

Soc. 650
Spring, 2018
Tues. 7:00-9:45
TA: Kendra Pugh (kendra.king001@umb.edu)
Office: W/4/067
Hours: Th 4:00-5:00pm & by appointment

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METHODS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Research methods are the core of applied sociology and essential for informed public policy. Research methods are used to weigh the merits of ideas about the social world and to test the value of specific practices. Applied sociologists evaluate social programs, describe popular attitudes, and identify causes and consequences of crime, health, and community cohesion. Like every social scientist, applied sociologists and public policy experts must understand research methods to be able to use the latest research findings to guide policy-making, program implementation, and public debate.

The primary goal of this course is to help you learn how to use social science research methods to investigate the types of social issues that are of concern to applied sociologists and public policy experts. We will do this by learning how to test the implications of social theories and the efficacy of social and health programs, how to develop new ideas in the course of disciplined investigation, and how to critique research conducted by others. Specifically, the course will involve reading in the required texts, analysis of research articles, completion of individual and group hands-on exercises, use of many online resources, and preparation of a research paper. These various activities will expose you to a variety of specific methods so that you can choose those most appropriate to a specific research problem and setting and understand the advantages and disadvantages of those methods.

This syllabus outlines only the first semester of a two-semester sequence in research methods in the Applied Sociology program. The second semester (Soc. 651) focuses on quantitative data analysis (statistics).

REQUIRED READINGS

Schutt, Russell K. 2015. *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research*, 8th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/investigating-the-social-world/book242232>

Schutt, Russell K. 2011. "Research Methods" (Appendix). Pp. 283-319 in *Homelessness, Housing, and Mental Illness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. With Stephen M. Goldfinger. (On Blackboard site.)

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674051010>

Research That Matters, Questions That Count (14 articles from SAGE journals).

Available at Blackboard site (for use as detailed in syllabus).

ISW8 is readable, engaging, comprehensive, and very popular (>). Moreover, it builds on years of experience in doing and teaching applied research as part of our graduate program and it includes, as examples, research about many of the substantive concerns of sociologists. Plan to read the assigned material before each class period. It also contains many highlights and exercises that we will rely on for focusing our discussion and hands-on learning throughout the course. Earlier editions (there are 7) and other adaptations (there are 8) are NOT acceptable.

The methodological appendix to my 2011 book on homelessness provides focused insights into issues that arise in using social science methods to study complex social processes. The preface and parts of chapter 1 give you an overview of the research on which the appendix is based. I have assigned relevant pages in several weeks to enrich our discussions about some more advanced issues in applied research. You can download a PDF of this material from the class Blackboard site. (*Of course, you are more than welcome to purchase your own copy from Harvard University Press!*)

Each chapter of *ISW8* begins with a summary of a research article that illustrates key methods in that chapter. Each week, we will discuss this Research That Matters, Questions That Count article from the corresponding *ISW8* chapter. The PDF for each of these articles is available through Blackboard in the RTM, QTC link for each week.

Blackboard

Soc. 650 has a companion Blackboard site that you can access from the UMass Boston home page (click on “MyUMass” and “Blackboard”). The course syllabus and all assignments will be available on this site and you are to submit all assignments (and final paper) by uploading them to our Blackboard site. I will return comments and also post all grades through Blackboard (which maintains confidentiality for your assignments, my comments, and the grades. You will post article handouts and answers to end-of-chapter questions as discussion threads, so that other students can read and reply to your posts. Our Blackboard site also includes discussion threads for posting general questions about the course and course material, and I will add discussion threads to be used in work on the research project. Links to ancillary resources will also be available at the Blackboard site.

If you are interested in improving your mastery of computing software and other computer-based resources, our IT department offers workshops on many topics:
https://www.umb.edu/it/getting_services/training.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES, ASSIGNMENTS, AND GRADING

You will learn in this course by doing—that is, by designing and carrying out applied research activities—as well as by reading in the text and discussing (and writing about) what you are reading. As you know, if you completed Soc. 600 (Foundations of Applied Sociology) last semester, our applied research activities this semester will focus on the BEACON project. BEACON is an exciting new research project led by our Center for Survey Research that involves a survey of a panel of Boston residents and matching of data with “big data” resources available through the Boston Area Research Initiative (BARI). Each course assignment will have some relation to the BEACON project and your final paper will include an analysis of data collected in the first BEACON survey. Data collected by students in the course will be pooled at several points as we work together to answer related research questions.

