Research Design

PS 9501a / MRPE 9100

University of Western Ontario

Fall 2020

Class Information:
Thursday 9:30am-12:30pm
Online (link will be posted on OWL)

Instructor Information:
Dr. Laura Stephenson
Office: SSC 4228
Office Hours: Thursday 1-3pm or by appointment

Email: laura.stephenson@uwo.ca
Phone: ext. 85164

Course Description:
The objective of this course is to provide graduate students with an understanding of the fundamental principles of research design. By the end of the course students will be able to recognize the value of different approaches, and will be able to critically evaluate the theories, empirical strategies, causal claims and validity of other research. The course will not cover every method or every approach, but by the end of the course each student will be better readers of research and will also have a better understanding of how to conduct an original research project.

Because both PS and RPE students are taking this class, the majority of the readings will reference political science. However, the principles of research design are almost universal across the social sciences, and therefore applicable across many different research projects.

The course will contain both asynchronous and synchronous components. There will be weekly recorded lectures for students to watch. These lectures will help to clarify the reading materials. The synchronous component of the course will take place during the assigned class time. After the first week, students will be divided into cohorts and assigned to a specific block of time for discussion about the course materials.

Note:
One’s choice of approach, method and analysis can be controversial. Many supporters of specific methods are unsympathetic to others. This course endeavours to present an overview of the various approaches taken in social science, and in particular political science. Thoughtful critiques of all methods will be encouraged. No one method is perfect; in fact, not all methods are equally appropriate, depending on the research question at hand.

Learning Objectives:
- This course will help you to understand the scientific method, why social science is a “science”, and also why many may object to that characterization.
- By the end of this course, you should be able to identify and assess the positive and negative qualities of major approaches to the study of social and political problems.
- Through the topics covered, you will gain an appreciation of major issues related to research design.
Course Materials:

Required Books [both are available through the library electronically]

Note: Readings not included in these books will be available electronically, either on the course OWL site or through one of the library’s databases. A search for the journal title on the main library site will usually turn up the electronic site.

Assignments:

Participation – 20%
Short Assignments – 40%

1/ Research Element Identification – 10%
2/ Approach Defense Paper - 10%
3/ Article Theory Identification – 10%
4/ Causal Design Paper – 10%

Article Comparison (PS students) or Research Design (RPE students) – 40%

1/ Outline – 5%
2/ Comparison Report or Research Design – 35%

Participation
All students are expected to be active participants in the class. This means being prepared by finishing the assigned readings, watching the recorded lecture, and preparing two discussion questions for the week’s discussion (questions are to be posted to the online discussion board by 12pm (noon) Wednesday before each class). Beyond that, I encourage all students to engage with the instructor and other students through real-time discussion and the online discussion boards.

Short Assignments

Approach Defense Paper:
Students are expected to choose an approach covered in Week 2 and argue why they believe it is superior to the other approaches discussed that week for addressing their research interests. Students are required to discuss at least two alternative approaches to the one they prefer. This is intended to be a thoughtful reflection on what the student believes are the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches discussed through the lens of the student’s own research interests, drawing upon the course readings. The assignment should be at least 3 and no more than 5 pages in length (double-spaced). Papers are due on September 24.

Research Element Identification:
A vital part of any analysis is learning what research has already been conducted. Part of the challenge when reading existing work done by others is understanding the main parts of the project. In this assignment, students are required to choose an article of interest from a scholarly journal (for example, Social Science Quarterly; Canadian Journal of Political Science; Canadian Review of Sociology; Electoral Studies; International Organization; Journal of Politics; if you are unsure please ask the instructor) and identify its key parts – research question; hypothesis(es); data source; methodological approach; key findings. Students are required to use Adobe Acrobat to highlight and comment on these elements of the paper in the document, and then submit the marked-up document to OWL. The assignment is due on October 8.
**Article Theory Identification:**
Students are expected to find an article in a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal and analyze the theory design put forth by the author. As will be discussed in class, theories are made up of hypothesized relationships between components that lead to specific outcomes. Part of critically reading research is being able to understand the underlying theoretical structure. The assignment should take the form of a diagram that identifies the key parts in the theoretical model, as well as a description of each part. **Paper are due on October 29.**

