) to scholarship in international relations has been enlightening.

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


Miriam and Colin Elman, "How Not to be Lakatos Tolerant: Appraising Progress in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming)


4. (Feb 20) Construing Causation and Explanation (PH)

"The idea of causality is allowed to survive because, like the British Monarchy, one supposes it to do no harm."

-- Bertrand Russell

This week, we examine three issues: i. what it means to say that x causes y; ii. what kind of 'explanations' for political developments social scientists can seek; iii. the challenges social scientists face when they seek to establish causation. The reading introduces the influential perspective of King, Keohane and Verba on these issues. It covers Waltz's argument about the role of theory in explanation and Tilly's qualms about what can be explained, as well as the proposal to address that qualm advanced by those who advocate the study of 'social mechanisms'. We will seek to uncover the underlying sources of disagreement between these positions as regards the structure of the social world, the nature of the researcher’s interests, and the power of existing theory and method to bridge the two.

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


5. (Feb 27) Standard Regression Models (PH)

"Without a constant counterfeiting of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not survive"
-- Friedrich Nietzsche

This week we examine the value of standard regression methods for establishing causal relations, considering two examples of the approach (Alesina and Hall/ Franzese), two articles concerned with the limits of what regression analysis can do (Shalev and Wallerstein) and one that proposes some statistical solutions to common problems (Braumoeller).

Required Reading

++ Alberto Alesina, "Why Doesn't the US have a European-Style Welfare System"


Recommended Reading

David Hackett Fischer, “Fallacies of Generalization,” in Fischer, Historian's Fallacies, pp. 103-130.


6. (Mar 6) The Challenges of Non-Linearity, Complexity, and Reflexivity (AM)

"I have cleansed the Augean stables only to replace it with this cart of dung"

-- Johannes Kepler on finding his laws of planetary motion did not conform to geometrical form

This week we consider recent work drawing attention to assumptions about the structure of the social world, and the resulting type of causal relations we observe underlying most social science studies. Some call into question the conventional methods of the field and raise issues about how such relations can be studied. We focus in particular on three aspects of the social world: non-linearity, complexity and reflexivity. What are these phenomena, how prominent are they in the social world, and what are some implications for establishing causality?

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**

7. (Mar 13) The Comparative Method (PH)

This week we consider the uses and limits of the comparative methods employed when a relatively small number of cases are to be compared. We consider Lijphart's influential formulation of the 'comparative method' as it is normally construed, Lieberson's critique of that method, and Ragin's proposal that comparison should be approached differently.

Required Reading


Recommended Reading


8. (March 20) Case-Studies and Systematic Process Analysis (AM)

This week we consider the value of case-studies, taking the article by Weingast and the book by Moravcsik as examples of this kind of research, and considering the efforts to justify the use of case studies and to outline how they should be done by Bates et al. and Hall.

Required Reading

++ Peter A. Hall, "Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research" in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., Comparative Historical Research (NY: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).


Recommended Reading

Fischer, “Fallacies of Narration” and “Fallacies of False Analogy,” in Fischer, Historian's Fallacies, pp. 131-163.


Harry Eckstein, "Case-Study and Theory in Political Science " in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., Handbook of Political Science Vol. 7 (Reading: Addison-Welsey 1975), pp. 79-139.
9. (April 3) Selecting Cases and Improving Evidence (AM)

"Truth proceeds more readily from error than from confusion"

Francis Bacon

Under the rubric of considering some specific issues of importance to research design, this week we consider the problems of how to select cases and how to strengthen research designs in order to counter the kinds of threats to validity enumerated by Kidder who draws on the tradition of seeing social science as quasi-experimentation as well as debates about how to improve the quality of evidence initiated by Lustick.

Required Reading


Recommended Reading


10. (April 10) Small N Studies in Practice (PH + AM)

This week we read two well-known works based on small-N comparison with a view to evaluating the various techniques Skocpol and Milner use to establish their points and to considering the issues that have arisen in the course to date in the context of concrete pieces of research.

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


PART THREE: SPECIFIC TOPICS IN RESEARCH DESIGN

11. (Apr 17) Improving Concepts and Measurement (PH)

"With eyes-to-see and lips to kiss with, who cares if some one-eyed sonofabitch invents an instrument to measure spring with"

-- e.e. cummings

This week we consider the problem of devising good concepts and of designing good measures for those concepts that can be used in empirical inquiry. The article by Putnam provides a concrete example of comparative research in which these issues can be examined. It should be read carefully and critically.

Required Reading


Recommended Reading

12. (April 24) Rigor: Choosing, Developing and Refining Theories (AM)

"Every simple statement is false. Every complex statement is useless"

-Paul Valéry

How do we define theoretical rigor? What can we do to increase the rigor of theory? How do we evaluate the trade-offs between theoretical rigor and the other qualities demanded of good social scientific research?

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


13. (May 1) Empirical Work on Recursive Complexity (AM)

This week we consider recent arguments that see political phenomena as the outcome of processes that unfold over time and that may display features of recursiveness, including those marked by path dependence. The issues include: i. what does 'path dependence' mean? ii. how prominent is it in the social world? and iii. how do we study and test propositions about causal relationships that display path dependence or recursiveness?

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**