Our doing will always be energized by talking and informed by thinking. Class discussion about what you are reading, what we are researching, and how the two are connected will be an important part of the class, so I expect you to come prepared to each class session and to participate actively. In addition, you will find yourself talking frequently with classmates as you complete activities, assignments and project activities. In these ways, talking will be a vital part of the learning process. Of course to say that you will have to be thinking throughout the course is to state the obvious, but I mean more than simply to say that everything we do is necessarily informed by our thoughts. In order to achieve your potential as a social scientist, you must think deeply and continually about each step you take as a researcher and why you take it. Thinking in this way means posing interesting and provocative research questions, finding new insights in the literature you review, going beyond the obvious in your analysis of data, and writing up your findings in a way that will speak directly to and resonate with your intended audience—whether that audience is other scholars or policymakers, or both.

Activities

What I am calling course “activities” are creative activities that will engage you intensively with the text material in ways that promote mastery. There are three types of such “activities,” involving Reading, Teaching, and Applying material from the chapter. You will sign up early in the course to use an assigned chapter from the text for two types of activity. One or two students (who then must work as a pair) can choose one chapter for any of the activities, with an expectation of twice the length of the written product. Be prepared to make your choices on a first-come, first-served basis in the second week of the course.

Reading

This activity is to lead up to a 45-minute class presentation and discussion in our class that focuses on key material in the chapter. A primary element in your presentation will be the *Research That Matters* article that begins the chapter. All of these articles are on the text Study Site. You can download and print the article you select or just read it on the web. You must post a handout for the class on Blackboard prior to making your presentation, with at least the title page, abstract, and one or more tables from the article. Your presentation is to summarize the research in the article (the research question, the literature reviewed in support of the question, the methods and primary findings, and key conclusions & limitations). Then answer the questions about the article in the chapter vignette and explain what this research can add to our understanding of the methods in the chapter. You are to plan to engage students in discussion about the article and related chapter material with questions adapted from that chapter’s Discussion Questions, Practice Exercises (if they can be carried out quickly in class), Ethics Questions, and/or—on the study site for that chapter—Web Exercises and Video Interview Questions. You will need to review with Kendra or me your plan for this activity by email, phone, or office visit in the week before your presentation.

Teaching

This activity is somewhat similar to the Reading activity, but will lead to teaching a session of my undergraduate sociology research methods, Soc. 351 (TTh, 12:30-1:45). My text in the undergraduate class is a very shortened and somewhat modernized version of ISW8, which is published by SAGE with the title: *Understanding the Social World: Research Methods for the 21st Century*. I will loan you a copy of USW to use as you prepare. Like *ISW*, it has a Research in the News vignette in each chapter, but the chapters are much shorter, there is no Research That Matters vignette, and the end-of-chapter activities are only a few Chapter Questions and Practice Exercises. If you are interested, I will also give you a course syllabus and you can check out the *USW* student study site: <https://edge.sagepub.com/schuttusw>. You must work with me to prepare your plan for this class session by email, phone, or office visit in the week before the class. You will be able to choose a specific class to teach early in the course.

Applying

For this activity you will draft a lengthy (3-4 pp.) “letter to the editor” in response to the Research in the News article summarized in a particular *ISW* chapter. The goal of your letter is to review the complete newspaper article (I can give it to you), read the original research report on which it is based (if available on the web), and then critique carefully the way in which the research should (or should not) be used to guide relevant public policy or programs. Preparing this critique will involve carefully considering the limitations of the research and the extent of support for the claims made by the newspaper reporter as well as by the original researchers. You should conclude this “letter” with a paragraph urging “next steps” that should be taken by researchers to improve the related information base for policymakers and/or program leaders.

Assignments and the Final Paper

You will begin to focus your substantive interests for the assignments and final paper when you complete Assignment 1. For this assignment, you will develop a research question(s) that can be studied with the BEACON project and on which you will focus most of your assignments and the final research paper. Based on your interests and availability, and with Kendra's assistance, you will then form a team with 4-5 other students who are focusing on closely related research questions. You will prepare to investigate the research question in assignment 1 and then develop measures and collect and/or analyze data for assignments 2, 3, and 4. Your final research paper will include analysis of data collected by you and other members of your team. Your work throughout the course will involve sharing ideas and activities with your team, but you will write each assignment and your final paper individually.

