COURSE STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to be a presentation of the methods of normal science and their application in Sociology: it will present the basic philosophy of science and structure of inquiry in the field; and will cover typical methods of data collection and analysis. The course will emphasize the importance of validity and reliability in research; the logic of experiments and quasi-experiments as a basis from which scientific research can develop; and methods of constructing and answering specifically sociological question. The overarching framework guiding the course will be the linkage between theory, data, and analysis, and how this orients the variety of research that constitutes Sociology and the social sciences.

By fully engaging this course, students will acquire a valuable set of tools that will allow for the active pursuit of research via an understanding of the validity and reliability of data and the logic of correlative and causal relationships. This will further enable the critical evaluation of scientific research in academic, journalistic, and other less formal contexts. The Sociological Tradition is strongly attached to the scientific method and its associated logic: the work of primary social scientists such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber strongly promoted the scientific method; and most of the articles published in the American Sociological Review, the American Journal of Sociology, and Social Forces – considered by many to be the flagship Sociology journals – have included at least one of the methods that will be presented in this class. As such, this course is an essential part of understanding the field of Sociology and methods of answering sociological questions; and it can valuable in other courses, academic research, and many careers.

The methods of data collection covered in this course have both qualitative and quantitative elements: emphasis will be placed on closed- and open-ended surveys and interviews, techniques of observation and participation, and the acquisition of secondary data. Together, these methods form the most common set of tools that social scientists use to collect data. Analysis of data will focus on the techniques of multivariate regression, and the logic that can be invoked from this statistical procedure: the linkage of independent and dependent variables and the importance of sample size to making generalizable claims.

This course is based on a thorough set of readings and will be driven by class discussions and lectures. Significant time will be spent deconstructing published research in the field of Sociology; and the majority of the second half of the semester will be grounded in students’ pursuit of short project papers that develop methods discussed in class.

COURSE PREREQUISITES

Social Statistics – Soc 371 – is a prerequisite for this course; and Social Theory – Soc 370 – is a co-requisite. The statistics and use of SPSS covered in Soc 371 are necessary to pursue some of the assigned projects and, while there will be review during the semester, students who do not have some familiarity with descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing, and regression will be at a disadvantage. This course is much like the second semester of a foreign language: those students who have not taken the first semester will likely be unprepared for some of the material being covered.