**Causal Design Paper:**
Students must design a comparative study or experiment to identify causality in the theory put forth in the article used for the Article Theory Identification assignment. (If the article is not appropriate, the student should consult with the instructor.) If the article already has a comparative or experimental design, the student is expected to design a different study. The paper should identify the cases or subjects to be studied, the variables that will be isolated and how that will be done, and how causality will be evaluated. Papers are expected to be at least 3 and no more than 5 pages in length. **Papers are due on November 12.**

**Final Assignments**

**Article Comparison (PS students):**
The purpose of this assignment is to consider how approaches and methodology can affect research findings. Students must choose two academic articles from peer-reviewed publications that address the same research topic. Students must submit an outline that identifies the research topic and the two articles for approval on **November 19.** The full assignment is due on **December 10** The assignment will have two parts. In the first part, students are expected to outline the methodological approaches used by the authors and compare and contrast their findings. In the second part, students are expected to use information learned in the course to consider how the methodological choices contributed to the similarities or differences in findings. Students are expected to reference readings from class to justify their arguments. Papers should be at least 15 and no more than 17 pages, double-spaced; use Chicago style for referencing ([https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/styleguides/ChicagoStyleAuthorDate.pdf](https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/styleguides/ChicagoStyleAuthorDate.pdf)); footnotes instead of endnotes; 12-pt font and one-inch margins; and include a reference list.

**Research Proposal (RPE students):**
Students are expected to prepare a research proposal applying the knowledge they gained throughout the course to design a study that can inform policy development. The specific research topic should be of personal interest to the student. Students must submit a brief outline that identifies the research topic and approach for approval on **November 19.** The full assignment is due on **December 10.** The proposal should identify the topic, provide a literature review and indicate what information is unknown, state the research question and specific hypotheses to be examined, develop the concepts, and outline the procedures (operationalization, measurement, data) to be used. Students are not expected to provide explicit details about their data gathering techniques (i.e., experiments, surveys or interviews), but a clear discussion of the type of data that is required to address the research question should be provided. Students are expected to reference readings from class to justify their choices. Papers should be at least 15 and no more than 17 pages, double-spaced; use Chicago style for referencing ([https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/styleguides/ChicagoStyleAuthorDate.pdf](https://www.lib.uwo.ca/files/styleguides/ChicagoStyleAuthorDate.pdf)); footnotes instead of endnotes; 12-pt font and one-inch margins; and include a reference list.
# Topics and Readings

## September 10
**Introduction: Social Science as Science**
- KKV, ch. 1.
- Gerring, ch. 1.
- A.F. Chalmers, *What is this thing called Science?* 3rd ed., Hackett. Ch. 1. [https://ebookppsump.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/alan_chalmers_what_is_this_thing_called_sciencebookfi-org.pdf](https://ebookppsump.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/alan_chalmers_what_is_this_thing_called_sciencebookfi-org.pdf)

## September 17
**Approaches**

## September 24
**Research Questions and Theories**
- Gerring, chs. 2-4

## October 1
**Literature Reviews**

## October 8
**Description and Conceptualization**
- Gerring, chs. 5, 6
- KKV, ch. 2

## October 15
**Measurement**
- Gerring, ch. 7
- KKV, ch. 5
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<tr>
<th>October 22</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Causality</strong></td>
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<td>• Gerring, chs. 8, 9</td>
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<td>• KKV, ch. 3</td>
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<th>October 29</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Comparative Method and Experiments</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Article Theory</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Identification Due</strong></td>
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<td>• Gerring, ch. 10</td>
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<th>November 5</th>
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<td><strong>FALL BREAK – NO CLASS</strong></td>
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<th>November 12</th>
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<td><strong>Process Tracing and Studying Cases</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Causal Design Paper Due</strong></td>
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<tr>
<th>November 19</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qualitative Observational Data</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Quantitative</strong></td>
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Observational Data


December 3
Ethics


December 8
* NOTE SPECIAL DAY *
Proposal Workshop

- Students will act as the audience while PhD students present their research proposals and receive prepared feedback from their discussant. Time for open discussion and questions from students will be set aside for each paper.