Assignments

Each assignment builds on material in the text chapters assigned in the weeks preceding its due date. These assignments will each focus on a topic related to the BEACON project. Separate handouts will be distributed with more detailed instructions for each assignment and the final paper.

Assignment 1: Preparing for Research

Present a research question on which to focus, review some relevant academic literature, and consider ethical issues. Your research question can focus directly on a section or specific topic that is being covered in this year's BEACON survey, it can propose a new survey direction, or it can assume a more intensive focus on a related issue that might best be addressed with qualitative data. Bear in mind that this assignment involves only presenting a research question, reviewing literature, and considering ethics; it is not a complete research proposal.

Assignment 2: Survey Design

Propose new specific survey questions and survey sections for the BEACON survey. Conduct cognitive interviews or a focus group (in a team) with Boston residents in specific neighborhoods to better evaluate your proposed questions. Contribute to a small sub-study using these questions in in-person interviews with actual Boston residents.

Assignment 3: Quantitative Data Analysis

This assignment provides experience with quantitative data analysis that will help you to review statistics and prepare for the final paper. You will present some frequency distributions, graphs, summary measures, and tests of reliability, using some of the data collected in BEACON's Wave 1 or the sub-study for Assignment 2.

Assignment 4: Qualitative Methods

You will conduct either participant observation or intensive unstructured interviews in one or more Boston neighborhoods, as defined in the BEACON project. The observations and interviews must focus on research questions included in or considered for BEACON. All data collected for this assignment will be combined in a dataset for the entire class to draw on for the final papers.

Final Paper: Shining a BEACON on Boston

Your final paper will present the research question on which you have focused your assignments (with whatever changes in that question make sense after your experiences), review related literature, analyze some of the pertinent data you and your teammates have collected, and then discuss your findings and present some conclusions. You will use mixed methods for the analysis, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data your team has collected and considering how the different methods help to inform your understanding. You will also be expected to develop some policy recommendations as well as suggest contributions to relevant scholarship. The final paper can integrate your material from other assignments, when it makes sense. Other material about BEACON will be distributed separately.

Assistance and Grades

Kendra Pugh, an advanced PhD student, and I will be available to help you throughout the course. Kendra will organize and coordinate class research activities and is the first person you should contact when you have questions about scheduling those activities. She will also be available to discuss other course issues with you. The most efficient way to seek advice from me (and from Kendra) is with the class Blackboard site. You also are always welcome to come to my office or Kendra's office during office hours (see above) or by appointment at another time. You can work with other students on activities and assignments, but the work you turn in must be your own (except when there is an explicit plan for a joint activity).

The participation grade will be based on your weekly answers posted in Blackboard to one Discussion Question or one Ethics Question at the end of that week's assigned chapter. Each answer will be scored as none, satisfactory, or excellent. Only your best 10 answers will be counted for the "participation" grade. Answers are expected to be succinct.

Course grades will be computed as follows:

Four assignments	40%
Two activities	30%
Research paper	25%
Participation (posted answers)	<u>5%</u>
	100%

I will not give a grade of "incomplete" except in very clearly justified and unavoidable circumstances. And be sure to review and adhere to the University's standards for academic honesty. UMass Boston's policies about such academic dishonesty are spelled out at in the Code of Student Conduct:

https://www.umb.edu/life_on_campus/policies/community/code (see #11-#14). The penalties are severe and infractions can lead to academic probation or expulsion. Cite all of your sources in your papers and do your own work on assignments and exams.

Accommodations

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1990 offers guidelines and support for curriculum modifications and adaptations for students with documented disabilities. If applicable, students may obtain adaptation recommendations from the Ross Center for Disability Services, CC-UL-0211, 617-287-7430. If this applies to you, be sure to present these recommendations and discuss them with me within a reasonable period, presumably during the Drop/Add period (<https://www.umb.edu/academics/vpass/disability/students>).

COURSE OUTLINE

Week	Topic/Reading/Activity
1 (1/23)	<p>SCIENCE, SOCIETY, AND SOCIAL RESEARCH <i>Course intro; reasoning errors; research motives, types, & orientations.</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 1 HHMI: Pp. 283-284 Article: Hampton & Gupta 2008.</p>
2 (1/30)	<p>THE PROCESS AND PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH <i>Research questions; literature reviews; research strategy & philosophy.</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 2, Appendices A, B HHMI: Pp. 284-285 Article: Exum et al. 2010.</p>
3 (2/6)	<p>RESEARCH ETHICS <i>Research ethics in context, IRB review, research proposals.</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 3 HHMI: Pp. 314-319 Article: Lacey et al. 2011.</p> <p>Assignment 1: Preparing for Research (Due 2/12, 9am)</p>
4 (2/13)	<p>CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT <i>Concepts; measurement operations & levels; reliability & validity.</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 4 HHMI: Pp. 295-307 Article: Webb et al. 2011.</p>
5 (2/20)	<p>SAMPLING AND GENERALIZABILITY <i>Sample types; probability & nonprobability; sampling distributions.</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 5 HHMI: Pp. 307-314 Article: Ferguson et al. 2012.</p>
6 (2/27)	<p>SURVEY RESEARCH <i>Question writing, indexes, questionnaire design & testing, modes</i></p> <p>ISW8: Chapter 8 Article: Bierman 2012.</p> <p>Assignment 2: Survey Design (Due 3/19, 9am)</p>

7 (3/6)

RESEARCH DESIGN AND CAUSATION

Causal conceptions; units of analysis; ecological fallacy; time order.

ISW8: Chapters 6

Article: Fergusson 2013.

SPRING VACATION (3/11-18)

8 (3/20)

EXPERIMENTS

True experiment, quasi-experiments, field experiments, validity

ISW8: Chapter 7

HHMI: Pp. 285-289

Article: Hoffman 2014.

9 (3/27)

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive & inferential statistics; crosstabulation and hypothesis-testing; correlations

ISW8: Chapters 9

Article: Cohen & Chaffee 2012.

Assignment 3: Quantitative Data Analysis (Due 4/2, 9am)

10 (4/3)

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS AND BIG DATA

Secondary data sources; ICPSR; big data

ISW8: Chapter 14

Article: Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga 2013.

11 (4/10)

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Participant observation; intensive interviewing; focus groups.

ISW8: Chapter 10

HHMI: Pp. 289-290

Article: Kato et al. 2014.

12 (4/17)

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Approach; techniques; alternatives; CAQDAS.

ISW8: Chapter 11

Article: Rinehart & Yeater 2011.

Pass/Fail, Course Withdrawal Deadline (4/20)

Assignment 4: Qualitative Methods (Due 4/23, 9am)

13 (4/24)

MIXED METHODS

Pragmatism, types, strengths and limitations

ISW: Chapter 15

Article: Testa et al. 2011.

14 (5/1) REPORTING RESEARCH/PRESENTATIONS
Design alternatives; writing and reporting.

ISW8: Chapter 16
Article: Makarios & Pratt 2012.

Research Presentations

15 (5/8) PROJECT PRESENTATIONS AND REVIEW
SEMESTER ENDS (5/9)

FINAL PAPER DUE: MONDAY, MAY 20 (11:59PM)

Course Supplementary Resources

Online resources are available to help you learn the course material and carry out the class project. Some of these are listed in this syllabus in relation to specific topics, but they are all available throughout the course.

There are many study aids available on the study site for *Investigating the Social World*: <https://edge.sagepub.com/schutt8e>. The required articles are available on this site, as are “interactive exercises” for each chapter that you can use throughout the course for review purposes. Video links provide interviews with researchers (many of our own faculty) that elaborate on topics discussed in each chapter, in the chapter-specific resource lists. The Study Site also includes flash cards, online quizzes, and other tools that you can use for review purposes. If you have problems using some of these resources in Internet Explorer, try a different browser to access them (such as Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox).

The Healey Library has developed a site with resources for our course, at <http://umb.libguides.com/SOCIO650Schutt>. Your work on the first assignment and whenever you must review the research literature or find relevant data will be facilitated by the resources on this site. Both during our course and throughout your graduate career, you will find it to your advantage to learn and use the SocINDEX scholarly database and the Mendeley bibliographic database system.